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Navigating the Evolving World of Fashion In-Game Advertising

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Abstract

This study addresses gaming as an interactive digital advertising tool, aiming to explore its effectiveness in digital marketing overall and to examine its impact on digital marketing for the fashion industry in particular.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present an analytical framework for explaining the appeal of games for fashion brand advertising. More precisely, this paper aims on investigating in detail how, if and what factors make games an appealing medium for fashion brand advertising, through a uses and gratifications perspective.

Design/methodology/approach

In the zeitgeist of infoxication and information anxiety, in which modern consumers must form their consumption identity habits, advertisement experts and academics are called to revise traditional advertising channels, exposed to the urgent need of finding new mass-mediated mediums to successfully reach their goal-market. While the advertising industry is striving to “consume” every freshly designed communicational platform and utilize it for marketing purposes, the uses and gratifications theory (UGT), will guide the researcher to uncover why and if audiences are choosing to perceive games as an advertising channel.

Originality/value

The present study contributes to the existing literature by investigating the uses and gratifications (U&Gs) that motivate gamers to adopt a positive attitude towards fashion in-game advertising (IGA) and brand recognition, and therefore influence their purchase intentions. Additionally, the study will contribute to confining the research gap between what fashion brands think they will achieve with IGA and what they are actually achieving. The study hopes to pose significant theoretical and practical implications for both researchers and practitioners who are eager in the metaverse economy, IGA advertisement and virtual world marketing communication.

Findings

Whilst fashion advertising in games poses a new challenge for both advertisement and mass communication practitioners, the present study concluded that games – as a mass-mediated environment – equip advertisement with the benefit of engaging audiences in interactive and immersive experiences. This unique IGA advantage allows for the creation of more personalized and targeted marketing campaigns, tapping into the specific gratifications sought by players, such as social interaction, self-expression, and achievement. By leveraging these insights, fashion brands can effectively connect with their target audience, and cultivate brand loyalty, brand recognition and brand engagement.

Keywords: gamification, in-game advertising, fashion advertising, consumer behavior, metaverse

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Preface

“So many people are really romantic about the possibilities of people becoming post-human through gaming or adopting avatars that represent who they want to be versus who they think they are in the real world.”
(Highsnobiety, 2019a)

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IV. List of Abbreviations

AR	Augmented Reality
CGI	Computer Generated Imagery
ICTS	Information and Communication Technologies
IGA	In-game Advertising
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
MR	Mixed Reality
MVFW	Metaverse Fashion Week
NFTS	Non-Fungible Tokens
U&GS	Uses and Gratifications
UGT	Uses and Gratifications Theory
VR	Virtual Reality
VWS	Virtual Worlds
3D	Three-Dimensional

Glossary

Advergames	Games designed and developed from the beginning to promote a specific product, brand, or message, by incorporating the promotional content seamlessly into the gameplay.
Avatars	Digital representations controlled by people in real-life.
Augmented Reality	A heightened, interactive representation of the physical world achieved through digital visuals, sounds, and other sensory cues using holographic technology.
Gamification	The application of features from gaming for non-game purposes with the purpose of affecting user/consumer behavior.
Gaming Skin	Virtual clothing items and accessories for in-game characters that serve to customize the appearance of in-game assets and not to alter the gameplay.
In-game advertising (IGA)	The practice of integrating advertising content into video games.
Metaverse	A digital universe consisting of interconnected virtual realms, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) experiences. It transcends "Facebook" and its rebranding as "Meta" as it incorporates a variety of virtual experiences that are not limited to a single company or platform (Periyasami and Periyasamy, 2022).
Pro-consumers	Customers who want to buy very high-quality technical products or equipment and also want to be a part of the process, loyalties, and engagement (Periyasami and Periyasamy, 2022).
Real World	The physical, tangible, and concrete environment we perceive and experience without the mediation of digital or virtual technologies.
Virtual Items	Digital goods created exclusively to be used in virtual world to enhance the overall entertainment experience of players (Guo and Barnes, 2012).
Virtual World	A synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers (Bell, 2008).
Web3	A term for the vision of a new, better internet, which features concepts such as blockchains, cryptocurrencies,

	and NFTs to give power back to the users in the form of ownership.
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1. Introduction

*“Over 3 billion gamers in the world:
fashion’s gotta catch ‘em all!”*
- Maud LeGosles (2021)

With the global pandemic subjecting people to spending a significant amount of time within their houses, even the non-gamers have turned to gaming to encounter a new form of community. Virtual spaces, identities, and communities are now emerging around what was once deemed a "childish niche" (Highsnobiety, 2021b), and brands are here to capitalize on these opportunities for meta-profit. Balenciaga, LVMH and Louis Vuitton are amongst the fashion colossuses that have recently established their presence within the gaming world, correlating gaming with marketing in hopes of creating a new consumer metaverse.

Accordingly, with Covid-19 driving physical stores to their closure and transferring life activities to digital spaces, the digital maturity of the fashion industry seemed as if the only way forward. No question, the cross-media effects of the gaming industry bring forward new challenges and norms concerning marketing techniques, community building and consumer behaviors. And whilst the marketing potential of live-game streaming has been already recognized by the industry (Xu et al., 2022), fashion had not jumped into the academic metaverse up until recently. Thus, in the age of meta-digitalization, using gaming elements and techniques in the way fashion brands interact with consumers is a key aspect of their marketing and communication efforts. Fashion marketers have begun to understand the importance of gamification and in-game advertising as two processes that can improve the way customers interact with a brand (Robson et al., 2016), making the online customer experience attractive and fun. At the same time, estimates indicate that the global gamification market is projected to reach a value of USD 37.00 billion by 2027 (Fortune Business Insights, 2020) as well as a dramatic growth in sales of virtual goods (Animesh et al., 2011). Recent studies have focused on exploring the psychological mechanisms behind individuals' emotional attachment to their virtual identities and how these connections manifest in real-world actions, resulting in commercially exploitable self-presentation content (Kaliyamurthy et al., 2022; Solomon, 2022). Yet, the exact impact of these virtual experiences on real-world consumer behavior and decision-making is still an open question.

It is worth considering that the integration of product placements in movies or television shows is not a new phenomenon. Meanwhile, with every aspect of our everyday physical selves being digitalized in the metaverse, it is of high importance to delve deeper into how the fashion industry is capitalizing on the gaming metaverse, by either providing a new way of online expression or by simply using in-game ads or product placements. Drawing on Chou (2015), correlating advertising with gaming comes as no surprise as every game's success is based on motivating people to make decisions and pursue certain activities. Consequentially, the question to be asked is not whether fashion's hasty entry into the metaverse is a profitable decision, but whether games are to be the best digital communication tool for fashion brands.

All the above confirm the integration of the apt material world of fashion into the uncanny metaverse of gaming. But the fundamental question is still to be raised: Does it worth it? Is gaming just another parodical advertisement trend or games are here to stay as the new virtual fashion runaway? Hence, from a timely perspective, this study follows fashion's entry into the gaming world from an academic and sociological perspective by bringing into the academic perspective an open-ended dialogue to provide the first empirical evidence -from the gamers' perspective- to questions like: How do individuals utilize games as a fashion advertising platform, and what makes them so appealing in this context? To address these questions, the study will apply the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) to examine individual consumer needs when exposed to in-game advertisements for fashion brands.

When trying to identify the potential lessons the fashion ecosystem could glean from the gaming ecosystem, research has emphasized their interconnectedness as an ongoing conversation centred around narratives and people's sentiments towards the brand's messaging (Highsnobiety, 2021b). Accordingly, the present research does not aim to establish causality between what drives a gamer's purchase behavior in virtual and real-world settings. Instead, this study will utilize academic theories and a series of interviews to initiate and contribute to the ongoing academic dialogue concerning fashion's foray into the metaverse. It seeks to enrich this discussion by presenting new empirical data collected from the perspective of gamers.

1.1 Relevance of the study

*“And by meeting the need of gamers, brands just might
be able to find the future.”*

– Highsnobiety (2021a:41)

In the metaverse zeitgeist, our reality and daily existence are becoming more akin to games, not only due to the widespread integration of games into our lives but also because activities, systems, and services are progressively adopting gamification principles (Koivisto and Hamari, 2019). This study is one of the first attempts to research the interaction between digital games and fashion industries from an advertising communication perspective. To fill the lack of relevant literature, this study will provide a new perspective to comprehend the purchase intention for brands advertised in online games. Prior studies have vastly highlighted how gamification and in-game advertising (IGA) techniques can increase customer engagement (Eisingerich et al., 2019; Harwood and Garry, 2015; Sinha and Srivastava, 2022; Abbasi et al., 2020) and therefore improve brand awareness and brand loyalty (Abou-Shou and Soliman, 2021; Xi and Hamari, 2019; Hsu and Chen, 2018). However, up-to-today literature presents a scarcity of empirical evidence on how gamification satisfies intrinsic needs (Xi and Hamari, 2019; van Roy and Zaman, 2019), especially when it comes to the psychological factors affecting consumer behavior (Mitchell et al., 2017).

This study aims to build upon earlier research by empirically demonstrating the core assumption that *“gamification should be able to increase the ability of a system or a service to satisfy intrinsic needs”* (Xi and Hamari, 2019:210). The study merely focuses on in-game product placement of *fashion* brands and seeks to determine the degree to which advertising fashion products within games can effectively serve as a thriving digital marketing avenue for the fashion industry.

It is my contention, however, that, the importance of the study is to provide insights for marketing communication practitioners to implement in-game techniques as an advertisement tool and establish strong consumer-fashion brand interactive relationships on the metaverse. Furthermore, it will contribute to the field of media and communication studies by providing a prior understanding of how games provide a new medium for digital communication strategies

and, hence, how brands and digital communication practitioners are experimenting with new mediums.

1.2 Purpose, Aim & Research Questions

This study has, as its main objective, a focus on providing the first empirical evidence on how -and if- embedding fashion products in online gameplay activities will affect the viewers purchasing actions and therefore, whereas games can provide a valuable platform for fashion advertising. Hence, the present study seeks to explain the influence of certain in-game techniques by exploring the additional factors of in-game fashion advertisements that affect the consumer's purchasing behavior patterns, such as social, hedonic or achievement gratifications. To do so, the following research question will be addressed:

RQ: How do gamers utilize games as a fashion advertising platform and what makes them so appealing?

To gain a better understanding of what extent gamification techniques influence brand recall and purchase attitudes, one has first to question the reasons behind purchasing high fashion products in online gaming environments. By doing so, the researcher aims to establish correlations between offline models of consumer behavior and their potential analogous counterparts in the online realm. Thus, the present study will try to test the hypothesis of:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The motivations and perceptions behind purchasing digital fashion products in the online gaming world are influenced by the level of the gamer's fashion interest in the real world.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The motivations and perceptions behind purchasing digital fashion products in the online gaming world are influenced by the gamer's purchasing behavior patterns in the real world.

More specifically, H1 posits that there exists a significant correlation between purchasing digital fashion items within online gaming environments and an individual's level of interest in fashion within the real world. Accordingly, H2 will explore the correlation between purchasing

digital fashion products in the online gaming world and the corresponding online purchasing behavior patterns observed in the real world.

Hypotheses were developed based on the anticipated value of in-game purchasing in helping to meet specific player needs. The researcher took into consideration that whilst some studies indicate that consumers' key behavioral habits are incorporated in their online shopping activities in a similar manner to their offline (Ganesh et al., 2010), others categorize online consumers based on additional behavioral traits – such as “*variety-seeking shopper*”- as Rohm and Swaminathan (2004) coin consumers who are stimulated by the extensive choices available online. As Highsnobiety (2021a:41) case study portrayed “...*there are bigger opportunities in using a brand's existing luxury expertise to better meet the needs of gamers*”. Thus, (taking as an example) users who value customizing their gaming skin to project their identity were considered most likely to proceed to in-game purchases of fashion accessories. Accordingly, the level of the gamer's brand awareness prior to their in-game exposure to the brand advertisement is considered most likely to motivate their purchase intentions both concerning virtual and real-world purchases.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This sub-chapter provides an overview of the structure of the master thesis. It outlines the main sections and their respective content, guiding the reader through the research journey.

Chapter two will introduce the reader to important for the research concepts, defining virtual worlds and the metaverse, gamification and in-game advertisements. Facebook's rebranding as “Meta” has sparked widespread discussions within the academic community about meta-commerce applications and the prospects of designing the new meta-consumer (Kim and Lee, 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2023). Understanding the architecture of the metaverse way beyond the social environment of Facebook and as a fantasy world towards the “*black hole of consumption*” (Bogost, 2021) is of high importance, especially in scenarios where virtual experiences have the potential to align with tangible real-world economic outcomes deriving from advertising practices. The chapter will then proceed with providing an analytical framework for explaining the appeal of games for fashion brand advertising. The following subsections will focus on both how games contribute to the formation of the in-game

personal and social self and on how virtual fashion choices impact identity construction and community-building among players.

Chapter three will continue with providing the theoretical framework of the study, presenting to the reader an academic overview of the concept of advertisement, as well as on how advertising techniques have been altered within the metaverse. To understand how people's virtual identities (as shaped by their online activities) can impact their actions and interactions in digital spaces, a uses and gratifications approach will be applied. Hence, chapter three will introduce to the reader the uses and gratifications theory (UGT), explaining its core concepts and relevance in the context of virtual worlds and gaming. The following subsection will discuss how advertising and, consequently, in-game advertising align with the principles of the UGT, meeting users' needs and providing gratifications. Additionally, the study will draw upon Baudrillard's (1994) and postmodernism theories to focus on understanding modern consumption habits within a new hybrid social meta-reality.

Chapter four will present the method and research design used for this study. Ethical considerations will also be acknowledged by the researcher, accompanied by an explanation for the selected choice of materials. Additionally, it will provide a comprehensive overview of the data analysis process, detailing the methods employed to analyze interview responses and draw significant insights.

Chapter five will discuss the research findings accompanied by comparisons, discussions, and a compilation of quotes that relate to the theoretical concepts. The final chapter will summarize and present the conclusions drawn from this research, with a focus on their relevance and implications for the impact of virtual experiences on consumers' purchasing decisions and the potential implications for the fashion industry in the digital age. Additionally, the researcher will acknowledge the limitations as encountered during the study process, and potential directions for future further research.

2. Existing research

The forthcoming chapter will delve into the existing body of literature. The author will present a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge for important for the research concepts. The chapter will proceed with illustrating how the gaming environment is interconnected with the notion of fashion, as both provide means for communication and self-expression. Additionally, the chapter will explore the allure of in-game advertising within the fashion industry.

2.1 Virtual Worlds and the Metaverse

Tracing the alluring implications of applying advertising techniques within the metaverse, one has first to understand the nature of both what the metaverse is and, accordingly, virtual worlds, as well as reevaluate a priori knowledge that up until now defines the notion of “*real world*”. Physical presence serves as the main differentiating factor between the virtual and the real. Hence, virtual reality refers to digitally created spaces users can access through sophisticated computer equipment (Fox et al., 2009). Once immersed in such realities, individuals can be transported to alternate worlds, experiencing a computer-mediated reality where interaction with objects, people, and diverse environments is possible, without being confined to time, space and other physical and concrete constraints confined to our experiences by the environment we inhabit. Barnes (2007) defined “*virtual worlds*” (VWs) as three-dimensional online environments that offer their users a stimulation of their real-world surroundings, in which the user is represented by animated characters (avatars) (Bainbridge, 2007). In this posthuman marketplace, avatars act as puppets in which the user controls their actions, yet it is the avatar that carries out these actions (Bell, 2008).

Bleize and Antheunis (2016) identify two main types of virtual worlds, the virtual social worlds (such as Second Life), and the virtual game worlds (such as World of Warcraft). Their main difference lies in the set of rules that exist and are to be followed in the virtual game worlds, limiting the opportunity for self-representation and self-disclosure (Bleize and Antheunis, 2016). To be more specific, Barnes and Mattsson (2011) refer to virtual social worlds as a “*virtual brand experience*” to best describe the quasi-real freedoms of choice that such an environment provides to the consumer. In those computer-generated virtual social environments, users can develop their own three-dimensional “*alternative self*” (avatar), to be

used as their “*vehicle-body*” to navigate within the quasi-real virtual experience, attend a concert or a movie, grab a coffee whilst interacting with fellow users, and buy, own, trade or sell virtual land or goods (Barnes, 2007) within the virtual world economy that consists either in its own virtual currency or on real ones. Contrariwise, they continue, game-oriented virtual worlds limit the users to a more goal-oriented design, where users choose from a limited set of game objectives and engage in a narrative-driven experience where their avatars play significant roles. Within this framework, users strive to fulfil tasks, complete quests, and advance their characters, all while adhering to the rules and behavioral constraints set by the game (Barnes and Mattsson, 2011).

The present study will focus on virtual game worlds, as massive multi-player spaces, defined by the need for Internet connectivity. Despite Barnes and Mattsson’s (2011) standpoint that the freeform characteristics of virtual social worlds designate the latter to be better innovative marketing channels, contemporary literature has documented how virtual game worlds are the best tool for providing advertisement with a “palpable” real-world experience. Hence, the gaming environment is asserted to give the consumer an “apt” product experience that other forms of traditional virtual marketing might be lacking.

With the growth of the popularity of virtual worlds, the lines between the two currencies -the virtual and the real one- are becoming blurred. Understanding the conveyance of our physical presence within the metaverse realm is of high importance especially where virtual experiences can cohere to direct real-world consequences (Periyasami and Periyasamy, 2022), such as economic alterations based on in-game purchases. As it occurs after every new technological era that human nature contrives and is subjected to, so it happens with our technological entry to the “*feel-good place of the exciting future*” (Madison, 2021) where every research finding should be reframed and redefined in the “*metaverse*”. For Periyasami and Periyasamy (2022:527), the term “metaverse” refers to “*the integration of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) into our everyday life*”. By incorporating new technological forms, such as non-fungible tokens (NFTs), cryptocurrencies, blockchain, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, the metaverse can best be described as a platform business model bridging the gap between virtual and real worlds by focusing on social and economic connections (Periyasami and Periyasamy, 2022). Contrariwise to traditional marketing tactics that promote a one-way communicational flow based on a static message that is to be transmitted to the audience, the metaverse is capitalizing on human relations by

immersing the user into a more interactive social relationship with businesses, through their digital embodiments. Drawing on Kim (2021:142) “*the metaverse is not just another new medium but might become a realized idea that can change all aspects of advertising and marketing*”.

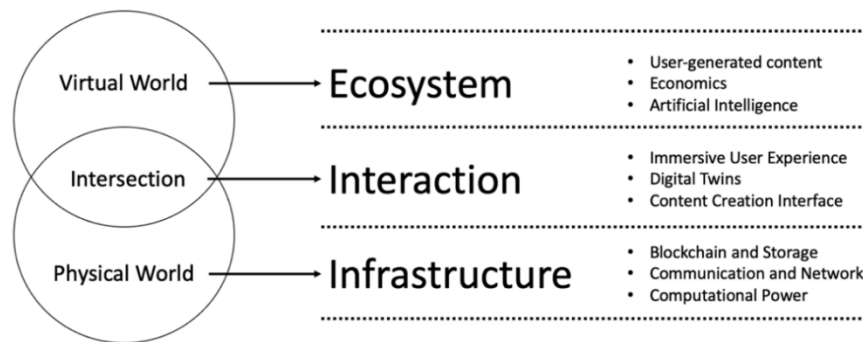


Figure 1. The architecture of the Metaverse
(Source: Duan et al., 2021)

In summary, virtual worlds represent distinct immersive digital environments, while the metaverse encompasses a broader concept of an interconnected and cohesive digital universe that includes various virtual worlds and experiences. The metaverse aims to provide a seamless and integrated digital experience for users, allowing them to interact and engage across multiple platforms and virtual spaces.

When studying the metaverse as a new digital communication medium, scholars define three key characteristics that separate VWs from other social media platforms. First, scholars (Kim, 2021; Bleize and Antheunis, 2016; Joy et al., 2022) focus on the real-time interactivity between the users, or “synchronous communication”. Secondly, users are given the opportunity to transfer their existence to the digital world by creating and customizing digital representations of themselves, and thirdly, explore the three dimensions of the virtual surroundings (Bleize and Antheunis, 2016). Accordingly drawing on Joy et al. (2022) the metaverse commonality is based upon a shared space of interaction where avatars are created for individual virtual representation and are impelled to own or even create their virtual property, exactly as they would with physical possessions.

2.2 Gamification and In-Game Advertising

Gamification is defined as the adoption of game technologies, game design methods and game elements outside of the gaming industry (Karać and Stabauer, 2017). Gamified systems resemble and are inspired by games but are not games per se. Drawing on Chou (2015), pioneer and international keynote speaker on gamification and behavior design, the term should be replaced by “*human-focus-design*”, as human motivation and not pure efficiency is the key core of shaping its design and implementation. Mishra and Malhotra (2021) add to the definition of gamification the experiential aspect, i.e., the gameful experience, while Koivisto and Hamari (2019) add the elements of “engagement” and “enjoyment” to describe the process of gamification.

Overall, the process of gamification can be explained by the linear connection of affordances, and psychological and behavioral outcomes (as seen in Figure 3) (Koivisto and Hamari, 2019). Affordances stand for the various gameplay tools that are incorporated into the systems to provide a gameful user experience that can arise psychological outcomes -deriving from games- such as competence, autonomy, relatedness, enjoyment, and engagement. Finally, an increase in physical activity or better learning results is among the behavioral outcomes that gamification processes can motivate the user to achieve. In a like manner, trying to unravel whether gamification satisfies intrinsic needs, Xi and Hamari (2019) studied the online gamified communities of two technological brands (namely, Xiaomi and Huawei) and indicated that immersion-related gamification features are positively correlated with autonomy need satisfaction, whilst social-related gamification features were associated with the intrinsic need of competence and relatedness.

It is estimated that the global gamification market is projected to reach a value of USD 37.00 billion by 2027 (Fortune Business Insights, 2020), with billion-dollar companies, such as Amazon.com, Nike, Starbucks, KFC, have thus far accredited the avails of incorporating gamified elements into their digital communication journey. A vast of prior studies have highlighted the importance of including gamification to enhance the online retail experience (Insley and Nunan, 2014; Koivisto and Hamari, 2019; Xi and Hamari, 2019; Eisingerich et al., 2019). Additionally, following the rise of mobile technology, advertisement experts encourage companies to absorb gamification and, consequentially, its psychological and behavioral outcomes to increase sales and customer engagement (Xi and Hamari, 2019). Hence, utilizing

gamification as a marketing tool enmeshes the user into a motivational and supportive set of actions towards a given activity or behavior by creating an interactive marketing experience based on key gameplay characteristics (Eisingerich et al., 2019).

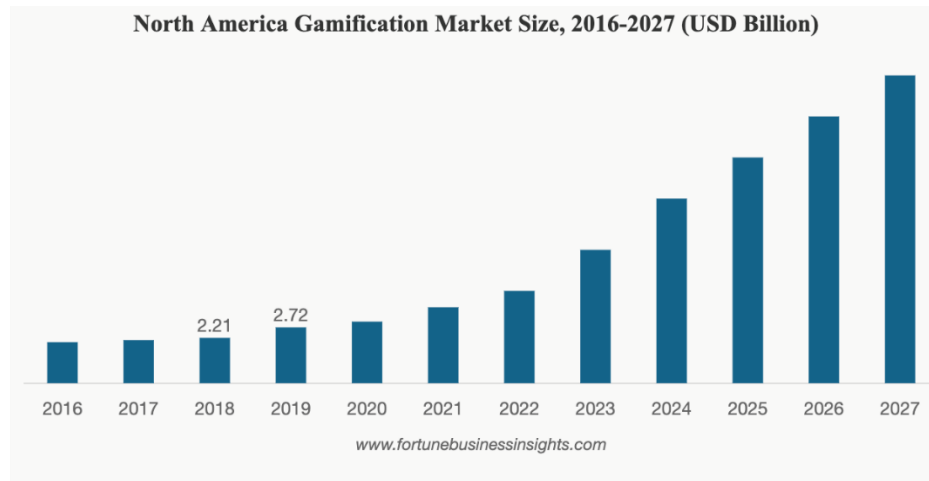


Figure 2. Growth and estimated growth of the North America Gamification Market Size (Source: Fortune Business Insights, 2020)

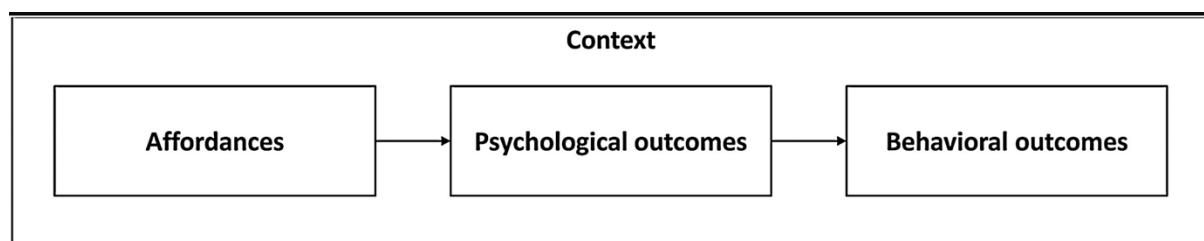


Figure 3. Overall conceptualization of gamification (Source: Hamari et al., 2014)

Whilst gamification is based on game-like systems that are not games per se, in-game advertising (IGA) and advergames refer to the formats of online games, used by marketers for advertising purposes. More precisely, IGA refers to the placement of brands in the online environment of games (Herrewijn and Poels, 2011), whereas the process of designing and developing a game from the beginning for the mere purpose of advertising a product or a brand is called advergames (Terlutter and Capella, 2013).

2.3. Fashion in the Metaverse

With the metaverse providing a fantasy world towards the “*black hole of consumption*” (Bogost, 2021), it was beyond question that the multi-trillion-dollar fashion industry would be there to profit. The fashion industry is getting a “metaverse” makeover, using the platform to reach new markets and promote its wearables “*from Blockchain to Love Chain*” (Tan, 2023) - as Vogue fashion expertise would describe fashion’s relation to the metaverse.

Fashion in the metaverse falls in the academic research within an overlapping area between Fashion and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), referred to as “*digital fashion*” (Noris et al., 2021). The latter encloses digital fashion innovations by dividing them into four categories 1) digital human and metaverse, 2) digital design and e-prototyping, 3) digital apparel and smart e-technology, 4) digital business and promotion (as presented in figure 4 below) (Sayem, 2022). The second and third category put their focus on the design and production stages. Thus, whilst the first one encompasses technologies implemented within the design stage (such as computer-aided design (CAD) and three-dimensional (3D) printing technology), designing and producing garments with embedded smart-electronics (e.g., smart watches and fitness trackers) are categorized in the third.

It is important here to bring to the fore that the present study will focus on digital fashion literature concerning the first and the fourth category. Therefore, the subsequent pages will delve into the question of not how or if the metaverse is redefining “craftmanship” by replacing apt textiles with digital designs, but how and if the metaverse is affecting fashion e-commerce applications by providing a new virtual reality where 3D avatars can play games, socialize, and spend money.

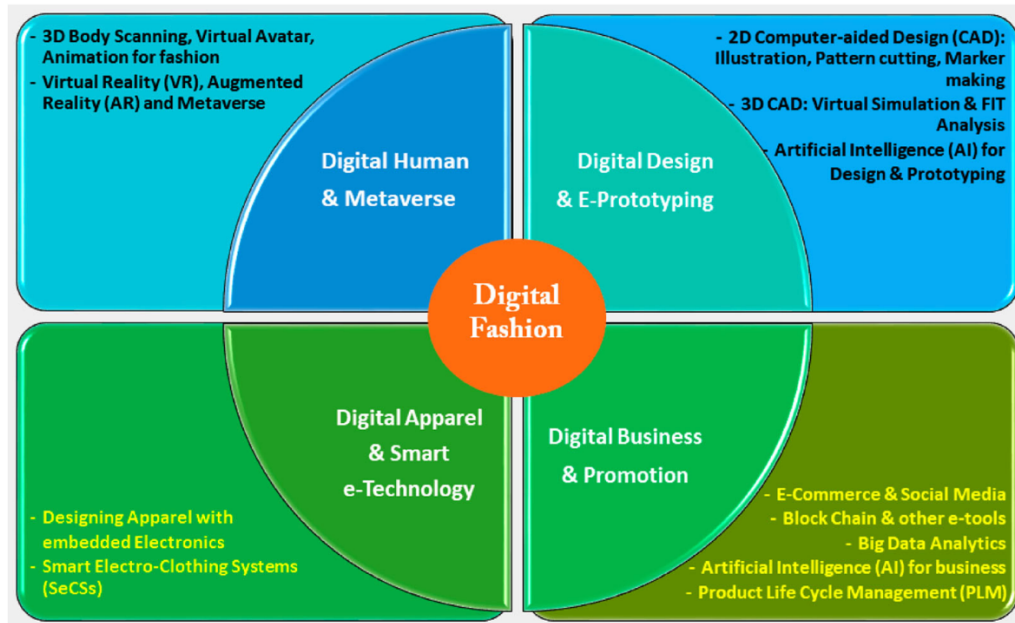


Figure 4. Major themes in Digital Fashion Literature
(Source: Sayem, 2022)

The potential for consumer engagement with brands in the metaverse has sparked substantial debate in marketing-oriented discussions regarding the prominent challenges and transformative possibilities for marketers (Periyasami and Periyasamy, 2022). According to a recent assessment by McKinsey & Company (2022) on marketing prospects in the metaverse, virtual product sales through direct-to-avatar transactions are projected to constitute a market worth \$54 billion. Consequentially, with the metaverse being widely regarded as the ideal marketing platform for the millennial generation (Periyasami and Periyasamy, 2022), leading luxury brands have integrated technologies to reimagine brand imagery and revitalize the consumer experience. The digitalization of every aspect of our everyday being-in-the-world has opened the virtual metaverse marketing door for the fashion industry, through virtual fashion shows and stores, as well as fashion advertisements embedded within virtual games (Fakhry and Nasr, 2023). Thus, by establishing virtual shopping malls in the metaverse, fashion brands have embraced technological advancements, enabling them to deliver their services and products in a modern and innovative manner within this digital realm.

The essence of fashion transcends physicality; through avatars that possess mobility, speech, and customizable appearances, individuals can manifest their desired aesthetic in any way they envision. Thus, in the virtual landscape marketing techniques are capitalizing on the creation of online identities. The rise of influencer marketing – defined as users promoting branded

content on their personal social media platforms – entered the metaverse’s uncanny valley¹ already the moment computer-generated imagery (CGI) microbloggers with human-like images created their personal Instagram accounts. Lil Miquela (2.7M followers), Shudu Gram (240K followers) and Noonnoouri (404K followers) are just a sample of the 'digital army' of hyper-realistic models taking the marketing world by storm (Newbold, 2018). Despite the millions of people closely taking a glimpse into their everyday lives through their persistent online presence, it took several months before internet users figured that they are not real people. Hence, the once futuristic dystopias of the existence of human hybrids have now turned into a marketing profit, with CGI avatars allowing brands to minimize the human risk factor and provide advertisers with more control over the campaign narrative (Dodgson, 2014).



Image 1. CGI influencer attending a Netflix Premiere, where she “laughed” and “cried”

(Source: @lilmiquela, 2019)

A question to be raised here is what significance will nonfungible tokens (NFTs), gaming, and virtual fashion assume in shaping the future of the retail landscape (McKinsey & Company, 2022)? Already back on February 2021, the NFT RTFKT marketplace sold 600 pairs of digital sneakers in less than seven minutes, generating \$3.1 million in revenue (Nowill, 2021). In March 2022, fashion lovers got to experience the first-ever Metaverse Fashion Week (MFW),

¹ A concept first introduced by Masahiro Mori to describe the feeling of discomfort we experience when an object is close enough to the human form, or even seemingly enough to fool our brains.

a four-day online event where virtual runways, panel talks, and meta-parties were accommodated in the 3D virtual world Decentraland (a browser-based platform where avatars can play games, socialize, and buy and sell digital assets) (Decentraland, 2022). MVFW gave the opportunity to some of the world's most recognizable luxury brands (such as Selfridges and Dolce&Gabbana) to make their Web3 debut. Hence, contrariwise to physical fashion weeks where only the fashion elite is granted access, MVFW democratized the global fashion scene by allowing each Web3 user to place themselves in the runaway's front row just by creating their online avatar (Shirdan, 2022). By hosting a completely virtual meta-fashion week, the fashion industry simultaneously hosted a business event where *“both history and the future will converge in the largest user-owned-and-operated virtual world to light the fires of the future of digital fashion’s panoramic potential”* (Paramasivam, 2023).

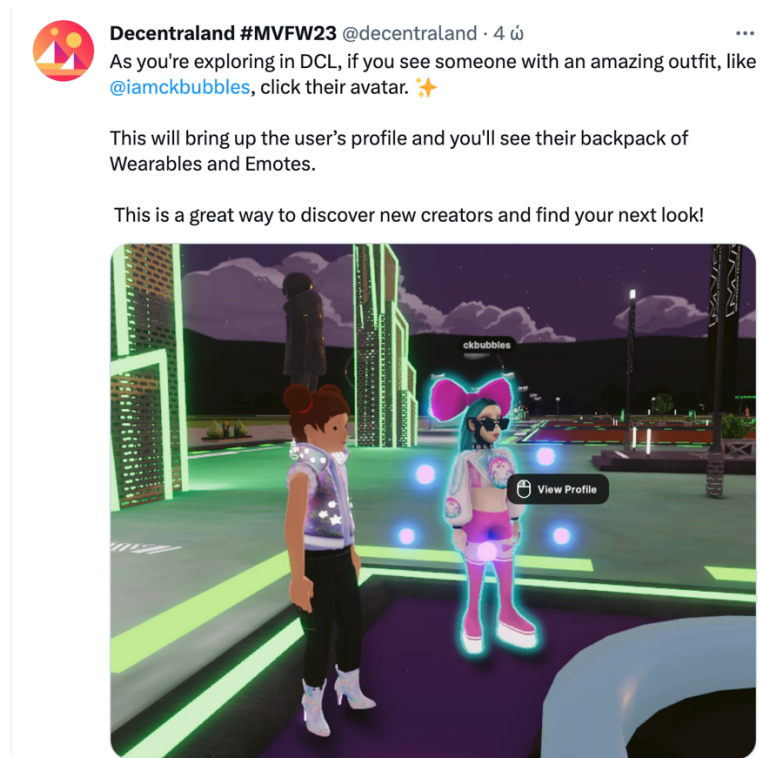


Image 2. Decentraland's Tweet to Promote the Metaverse Fashion Week 2023
(Source: Decentraland, 2023)

Furthermore, Farfetch, an online luxury fashion retail platform, in collaboration with DressX provides a leading example of how adhering to digital fashion allows consumers to embrace the concept of constant novelty without ethical concerns. DressX is the *“largest fashion multi brand store of digital collections from most well-known brands and 3D designers”* (DressX, n.d.). Within that digital fashion platform, the user can scroll and select amongst a wide variety

of multi-branded virtual goods, attach their personal picture, and have the garment tailored to the image and ready to share online. In that way, DressX combines the constant need for renewal with individuality. Yet another example of how fashion is leveraging on the individuality the metaverse proffers is the collaboration of Prada, a leading house amongst the fashion colossus, with Adidas. Titled Adidas for Prada Re-Source, the originality of the project lay in allowing participants from all over the world to create the NFT limited edition collection from the start (Adidas, 2022). To put it in Adidas (2022) words, the goal of the collection posed “*an ambitious first-of-its-kind NFT collaboration that will feature user-generated and creator-owned art*”.

Non questionably, NFTs are promising to revolutionize the way in which businesses interact with prosumers [a consumer who wants to buy very high-quality technical products/ an individual who actively participates in both the production and consumption of goods or services (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023)], by providing opportunities for personalized experiences, gamification elements, community connections, and strengthening customer loyalty (Dwivedi et al., 2022). Research in the use of NFTs highlights how by their use businesses are given the opportunity to create distinctive and unforgettable customer experiences, building trust and unlocking new avenues for growth (Praxis Global Alliance, 2023).

2.4 Examples of Gamification in Fashion

“Would you still love me if I wore the balenciaga x fortnite hoodie”
-@PrttyLieutenant (2021)

Dating already back to 2021, fashion house Balenciaga became the first to enter virtual gaming worlds by realizing a non-fungible token (NFT) capsule collection in the videogame Fortnite (Maguire, 2021). By introducing their in-game collection, the brand claimed that their search volume has nearly doubled, whilst they have already unveiled plans to launch a metaverse business unit in the near future (Sensorium, 2022). Similarly, Gucci has entered the gaming metaverse by collaborating with gaming platform Roblox to open a space called the Gucci Garden. Inspired by the studio's real-life show in Florence, this digital experience gave Roblox users the chance to explore immersive themed rooms in the garden and even try to buy a Gucci

NFT to wear in-game (McDowell, 2021). The version of Gucci's iconic Dionysus bag sold for a price tag more than its real-life counterpart, at a record of \$4,115 (Sensorium, 2022).

Titled 'Louis the Game', was another mobile advergame launched by Louis Vuitton in partnership with digital artists Beeple. Its users could follow the game's protagonist – Vivienne – on her journey across real-life famous fashion capitals, dressing their avatar in the brand's prints and being rewarded with insights into the brand's history, through postcards and other memorabilia popping up along the gameplay (Sensorium, 2022). Louis Vuitton's advergame can pose a great example of how fashion's entry in the metaverse era aims on creating a new customer experience mostly for brand recall rather than brand profit. Louis Vuitton's CEO, Michael Burke explained: *"This is not a commercial experience, but a pedagogical, educational experience that must be fun, emotional and dynamic"*, as the game tokens were never meant to be sold in the open market (in Sensorium, 2022). Contrariwise to Louis Vuitton advergame where its tokens were never meant to be sold in the open market, Maison Gucci has embarked on a collaboration with Tennis Clash, where the gaming experience is seamlessly integrated with the retail aspect, enabling users to explore and purchase the featured Gucci items directly from the Gucci website while engaging with the game (Li, 2020).

Moreover, platforms like *Skinvaders* play a crucial role in bridging the gap between fashion brands and the gaming community. These *"cosmetic engines"* (Larocheski, n.d.) are created to serve as a marketplace where fashion brands can collaborate directly with game developers to design and distribute exclusively virtual clothing items and accessories for in-game characters, also known as *"skins"*. Hence, by facilitating the seamless integration of virtual fashion items into gaming environments, these platforms provide an innovative way for fashion brands to reach a diverse and highly engaged audience within the gaming community.



Image 3. Off-White's skins on Fortnite as found on Skinvaders
(Source: Iarocheski,n.d.)

2.5 Games and Identity-Building

As our lives undergo digitization, existing literature highlights the individual's need to construct their virtual identity so as to differ from their real-life persona (Nagy, 2010; Schau and Gilly, 2003). Trespassing the apt-social world, where identity building is dictated by social norms and expectations, VWs are perceived as a space for self-expression, free from physical "gating features" (such as stigmatized appearance) (Nagy, 2010). VWs play a key role in identity empowerment by providing a platform for individuals to express their "hidden selves" (Suler, 2002). Moreover, when discussing identity management within cyberspace, Suler (2002) pinpoints how the individual's choice of media channel for identity building can intricately intertwine with the level of identity integration and dissociation, as well as with the degree to which an individual presents a real or imaginary self.

Within the gaming environment, the concept of self-conception, as described by Markus and Nurius (1986), can be developed through the formulation of online gaming identities. More precisely, Markus and Nurius (1986) categorized individuals' self-perceptions into two groups:

the "now selves," referring to our established identities as recognized by others, and the "possible selves," which encompass images of the self that are presently unknown to external observers. In the realm of online gaming, through their gaming avatars and interactions within the virtual world, individuals have the opportunity to embody and experiment with various facets of their identity, potentially expressing traits or characteristics not typically present in their offline personas. Overall, gaming avatars offer a subcomponent of the possible selves that differ from both the suppressed or hidden "true self" and the unrealistic or fantasized "ideal self" (Higgins, 1987), contrariwise to studies that suggest that consumers compartmentalize their online and offline identities (Schau and Gilly, 2003).

Despite virtual gaming worlds having showcased significant economic opportunities, there has been limited empirical research focused on players' purchasing behavior within these virtual realms. Studying the correlation between virtual identity and consumption, Koles and Nagy (2012) revealed that individuals who primarily identified themselves based on the physical attributes of their avatars tended to form opinions about other VW residents based on their visual characteristics.

2.6 Fashion as a Means of Communication

The progress towards the post-modern period of human action could be characterized as a period of clothing Heidegger's (2008) "Dasein" with the textile production structures of the industrial period. The search for a single satisfactory definition of what fashion seems to run afoul of the chaotic bibliographic universe that both sociologists and psychologists have tried to map since 1482 (year of appearance of the French word for fashion, as a collective way of clothing, according to the "Dictionnaire de la mode au XXe siècle" (Kawamura, 2005:3). However, the conceptual approach of the term is not strictly enclosed under the boundaries of one's personal appearance as defined by the clothing industry. On the contrary, the decontextualization of the term from economic approaches allows for the understanding of fashion as a sociological concept.

Various theorists have demonstrated the use of clothing as code, as a language that allows the creation and (selective) understanding of a message (McCracken and Roth 1989; Holman, 1981). Following the semiology of Barthes (2004), many treat fashion as a means of communication. In the definition of fashion by Holbrook and Dixon (1985:110), fashion is

presented as “public consumption” which allows people to communicate the image they wish to project.

Research on the postmodern consumer explores fashion’s narrative dimension, as they unravel the symbolic meanings behind one’s consumption habits. As Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) suggest consumers tend to possess things for constructing both their social and self-identity. On the same tone, Flügel (1930) studied fashion from a psychoanalytical perspective, using the lexicon of Freudian symbols to address clothing as a means of expressing the unconscious self. Hence, clothing is perceived as a physical extension of the self that allows the individual to construct their own narrative. Moreover, existing literature clearly conceptualizes not only how clothing represents the social status and lifestyle (Kim, 2005) of the individual but also, they differentiate between the social classes (Khare, 2014). Consequentially, fashion extends beyond the expression of individual beliefs; it also serves as a reflection of our shared social values (Highsnobiety, 2021b).

2.6 Chapter Summary

The overall aim of the chapter was to provide a comprehensive exploration of existing literature and how it relates to the research objectives, by intrincating the intersection between fashion and the gaming realm. Subsequently, the chapter introduces to the reader pivotal research concepts, such as virtual worlds, the metaverse, gamification, and in-game advertisements.

The research thread unravels by first providing an overview of current academic discussions around the nature of the metaverse, sparked by Facebook's transformation into "Meta". The architecture of the metaverse is discussed in relation to both its social context and its implications for meta-commerce applications and the rise of the meta-consumer. Overall, past research focused on defining features that discern VVs from other social media platforms is considered essential for comprehending the metaverse as a digital communication medium. Additionally, understanding the differentiation between virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds - which arises from their varying degrees of freedom, structure, and purpose -, is important to provide clarity on the study’s focus on virtual game worlds.

Thereafter, the author deems it of great importance to illustrate how the gaming and the fashion industry are interconnected due to their inherent nature, as both provide mediums for

communication and identity formation. Thus, the present chapter provides valuable examples of how luxury fashion brands are incorporating gaming techniques in their strategic marketing plans, highlighting the reasons behind the appeal of games as a platform for fashion IGA.

3.Theoretical Framework

The focus of this study is to understand if the virtual gaming environment serves as a great platform to advertise fashion brands. In order to achieve this understanding, it is essential to explore the various consumer behaviors and attitudes that come into play throughout the process of making purchasing decisions and engaging with in-game fashion products. Hence, to understand audience behavior and the gratifications that derive from interactions with in-game advertisement-driven fashion purchases, the researcher will utilize the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) in advertising studies. By doing so the researcher aims on identifying the ways in which in-game advertisement (IGA) can effectively cater to gamers' needs and provide gratification. Hence, in this chapter, the selected theoretical framework for the analysis will be introduced.

3.1 A historical overview of Advertising

Before delving deeper into how advertising works in the gaming metaverse and what gratifications it fulfils for pro-consumer gamers, a brief framework of how advertising provides information to the consumer will provide the present study with a substantial theoretical background, to understand if games can provide a profitable advertising platform for fashion brands.

Diving back into a retrospective examination of advertising, already back in the 1920s, advertisers presented the AIDA (Attention - Interest - Desire – Action) model, as a first “*hierarchy of effects*” (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961) process of influence that aims in uncovering the sequential steps through which advertising impacts consumers. The AIDA model was constructed upon advertisers' view of the audience as an active group, using media to gratify their need for information (Smith and Swinyard, 1982). In the 1960s, the “*active*” notion of the audience was enhanced, after mass media scholars identified selective defense mechanisms consumers adopted in the process of filtering media influence (Bauer, 1964).

The arrival of television proposed limitations of the traditional hierarchy of effects model amongst marketing practitioners. Krugman's (1965) model perceived television audiences as rather passive than active, as exposure to massive repetition subconsciously changes perceptions of the product in the viewer's mind. Krugman (1965) perceives television advertising as a form of "*learning without involvement*", a "*sensory involvement*", proposing that consumers like the products because they buy them and not vice versa. Henceforth, Krugman's (1965) model suggests that overwhelming repetitive exposure to television advertisements might affect the audiences' purchasing actions but will not affect their overall brand perception.

Later models focused not merely on the economic and market response effects of advertising. Pure affect models focused on exposing the affective responses that advertisements might arise based on the level of familiarity and the feelings that the ads may evoke (Burke and Edell, 1989). Those "*mere exposure*" theories (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999) proposed that awareness of the brand and audiences' individual liking, feelings and emotions enhance the ad's effectiveness, whilst awareness of the advertisement itself and its assigned product information plays a secondary role. Thus, advertising effectiveness towards brand attitudes highly correlates not only with verbal and informative characteristics, but it strongly depends on evoking emotions. Consequentially, the mental effects of advertising (e.g., awareness, memory, attitude toward the brand) are prerequisites to affect behavior (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999). Later studies have also focused on consumer behavior when confronted with negative information Elsharnouby et al. (2021) explored how the mediating role of brand knowledge and involvement is essential in enhancing consumers' resilience to negative information in their interactions with brands.

A Framework for Studying How Advertising Works

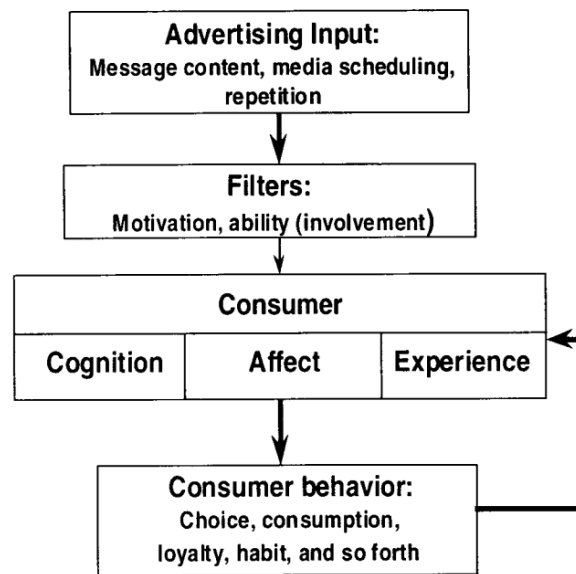


Figure 5. Vakratsas and Ambler's framework for studying how advertising works
(Source: Vakratsas and Ambler's, 1999)

Bringing the “*medium is the message*” (McLuhan, 2001) perspective into advertising, Nelson (1974) argues that by choosing the advertising medium the brand can maximize the repeat-purchase probability. Nelson (1974) perceives advertising as information and proposes that a mechanism exists which translates the advertising message into profits. More precisely, in his study disclosing how the features of advertising's behavior can be explained by advertising's information function, he distinguishes between “*search qualities*” and “*experience qualities*” (Nelson, 1974:730). Whilst the first refers to the brand qualities that the consumer has already acknowledged prior to purchase and the latter refers to the brand qualities that have yet to be determined. The style of a dress was used as an example to portray the first, whilst the taste of a brand of canned tuna fish was to picture the latter (Nelson, 1974). Moreover, he suggests that the cognitive component of advertisement response, measured by brand recognition or recall, will influence whether the advertisement will be seen by the user or not (Nelson, 1974). On the same note, Biel (1990) highly correlates the audience's attitude towards a brand with ad likability.

3.2 Advertising in the Metaverse

Consequentially, prior advertising research has already been updated to question the role of advertising in the metaverse by trying to question the traditional nature of advertising and provide an answer to inquiries such as: *“Will it (advertising) work the same way as it does in the real world? Will earlier advertising research findings still apply in the metaverse?”* (Kim, 2021:142).

Defining advertising as paid communication in mass media channels from an identified stakeholder to persuade an audience (Thorson, 2017), requires -for advertising to be successful- stakeholders and practitioners to be aware of the communication processes, strategies, and techniques. Thus, developing and encoding the message, selecting the right medium in which the message will be decoded and understanding decoding as a personal process, are key communicational steps to be considered in advertising.

Traditional mass media used to lead the advertising world by transmitting in a one-way communicational model those messages to the mass audiences (Thorson, 2017). With the arrival of the world wide web (web3), the digitalization of advertisement began to take place in online environments and, eventually, in social media platforms. In an increasingly fractured media environment, the use of online video games as an advertising channel has gained a lot of metaverse supporters (Eisingerich et al., 2019; Abou-Shou and Soliman, 2021; Xi and Hamari, 2019). Advertisement through the Internet provides more space for “individualization” than traditional media (Thorson, 2017). Simultaneously, the gaming environment is thriving based on its idea of creating online identities. Hence, from email advertising - personalized and delivered specifically addressing your inbox -, in-game advertising seems only as a natural step for the advertisement industry to mediate the customers' reality and create a feeling of uniqueness, whilst capitalizing over the imitative desire of “becoming someone else online”. Coinciding with these principles Kaliyamurthy et al.'s (2022) study delved into the domain of social media, analyzing the intricate interplay between template designs and algorithms. This interplay not only constrains self-presentation but also subtly guides users towards generating content that is commercially exploitable. This correspondence resonates with the continuous investigation into the intricate interplay between user behavior and intentions, influenced by the parameters and prospects set forth by the platform. Consequently, recognizing games as a

distinct form of medium of play is the first aspect of further understanding in-game consumption (Dalmoro et al., 2022).

Therefore, the present study will aim on exploring how games provide a new medium for digital communication strategies by applying mass media communication theories in advertising. More precisely, research findings will be critically analyzed based on the UGT. As past academics and advertisement communication practitioners have highlighted research should pivot their focus from what advertising does to consumers to what consumers do with advertising (O'Donohoe, 1994). Thus, the UGT will provide the present research with the needed theoretical tools to develop our understanding of users' perception of fashion brand advertisements in games. Additionally, as the UGT focuses on why people choose one medium over other alternatives to gratify their individual needs (Katz et al., 1974), the present research will reveal whether games can provide a profitable medium for fashion brands.

3.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) entered the field of media and communication research in 1944, trying to provide an understanding of the reasons behind users' choice of a certain type of media (Katz et al., 1973). Contradicting the Frankfurt School's view of the media as hierarchies in which agenda setting passively influences the audiences' behaviors and beliefs, Katz's (1959) communicational model suggested an active audience, which seeks gratification depending on the mass media source. Thus, mass media use is goal-directed and user-centered to satisfy both information and entertainment needs, in accordance with the individual social roles and the psychological needs of odd audience members. Accordingly, UGT argues that the chosen medium and not exclusively the content provided is the mean to gratify different social and phycological user motives (Leung and Wei, 2000). Drawing back on Katz (1959:2), the "uses" approach posits that people's values, interests, associations, and social roles hold significant importance, and individuals selectively "*fashion*" and shape their perceptions of what they see and hear based on these interests. Accordingly, to uncover the psychological needs of the individual while using media platforms, UGT (Katz et al., 1973), assumes that audiences consciously choose to consume media content to fulfil their self-aware needs, instead of being passively exposed to media agendas. An early study on mediated opinion formation conducted by Riley and Riley (1951), revealed that children with a high level of social integration amongst their peer networks "*use*" media as "social utility" – "*to*

select media materials which in some way be immediately useful for group” (Riley and Riley, 1951:456). By changing the traditional norms of communication theories from the linear question of *what the media do to people* to *what people do with the media* (Katz, 1959), the model suggests that it is the users’ needs that motivate them to actively choose a media platform for news/advertising consumption.

A Stafford and Stafford (1996) study designated content gratification and process gratification (the communicational process), as the main gratification types behind using different media, adding social gratification in later research (Stafford and Stafford, 2001). Content gratification refers to “*the fulfilment of information expectation*”, gratifying the user’s information-seeking and information-sharing needs. Accordingly, social gratification seeks to fulfil the individual’s need for social interaction and networking, whereas hedonic gratification is related to the individual’s need for entertainment (Gan and Wang, 2015).

With user-generated media (UGM) drastically changing the one-way communicational model of mass-mediated communication, UGT has been implemented in research in relation to new(er) sociability contexts (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011). Early scholars applied UGT to delve deeper into people’s intentions while choosing specific television programs and, thus, to understand the audiences’ approach to mass media (Katz et al., 1973). Drawing alongside the rapid alteration in the exposure patterns of media consumption that came along with the interdependence of mass-mediated communication channels and new digital technologies (Finn, 1997), scholars have applied UGT not only to understand motives for media behavior in traditional mass media platforms (newspapers, radio, television) (e.g. Elliott and Rosenberg, 1987, Conway and Rubin, 1991; Towers, 1987; Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979), but also most recent forms of new media, such as Facebook (Dhir and Tsai, 2017), Twitter (Han et al., 2015), WeChat (Pang, 2016) and internet concepts (e.g. email, text messaging, photo-tagging, using the “like” feature, mobile games (Dimmick et al., 2000; Dhir et al., 2018; Dhir et al., 2017; Dhir, 2016; Gan, 2017; Bulduklu, 2017). The primary goals of U&G inquiry are to elucidate how individuals utilize media to satisfy their needs, comprehend the motives behind media behavior, and identify the functions or outcomes that result from the interplay of needs, motives, and behavior (Katz et al., 1974).

3.4 Advertising Applications in Uses and Gratifications Theory

When utilizing UGT in advertising studies, researchers (Tsao and Sibley, 2004; Kaur et al., 2020; O'Donohoe, 1994) explore the motivations, needs, and gratifications that audiences experience while consuming advertisements. More specifically, UGT in advertisement not only enables the researcher to reveal how and why audiences select specific media channels and engage with advertisements but also to discern the gratifications that users seek from advertisement consumption within the media channel. Assessing media consumption patterns and the reasons behind them can help advertisers align their marketing techniques with their target audience preferences.

A study conducted by Tsao and Sibley (2004), tried to reveal whether the UGT can be used in relation to advertising. In like manner with consuming mass-mediated messages to fulfil specific personal needs, studies revealed that media users do not passively consume advertising messages. Contrariwise, from the infinite pool of advertising, they choose advertisements that they desire to fulfil their "*aesthetic, emotional or intellectual*" expectations (O'Donohoe, 1994).

A vast number of prior studies have revealed a positive correlation between U&Gs and satisfaction and loyalty (Kaur et al., 2020). In like manner, limited literature unravels entertainment U&Gs, as well as U&Gs deriving from social interaction as factors that can significantly influence users purchasing intentions (Aluri et al., 2016). The latter refers to a type of behavioral intention that pertains to consumers' proneness to purchase a particular product or service based on their perceptions, attitudes, and level of satisfaction (Aluri et al., 2016). When examining attitudes towards television commercials, Alwitt and Prabhaker (1992) drew back on the main gratification types behind using different media (including social, hedonic, and content gratification as mentioned above), establishing a linear relationship between U&Gs sought in advertising and U&Gs sought through medium use, adding *value affirmation* to the first ones. On a similar tone, when addressing the factors influencing purchase intent in virtual worlds, Bleize and Antheunis (2016), ascribe the ability to sell virtual products to real-life consumers as the main factor affecting the success of virtual buys.

3.5 Uses and Gratifications in In-Game Advertising

The first step in exploring the motivations of gamers when consuming branded content within the gaming environment is to create a portrayal of the various U&Gs that have already been identified in past research, by using the theoretical lens of UGT. The U&Gs can be categorized based on the type of content or the medium in which the content is presented, providing valuable insights into the reasons why gamers engage with branded content in the gaming environment (Ruggiero, 2000).

3.5.1 Gratifications for Purchasing Decisions in Virtual Worlds

A respective amount of literature studies (Koles and Nagy, 2012; Jin and Phua, 2015; Walsh, 2014; Yoo and Eastin, 2017) has been focusing on investigating the relationships between different U&Gs of advertising brands within the gaming environment, focusing on continuation, brand loyalty, brand recognition and purchase intentions. When it comes to specifically studying the exposure and brand recall of fashion brands in the gaming environment, research has been limited to understanding how brand advertisement on the character's clothing has a positive effect on the brand purchase intention (Steinerte, 2021; Yoo and Eastin, 2017). Additionally, on the gaming metaverse, U&Gs driving purchasing actions and purchasing behaviors are highly correlated with the level of satisfaction that derives from the player's self-esteem boost when personalizing his/her character appearance (Guo and Barnes, 2012). On a similar note, Guo and Barnes (2012) equated gamers' purchasing intentions to their in-game social status. As purchasing virtual items often corresponds to the gamer's social gratification of "levelling-up" their avatar, players with high social VW status are most likely to stay consistent with in-game purchases in order to maintain their present social gratifications. Hence, prior literature demonstrates a linear line between the gamer's social status and their purchasing behavior patterns. Moreover, research (Koles and Nagy, 2012) has exposed a distinct duality concerning virtual goods purchases. On one hand, specific virtual items are purchased to act as in-game differentiators, helping individuals stand out from the virtual avatar crowd. On the other hand, certain virtual goods are purchased to as necessary for accessing or affirming membership within a group (Koles and Nagy, 2012).

When examining the influence of IGA on the purchase intention of players, research focuses on congruity (Verberckmoes et. al, 2016), integration, and prominence as three of the key

factors to examine the influence of a match between the game and its advertising (Yaping et al., 2010). Several studies have investigated the impact of the IGA effectiveness on people's cognitive attitude (brand awareness) (Jin and Phua, 2015; Walsh, 2014), affective attitude (brand evaluation) (Yoo and Eastin, 2017) and behavioral attitude (purchase intention and purchase behaviour towards advertised brands) (De Pelsmacker et al., 2019). Moreover, a strong correlation has been observed between cognitive engagement in following the games' narratives and an increase in participant interaction with brands advertised in the games (Yoo and Eastin, 2017). Other experiments highly correlate the player's involvement (Lee and Faber, 2007) and the player's experience (Schneider and Cornwell, 2005), the degree of game difficulty (Dardis et al., 2019) or the type of the game - e.g., if it a first-person shooter one (Chaney et al., 2004; Peña et al., 2018) or a fantasy one (Verberckmoes et. al, 2016) - with brand recall. Additionally, studies have highlighted how over-using IGA techniques in online gaming can lead to negative user reactions -if not coordinated appropriately with the game environment – (Lewis and Porter, 2010).

Existing literature indicates that experiencing a product in the virtual environment can increase the product's interactivity, creating a vivid mental representation in the consumer's mind and, therefore, a higher purchase intention (Schlosser, 2003). Highsnobiety's (2021a) (a global fashion and lifestyle media brand) case study on brands in gaming pictured the importance to style your digital skin with fashion brands. Their survey was conducted among their *“own style-conscious readership to learn more about their relationship to gaming”* (Highsnobiety, 2021b). The study revealed that 60% of 559n of their readers have purchased digital clothing for their online avatars, 31% claimed that gaming influences their style, whilst the majority of the study participants portray how their gaming skin shows their interest and what they wished they could afford in real life. Research focusing on the virtual world of World of Warcraft (WoW), which holds the Guinness World Record for the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG; Activision Blizzard, 2016), ranked customization of the user's avatar, the user's need to increase their game level based on in-game purchases and the level of satisfaction amongst the highest factors influencing consumers behavior towards in-game product purchases (Guo and Barnes, 2012). However, Guo and Barnes (2012) highlighted that the purchasing behavior of online consumers for virtual items varies from the process of merely utilizing digital platforms to buy in-world items, as illustrated in Figure 6.

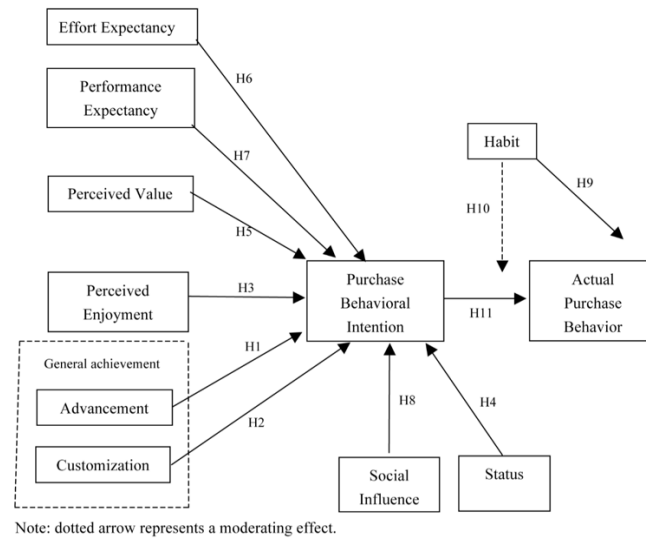


Figure 6. Factors correlating purchase behavioral intentions with actually purchase behavior according to Guo and Barnes.
(Source: Guo and Barnes, 2012)

3.5.2 Gratifications for Engaging in Virtual Gaming Worlds

While large corporations are increasingly venturing into the virtual realms of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) through advertising, there is a scarcity of research that investigates the connection between virtual identities, virtual consumption, and real-world consumption (Shelton, 2010). When examining the motivations behind playing MMORPGs, Yee (2007) classified these gratifications into three (3) components: (1) the social component – which enlists socialization, relationship, and teamwork, (2) the immersion component - including the gratifications of role-playing, customization, and escapism, and (3) achievement – including advancement, challenge, and competition.

Accordingly, the idea of identity as a gratification in the metaverse can be clearly perceived in “*Second Life*”, a multi-player online virtual world of around 900,000 actively monthly users that is promoting itself as “*an inclusive haven of self-expression*” (Second Life, 2023). Second Life offers its users exactly what the name is promising: an opportunity to lead a “second” life, in parallel with their real-world embodied existence. Thus, users can either embody their authentic selves or forge an entirely new imaginative character. There, the influence of purchase decisions in the virtual world has been linked to the identified factors of expectations regarding effort, performance, and perceived value (Guo and Barnes, 2011). More precisely,

effort expectancy refers to the users' expectations of the benefits of purchasing virtual products in comparison to the efforts or costs required. Performance expectancy depicts the users' attributed expectation of how the purchased virtual product will outgrow their in-game performance, whilst perceived value is used to describe the value of a virtual product, in terms of monetary value or non-monetary effort (Guo and Barnes, 2011). Correspondingly, based on a survey conducted among 580 Second Life residents, Haenlein and Kaplan (2009) showed how the exposure to flagship brand stores within the virtual worlds, the user's purchase experience and purchase frequency (again within the virtual environment), as well as the derived gratification that accompanies such purchases, can positively influence real-life purchase intent by influencing the user's attitude towards the in-game displayed brand. Hence, their study showcased how IGA purchases can alter consumer behaviors in real-world, in a like manner to traditional advertising methods (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2009). Extending the literature on virtual goods buying behavior amongst Second Life residents, Animesh et al. (2011) listed telepresence (the feeling of being immersed in the virtual environment), social presence (the feeling of personal connection with other virtual world residents), and flow (the level of user involvement and fascination by the virtual world) as influential factors for virtual-world purchases.

Previous studies aimed to create an initial taxonomy of user motivations for engaging in virtual social worlds (Shelton, 2010), while also examining the influence of these diverse reasons on both virtual and real-world consumer behaviors. More precisely, Shelton (2010) formulated his hypothesis based on existing literature that highlights nine potential user gratifications for engaging in Second Life (as presented in Table 1) to reveal to what extent do these motivations drive users to make purchases within Second Life.

Table 1. User gratifications for Engaging in Second Life based on Shelton (2010)

User gratifications for engaging in Second Life (Shelton, 2010)	Description
Fantasy	Using Second Life to engage in activities beyond real-world possibilities
Customization	When individuals take interest in personalizing their avatar's appearance

Role-playing	Crafting a persona with a background narrative and engaging with other residents to create an improvised narrative.
Relationship	Playing Second Life with the intention of forging enduring and meaningful connections with fellow Residents.
Socialization	Utilizing Second Life as a platform to interact with friends, family, and expressing interest in engaging in conversations with other virtual residents.
Escapism	Being online in Second Life as an escape from contemplating real-world issues and concerns.
Relaxation	Utilizing Second Life as a method to unwind and alleviate stress.
Advancement/ challenge	Using Second Life as a mean for personal growth.
Competition	The aspiration to engage in competitive activities with other virtual residents.

3.6 The Simulacra of Gaming

“Confirmed! We Live in a Simulation”

- Scientific American (2021)

With the gaming industry blurring the lines between physical and digital identities, the trillion-dollar fashion industry could not miss the opportunity to turn games into fashion’s new runaway (Kelly, 2021). Fashion’s common aspect with gaming - besides the economic profitability of both industries – lies in the social aspect of community and character building. Whilst both games and fashion offer a form of self-expression, for many, gaming offers a form of an alternate reality that non-virtual fashion products cannot (for example it is easier to experiment with gender roles in a virtual world). Drawing on Kelly Vero’s (as found in Brown, 2021) - a leading figure in the VR/AR industry – position on how gaming will save fashion,

the collaboration of the two industries should be driven by trying to “*make life real again but make this digital*”. Hence, in an effort to examine how games can address people’s consumer need to express themselves through fashion, the present study will reflect on postmodernism and Baudrillard’s theories. “*Symbolic value*” and neither exchange nor use-value play a crucial role in understanding modern consumption habits (Baudrillard, 1994). I argue that in the “*society of the spectacle*” (Debord, 1995), theories of postmodernism should be studied and applied to understand modern consumption.

Baudrillard, “*the high priest of postmodernism*”, introduced his concept of reality as a “*simulation*”. His book “*Simulacra and Simulation*” (Baudrillard, 1994) depicted how human experiences shaped within the modern technological Western world are nothing but “*copies without an original*”. He argues that technological determinism has penetrated human existence with meaningless signs and images. For Baudrillard (1994) television is the ultimate ‘manufactured object’ that produces hyperreality. For the purposes of the present research, that would be online games.

Postmodernism, as a philosophical and cultural movement, challenges traditional notions of consumption behavior. It suggests that in contemporary society, individuals consume not only to fulfil basic needs but also to express their identities, values, and affiliations with certain social groups or lifestyles (Giddens, 1991). Products and brands, in this context, become symbols and signifiers of broader cultural ideas and aspirations. In brief, the symbolic meanings of products serve two interconnected functions: shaping the external social world – “*social-symbolism*” and constructing the consumer’s individual self-identity – “*self-symbolism*” (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

3.7 Chapter Summary

In summary, to gain insights into consumer behaviors and attitudes during the process of purchasing and engaging with IGA fashion products, the study adopts the UGT commonly applied in advertising studies. By employing UGT, the research aims to identify how IGA can effectively cater to gamers' needs and provide gratification. Thus, the present thesis aims on investigating the potential of the virtual gaming environment as a platform for advertising fashion brands based on building a new theoretical “metaverse advertising model” (Kim, 2021). This model is expected to shed light on the dynamics of advertising within virtual

gaming environments, exploring how gamers interact with and respond to fashion brand advertising, ultimately providing valuable insights for marketers seeking to optimize their advertising strategies in the evolving landscape of the metaverse.

Moreover, the metaverse aligns with postmodern principles as both challenge traditional notions of reality, truth, and identity. Postmodernism theories emphasize the fragmentation and multiplicity of meanings and reject the idea of a single, objective reality. Hence, when studying the U&Gs of advertising within the gaming metaverse, postmodernism theories that signify how products and brands are extending their material nature and are becoming symbols of identity, value and social expression should be applied.

4. Methodology

The current study has utilized U&G theory in context to IGA to provide an answer to: How do gamers utilize games as a fashion advertising platform and what makes them so appealing? This research aims to explore the motivations and behaviors of gamers when it comes to using video games as a platform for fashion IGA, as well as to identify the factors that contribute to the appeal of such advertising within games. Thus, by embracing an open-ended discussion with gamers, the study will uncover whether they perceive fashion IGA as fulfilling their desires, preferences, and aspirations in terms of fashion consumption.

Hence, to address the previous question and the research aim, the research was designed and implemented around two stages. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect empirical data that will provide the researcher with a preliminary list of U&Gs. As the current research aims to uncover the U&Gs for using games as a medium, in-depth interviews are chosen as the most suitable research method to understand the gamer's needs from their own personal perspective. Thereafter, the researcher will adopt thematic analysis to analyze and categorize the collected data on a preliminary list of U&Gs. Subsequently, the transcribed interviews and recordings were subjected to a thematic analysis, aiming to identify commonalities and distinctions within the informants' statements (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

The present chapter is structured in the following manner: first I will provide a brief introduction to justify in-depth interviews as the preferred methodological approach. Following

this, I thoroughly describe the interview processes as well as I rationalize the process of the interview respondents' selection. Trustworthiness criteria, ethical considerations as well as my role as a researcher are then discussed. The chapter continues by providing an analytical description of the data collection and transcription progress. To ensure the transferability and validity of the study, I strived to employ a transparent approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the collected empirical material. The data analysis followed a deductive thematic approach based on an interview guide, carefully crafted so as to provide themes like gaming relationships, avatar customization, fashion connection, and perspectives on brand involvement. A pilot interview was conducted to ensure the process's efficacy and refinement.

4.1 In-depth Interviews

According to Legard et al. (2003), the importance of in-depth interviews in data collection lies in the power of language to illuminate meaning. Using interviews as a research method will help the researcher to delve deeper into the meaning creators attribute to their experiences when constructing their digital selves, as well as to what extent their in-game purchases reflect their real-world ones, providing an answer to the study hypotheses.

The interview process aligned with Kvale's *"traveler metaphor"* (1996), wherein knowledge is negotiated through dialogue rather than predetermined. The focus was on understanding the interviewees' experiences rather than shaping their responses. Hence, by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews, the researcher can delve into the motivations and gratifications that drive users' engagement with in-game fashion brand advertisements. This method allows for a detailed examination of the factors that make games an appealing medium for fashion brand advertising, which aligns with the U&Gs perspective. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in questioning, enabling the researcher to explore a wide range of perspectives and insights related to the appeal of games for fashion brand advertising. Additionally, their explanatory nature could help the researcher uncover new and emergent themes that may not be evident from the outset, contributing to an in-depth analysis of consumer behavior.

Overall, through interviews, the researcher can establish a personal connection with the participants, which may lead to deeper and more candid responses. This connection can be essential in exploring sensitive topics related to consumer behavior and motivations.

4.1.1 Selection of Interview Respondents

In the initial stage of participant identification, the researcher sought to build a sample of interviewees who could significantly contribute to the discussion regarding fashion's intersection with gaming. Considering the objective of the research was to shed light on the underlying motivations behind purchasing fashion products in the gaming environment, individuals with a profound interest in gaming were actively pursued. Hence, the selection of the interview respondents was not merely focused on participants who regularly engaged in gaming activities. Rather the nine interviewees chosen for this study self-identified as gamers based on their deep involvement in the gaming culture and their active participation in gaming communities. This methodological rigor was essential as the study aims to create a foundation for an open-ended discussion that provides a portrayal of gamers' perspectives. Additionally, it was crucial to select respondents with an extensive interest in buying gaming fashion skins.

At first, the researcher sought participants from game live-streaming platforms (e.g., Twitch). However, an early challenge arose due to the difficulty of knowing the gamers' willingness to invest in gaming skins. To overcome this, the researcher observed the users' in-game avatars and their customization choices. Hence, an amount of 20 users were initially discerned and approached through an email for potential participation based on their use of fashion collaborations within their game streaming activities. The email introduced the study's purpose, my role as a researcher, the context in which the present research is carried out as well as the reasons that motivated the researcher to consider the recipients as ideal candidates for participation. The initial interview selection was carried out at the end of March 2023. Providing the timeframe of the data collection process is of high importance as it signifies to the reader the temporal context in which the study's discussion will be based upon.

A second challenge appeared when responses were not received. The researcher acknowledges that such limitation can be due to a high influx of emails on the recipients' end or their self-perception as creators and public figures, leading them to potentially prioritize other correspondences. Thus, the researcher reached out - beginning of April 2023 - to her social circle to facilitate a more accessible participant identification procedure and to identify individuals with a strong interest in gaming and in investing in virtual fashion products. This decision enabled the researcher to better comprehend the respondents' interests, preferences, and gaming behaviors. Additionally, such an approach took into consideration the already established level of rapport and trust and interviewees were anticipated to be more open and

candid. However, it should be kept in mind that a pre-existing relationship between the participants and the researcher might bias the authenticity of the collected material, as the participants might feel the need to please the researcher.

To mitigate these disadvantages, the researcher continued the participant identification by implementing the snowball sampling technique. Through this method, four participants were voluntarily recruited, being referred by initial participants. As games are acknowledged as a platform for community building, snowballing gamers within the participants' community made it possible to include individuals who would have been challenging to reach. Thus, by recruiting respondents with no prior connection to the researcher, I strived to ensure a diverse and representative sample, while also minimizing the potential for biased responses.

Furthermore, the selection of interviewees for metaverse-related discussions tends to favour individuals from Generation Z² - also known as Gen Z, iGen or postmillennial –, due to their familiarity with and their extensive use of digital technology and the internet. As the digital natives transform and construct their lives within the digital environment, by spending an increasing amount of time purchasing and engaging in activities within the metaverse realm, the researcher deemed right to proceed with the selection of participants within this year-of-birth range (born approximately between the late 1990s and the early 2010s). However, focusing solely on these years may neglect the perspectives and experiences of elder demographics, who are also eagerly reforming every aspect of their real-world experience within the new metaverse environment.

Since the research was designed to foster an open-ended and exploratory discussion about the motivations behind purchasing fashion products within the gaming environment, determining the point of saturation presented a unique challenge. Unlike studies with more clearly defined objectives and specific data requirements, the aim here was to gather rich and diverse insights from the participants to delve into their in-game experiences and purchase behaviors. Considering that gamers are a broader category that refers to every individual who actively participates in playing video games, despite their diverse educational backgrounds and ages (Entertainment Software Association, 2015), the selection of interview participants

² A typical Gen Zer is often characterized by self-drive, collaboration, social and climate awareness, and a value for flexibility and authenticity. They are the first generation to grow up fully immersed in a high-tech-driven world. The digital skills and tools that they possess allow them to cultivate a heightened sense of diversity while shaping their unique identities (De Witte, 2022).

deliberately avoided any restrictions based on geographical location or educational background.

Overall, to ensure the credibility of findings despite a small sample size, the researcher made deliberate efforts to recruit participants from a diverse range of social and economic backgrounds, as well as varying genders, and ethnicities (refer to Table 2). By doing so, the research aimed to provide an insightful analysis of the topic, representing a broad cross-section of the gaming community and their engagement with in-game fashion. Additionally, to determine the sample size, the sampling process continued until new perspectives and additional information ceased to emerge. Hence, a total amount of nine interviews were conducted until the researcher judged that saturation has occurred and new data could no longer be obtained to provide further insights. To ensure confidentiality and considering its non-essential nature for the data analysis process (Swedish Research Council, 2017), the interviewees' names have been concealed, and the interviewees' perspectives will be presented in the text using their initials.

Table 2. Presentation of interview respondents

Respondent	Year of Birth	Gender	Occupation	Ethnicity
Interviewee C.	2000	Female	Sales Advisor	German
Interviewee E.	1998	Female	Social Media Curator	Greek
Interviewee H.	1998	Male	Financial Advisor	Greek
Interviewee K.	2002	Female	Student	Belgian
Interviewee L.	1996	Male	Waiter	British
Interviewee M.	1997	Female	Creator Success Specialist at Gaming Company	Swedish
Interviewee O.	1999	Male	Senior Customer Service Representative	Swedish
Interviewee R.	2000	Male	Student	British
Interviewee S.	1995	Male	Student	American

4.1.2 Interview Process

In accordance with the open-ended purpose and the objectives of this research, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach to stimulate an open conversation with each of the participants. Thus, the semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for flexibility in questioning, aiming to foster an exploratory dialogue that delved into the participants' unique perspectives and experiences. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were all held in person.

The construction of the interview manual (see Appendix 1) was a crucial aspect of the study, offering initial themes for the deductive content analysis process. Thus, it involved phrasing questions that would effectively probe participants' attitudes, motivations, and behaviors related to fashion in gaming. The interview guide initially included the following themes of questions: relationship with gaming; avatar customization; relationship with fashion; viewpoint on the involvement of fashion brands in gaming. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews and my intention to remain receptive to the participants' experiences, the interview guide served as a flexible framework rather than a formal questionnaire.

To ensure the effectiveness and refinement of the interview process, a pilot interview was conducted. The pilot volunteer-interviewee was identified based on his extended knowledge and professional experience in the gaming industry, chosen from the researcher's past intern position in a gaming company. The pilot interviewee followed the interview guide (see Appendix 1). My aim as a researcher was to practise active listening, whilst maintaining a non-directive approach to encourage the interviewee's unbiased answers. The volunteer's expertise was considered of high importance in providing insights and feedback on the interview guide and methodology, helping to refine the data collection approach in the latter interviewee stages. The pilot interview was held in person and lasted approximately one hour, whilst a thorough one-hour session followed to gather the participant's feedback on the clarity and appropriateness of the questions and overall interview experience. Consequentially, it revealed that the questions and interview guide were mostly ready for implementation, requiring only minor adjustments, particularly concerning the gaming aspect and refining elements related to games that involve skins and avatar customization. The pilot interview was only to test and validate the interview guide and its findings were not incorporated into the study's empirical material analysis. Overall, the researcher considered the pilot interview to be of high

importance for ensuring that subsequent interviews with future participants would generate meaningful and insightful responses.

The interview places were chosen by the interviewees to ensure their feeling of comfort within the surrounding space, whilst the interviewer made sure that the space was quiet enough so that the recording process would not be interrupted. Drawing on Bryman and Bell (2015), recording the interview can provide the researcher with the benefit of re-listening to it hence, avoiding any misunderstandings or mishearing. To establish a comfortable atmosphere, each interview began with a clear explanation of the research topic and the researcher's purpose, followed by obtaining permission to record. Additionally, interview terms, such as space, time, and confidentiality, were agreed upon, and participants were informed of their right to interrupt the discussion at any time they felt necessary. Thereafter, to ensure a more thorough analysis of the collected data and ensure transparency (Bryman and Bell, 2015), the researcher proceeded to transcribe the entirety of the audio recording. The methodological approach to transcription involved capturing all elements of the conversation including potential non-verbal cues and casual remarks, aligning with the research's commitment to ensure the authenticity of the data. While some researchers may choose to edit transcriptions by removing elements considered to be irrelevant to the research's purpose, I regard that these casual conversation elements could potentially offer valuable insights into the participants' emotions and reactions. Moreover, as the study aims to delve deeper into sensitive issues, such as identity and community building within the digital realm, as well as to uncover the respondents' consumer motivation choices, retaining the authenticity of the interview in the transcription is considered essential for the researcher to delve deeper into any unspoken dynamics that could contribute to a better understanding of the research inquiries.

All the interviews were held in English so as to avoid any misinterpretation when translating, due to language barriers.

4.2 Trustworthiness Criteria

The researcher strived to ensure the study's quality by adhering to the standards and principles of reliability, credibility, validity, dependability, and transferability (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Graneheim et al., 2017; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

For the purposes of the reliability of the study – viz how consistent the collection of empirical data was so that the same result would reoccur by using the same method (Bryman and Bell, 2015) -, the researcher proceeded in using the same interview guide for all participants. Whereas the author took every possible measure to ensure methodological reliability, it is important to highlight that since the empirical data were collected with a qualitative method, validity can be subjected to each participant's point of view. Hence, validity – as the level at which the participants represent a true depiction of what the study intends to measure – could be wrongfully distorted by the respondents' subconscious need to provide the most “right” and “useful” for the study answer. To avoid this, the interviewee ensured the anonymity of the participants (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Furthermore, the interviewee made sure feelings of comfortability were raised amongst both sides by starting the interview with more general subjects to discuss instead of jumping directly to the thesis subject. By doing so, the researcher hoped to build trust and increase validity.

The dependability of the study refers to *“the challenge of deciding which codes and supporting quotes from the original text are to be included in a category”* (Graneheim et al., 2017: 33). Failing to deal with the mismatch between the degree of interpretation and the level of abstraction in the analysis can pose great challenges to the study's validity. To address this issue, the author proceeded in providing examples of both the abstraction and the interpretation process, such as direct citations from the transcript empirical data, that can guide the readers in assessing the credibility and authenticity of the findings.

Moreover, transferability plays a crucial part in assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability refers to the extent to which the findings and conclusions of a study can be applied or generalized to other contexts or settings beyond the specific study sample. To increase the trustworthiness of the study the present methodology chapter tried to present the process of collecting and analyzing the empirical data as detailed as possible. This approach ensures transferability and the future replication of the study results as well as allows the readers to assess to what extent the findings can be tailored to their situation (Klein and Myers, 1999).

However, it's important to note that the findings of this study may not necessarily extend to all gaming communities or broader populations. While in-depth interviews provide valuable insights into participants' personal perspectives, the researcher acknowledges that such a data

collection method limits the generalizability of the findings. Alternative research methods could have been explored, incorporating a larger and more diverse sample, allowing for the inclusion of various gaming genres and platforms. Thus, to enhance the generalizability and offer a more holistic view of the relationship between gamers and fashion IGA, the researcher could employ a quantitative survey alongside the interview process.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Considering that the theme of this study touches upon sensitive matters, such as the construction of one's online identity, both the research topic as well as the research design raise important ethical considerations and deliberations that ought to be addressed throughout the thesis writing process.

Regarding the research design, confidentiality issues have been addressed from the very first moment. Prior to the interview, the participant was provided with an informed consent form (see Appendix 2), clarifying the research's purpose and voluntary participation. The present study adhered to the guidelines outlined by The Swedish Research Council (2017) concerning anonymity, recognizing that, in certain types of studies, the specific identity of individuals is not crucial. Similarly, for the present thesis work preserving the anonymity of the interviewees does not impact the verification of the research sample. The focus of the analysis is solely on the interviewees' perceptions regardless of their personal data. Hence, in line with these guidelines, the confidentiality issues in this research were addressed meticulously. Moreover, taking into consideration that the creation or the re-shape of one's personal identity in the virtual environment is a sensitive area to be touched upon, any kind of language used to either present or analyze the data should be carefully chosen so as not to raise any negative feelings or psychological discomfort for the participants or for the readers.

After identifying the interviewees, the latter were invited to participate in the study by e-mail, where all the details about confidentiality as well as the purpose of the study were stated. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their identities and responses right before and after the researcher started the audio recording, whilst they've been informed that both the transcript as well as the audio recording will be kept strictly from the research and only up to the date that the thesis examination will have been successfully marked.

In this master thesis, I, as the researcher, played a central role in conducting the qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews. Acknowledging the potential of my own personal views on the interpretation of data and addressing the challenge of dependability it was important for me to remain vigilant about my pre-understandings (Graneheim et al., 2017). Hence, even though I do not engage in any gaming activities, I possess a strong theoretical knowledge of the gaming industry. Not only do I surround myself with dedicated gamers but also, prior to this study, I held an intern position at an influencer marketing gaming company. The latter has equipped me with an extensive knowledge of games per se, as well as how the gaming marketing industry operates. Additionally, nevertheless my gaming skills are limited, I have a huge interest in how immersing in the world of gaming not only forms a feeling of community but also has the power of forming one's own personal identity. I also have a profound passion for fashion, driven by similar reasons. I believe that both gaming and fashion are powerful mediums that redefine how we interact with the world, reflecting various aspects of our experiences and allowing us to express ourselves creatively. My dual interest in gaming and fashion serves as a motivating force in exploring the intersection between these realms and understanding how virtual identities and virtual consumption influence real-world behaviors, enriching the depth and significance of this research.

By acknowledging and openly discussing my own preconceptions and beliefs, I aimed to maintain transparency and minimize any undue influence on the data analysis.

4.4 Data Analysis

This chapter presents a detailed account of the data analysis process, which involved thematic discourse analysis and deductive content analysis, to explore the factors influencing gamers' motivations and perceptions related to purchasing digital fashion products in gaming. The chapter also includes an explanation of the data coding process, providing insights into how textual units or segments were selected and assigned to specific pre-existing categories or theories. Furthermore, examples and excerpts from the interview data are presented to illustrate how thematic discourse analysis and deductive content analysis were applied.

After familiarizing myself with the transcribed empirical data, a thematic content analysis was used to analyze and structure the collected material into codes that would best serve the study hypotheses. The coding process in this study employed deductive content analysis, following

the approach proposed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Hence, in conducting deductive content analysis, I utilized pre-existing categories and theories relevant to my research question. These predetermined categories guided my focus while reading and re-reading the data. I sought to identify specific textual units or segments that aligned with the established concepts and themes from previous research. These textual units could include individual phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that provided valuable information related to my research topic. By applying the predefined codes derived from the existing theories, I systematically organized the data and examined common themes or patterns that emerged from the responses.

Hence, to address the study's research questions, and H1 and H2, the author focused on exploring the factors influencing gamers' motivations and perceptions related to purchasing digital fashion products in gaming. To address these questions, the deductive content analysis was structured around the pre-existing categories derived from relevant literature and established frameworks related to gamers' motivations and perceptions in the context of digital fashion purchases in online gaming. The established framework served as a valuable guide to ensure that important aspects of gamers' gratifications and preferences were thoroughly examined. Moreover, by drawing upon past research and theories, the study benefited from a solid foundation of knowledge in the field of gaming and consumer behavior. Appendix 3 presents illustrations of the coding process and how the identified codes were grouped into thematic clusters. For instance, the coding process was guided by the predefined theme "In-game purchasing as a Social Gratification". Participants frequently mentioned their desire to *"signify some kind of social standing or power within the game"* (Interviewee K.) through fashion purchases. This concept was coded under the corresponding code "social standing." Likewise, instances where participants discussed their preference for items that provided "social distinction" and "symbolic value" were coded accordingly. These codes reflected the participants' recognition of fashion items as not only functional accessories but also as symbolic markers of their status within the virtual world.

Accordingly, Yee's (2007) classification of gratifications in playing MMORPGs framework identified three main components: the social component, the immersion component, and the achievement component (Yee, 2007). Under the social component, the analysis aimed to understand how socialization, relationships, and teamwork influence gamers' motivations for engaging in in-game fashion purchases. The immersion component explored how role-playing, customization, and escapism gratifications contribute to the perception of virtual fashion as an

important aspect of the gaming experience. Lastly, the achievement component investigated how motivations related to advancement, challenge, and competition influence the decision-making process regarding digital fashion purchases.

An interview guide (refer to Appendix 1) was first built to touch upon the core themes of the study:

- To understand the interviewee's relationship with gaming.
- To gain insights about how the interviewees depict/customize themselves online in gaming.
- To understand the interviewee's relationship with fashion, trends, and online purchases.
- To understand the interviewee's point of view on fashion in gaming.

Conducting the interviews based on the thematic guide provided an opportunity to focus on questions aiming to reveal whether using fashion brands in gaming offers merely personal satisfaction to the gamer or veils their need for online identity building, whilst follow-up and probing questions were asked when needed for further clarification and elaboration. Moreover, by using a thematic guide for the interviews, the researcher ensured that the questions and topics addressed during the interviews aligned with the core themes of the study. This approach enhanced the rigor and coherence of the research process and allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the motivations and perceptions behind using fashion brands in gaming, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

One important aspect that should be methodologically supported here is the researcher's choice to include a hypothetical question in the interview guide. More specifically, the study's open-ended discussion nature evolved around exploring the motivations, behaviors and factors that contribute to the attractiveness of fashion IGA from the gamer's perspective. Hence, the researcher proposed to the participants the hypothetical scenario of a future where every fashion purchase is to be made in the digital realm. By posing this question, the researcher sought to reveal whereas gamers perceive games as a virtual platform with the potential to replace other digital purchasing tools. This hypothetical question serves as a methodological tool to provoke critical thinking and gather valuable perspectives from the interviewed gamers. As the scenario is not totally alienated from the metaverse zeitgeist, participants' responses can provide insights into potential trends and shifts. The researcher acknowledges potential limitations that can derive from a hypothetical question. Its speculative nature and limited

predictive value could pose a difficulty for marketers in pretending future advertising trends, as participants' current viewpoints might not accurately reflect their future attitudes. Nevertheless, by delving into their reactions to such a scenario, the researcher aimed to unearth underlying attitudes, concerns, and preferences related to the intersection of fashion and gaming.

5. Analysis & Results

In the following chapter results of the interviews will be presented accompanied by comparisons, discussions, and a compilation of quotes that relate to the theoretical concepts. It is important to note that all quotes provided therein are extracted directly from the conducted interviews, whilst to ensure confidentiality, all interviewees are referenced as "Interviewee" followed by the initial of their name.

5.1 Games as a Uses and Gratifications Platform

When trying to uncover the process of persuasion within mass media platforms, early communicational scholars concluded that the media are not as influential as expected to be. Research altered their focus on understanding what it is that is the source of influence – if not mass media (Katz, 1959). Katz's (1959) view that the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction can be the correlating point between the UGT and games. In Interviewee H.'s words, utilizing games as a platform allows for

“...experiencing something different from what other media offer... I believe it is a higher form of entertainment which is much more direct than other traditional media e.g., movies, music, books.” (Interviewee H.)

This aligns with Katz's (1959) perspective that the media competes with other sources of need satisfaction, and it serves as a correlating point between the UGT and games. Games, with their unique interactive and immersive nature, provide a distinctive avenue for individuals to fulfil their entertainment and experiential needs, setting them apart from conventional forms of media consumption. It is important here to mention that Interviewee H. was the only participant

that contradicted games with other media platforms, describing games as an encounter with a unique and distinct experience, unlike what other media sources typically offer.

5.1.1 Escapism and Socialization

Katz and Foulkes (1962) conceptualized mass media use as an escape. Thus, when trying to reveal the gratifications behind gaming, the analysis of the interviews revealed a significant theme that emerged prominently among all but one of the participants - escapism. This finding is aligned with previous research that highlights escapism as one of the key gratifications sought in gaming experiences (Shelton, 2010; Yee, 2007). In the present study, escapism emerged as a recurring motive in all the informants' responses when asked their reason behind engaging in gaming activities, providing a glimpse into how players perceive games as an opportunity to momentarily detach from their physical realities. For Interviewee S. gaming

“allowed me to forget about like all of the things that I was stressed about it's like a nice way to get away from reality.” (Interviewee S.)

Thus, by identifying escapism as a prevalent gratification need fulfilled by gaming, the research sheds light on how players perceive games as an opportunity to detach momentarily from their physical realities. This understanding has important implications for the investigation of in-game fashion advertisements' effects on consumer behavior. By incorporating fashion products within gaming environments, fashion brands may effectively tap into players' desire for escapism, leading to increased engagement and potential real-world consumer actions.

Through the interview coding process, another prominent code emerged, highlighting games as a platform for socialization. Participants shared their experiences of using games not only as a means of escapism but also as a way to create and maintain social connections by using media as a "social utility" (Riley and Riley, 1951). Gamers expressed how engaging in multiplayer games allowed them to interact with others, collaborate as a team, and build relationships with fellow players.

“It's getting increasingly harder to keep a relationship with my friends and but with the gaming we can enjoy each other's company.” (Interviewee O.)

The analysis also corroborates Yee's (2007) classification of gaming motivations, particularly the social component. Gamers' preferences for socializing within the gaming environment reflect the interconnected nature of games and their appeal as U&G platforms. Contradicting the notion of games solely being an escape from reality, this section of the analysis emphasizes the multifaceted nature of gaming experiences, in which they can simultaneously fulfil both social and escapism needs.

5.1.2 Advancement/ Challenge

Another major theme that has been identified as a gratification behind engaging in gaming activities was employing games as a method to pursue personal development - what Shelton (2010) described as “*advancement/challenge*”. Hence, whilst all of the participants acknowledged games as a platform to escape from the boundaries and the anxieties of the earthly environment, five out of nine participants emphasized that using gaming as a hobby not only satisfies their desire to be transported into a stress-free fantasy realm but also to equip themselves with tools for personal growth that are often challenging to attain within their everyday social context. For instance, for Interviewee S.

“A lot of games, especially shooting games, I think they also train your like hand-eye coordination like I think it makes me better at things like driving.” (Interviewee S.)

Moreover, games involve setting goals and presenting challenges that the player needs to overcome, encouraging the gamer to make decisions that impact the game's outcome. Hence, besides providing an immersive entertaining experience, they can also provide a platform for enhancing one's decision-making abilities. As interviewee K. pointed out, “*when playing some games, you do learn some skills like management managing your time or assets*” (Interviewee K.), which can be transferable to real-life situations. Additionally, games were discussed as a tool for emotional resilience with an impact on decision-making skills in the context of consumer behavior. Interviewee M. highlighted how gaming serves as an educational platform,

“because there's a lot of inspiration, learning and strategy behind gaming and it has taught me a lot of things that school couldn't do.” (Interviewee M.)

Drawing back on consumer behavior theories, decision-making skills and emotional resilience significantly influences how consumers navigate the marketplace, interact with brands, and make purchasing decisions (Elsharnouby et al., 2021).

These insights into the impact of gaming on skills and behaviors also apply to why fashion brands are embracing gamification techniques as innovative advertising strategies. Referencing Louis Vuitton's CEO, Michael Burke (Sensorium, 2022), it becomes evident that the brand leverages gamification and in-game advertising techniques with an emphasis beyond commercial considerations. Contrariwise, the luxury fashion house aims to provide an in-game educational and engaging experience that is both enjoyable and emotionally compelling. Consequently, fashion brands recognize the potential of gamification not only as an advertising tool but also as an educational avenue, aligning with its educational nature, to heighten engagement and foster brand loyalty.

5.1.3 Customization and Self-expression

Finally, during the thematic analysis of gratifications gamers seek from engaging in gaming activities, the researcher has identified a novel theme of gratification, *"self-expression"*. Whilst one could argue that *"self-expression"* falls under the *"customization"* (Shelton, 2010) category, the author would like to distinguish between the two. Hence, in the context of gaming self-expression and customization are related concepts but not entirely synonymous. While customization is one facet of self-expression in gaming, there are other ways in which players can express themselves in the gaming environment. Conversely, although self-expression can be achieved through customization, it doesn't solely capture the entirety of a gamer's need for self-expression. Rather, avatar customization (as it will be presented in the next chapter of the analysis) enables players to embody their *"possible selves"* (Markus and Nurius, 1986) when creating their virtual avatars.

"I prefer to make them (her avatars) as I would imagine a perfect person/ a perfect me would look like." (Interviewee E.)

While avatar customization facilitates the manifestation of possible selves, self-expression in gaming extends beyond the mere external appearance of the character. Players can express their

real selves by making decisions, forming alliances, or adopting in-game roles that reflect their genuine personalities and values. Interviewee C. And H. confirmed this distinction.

“If you really connect with a game, especially for story-driven games, it becomes part of you. It is like it mirrors your values and real-life preferences.” (Interviewee H.)

Interviewees M., L., C., R., and K. emphasized that gaming provides them with the freedom to create and customize their virtual avatars, enabling them to reflect aspects of their identity and personality through these virtual representations. In addition to avatar customization, Interviewee C. mentioned that self-expression in gaming also extends to her in-game activities and interactions within like-minded gaming communities.

“From my point of view, the games I choose to play and the gaming communities I chose to engage and also contribute to expressing my identity online, as they reflect my personal choices and social values.” (Interviewee C.)

5.1.4 Summary

When examining the psychological needs of individuals within media platforms, the UGT posits that audiences actively select media content to satisfy their self-aware requirements, rather than being mere recipients of media agendas (Katz et al., 1973). This concept of actively seeking out content for gratification (Stafford and Stafford, 1996) finds resonance within the context of gaming environments, as gamers actively opt to immerse themselves in these virtual realms and actively engage in consumption. This alignment suggests that similar to media consumption, the choice to participate in the gaming environment is driven by a conscious motivation to meet intrinsic needs.

Overall, the first analysis chapter aims to delve into the exploration of games as a U&G platform, aligning with the thesis's aim of investigating the appeal of games for fashion brand advertising from a U&G perspective. The chapter highlights how early communicational scholars shifted their focus to understanding the sources of influence beyond mass media, leading to Katz's (1959) view of media competing with other sources of need satisfaction. Based on a thematic discourse analysis, the chapter further examines prominent gratifications sought in gaming experiences, such as escapism, socialization, advancement/challenge, and

customization and self-expression. By doing so, the author suggests that these gratifications provide important insights for fashion brands seeking to utilize games as a strategic marketing communication channel, considering gamers' motivations and preferences.

5.2 In-game purchasing as a Gratification of Identity-Building

“Balenciaga X Fortnite collab solidly confirms we live in a simulation”

- @d1zzyb4by (2021)

Games are perceived as hedonic information systems, used not only to provide entertainment and pleasure (hedonic) but also to convey and transmit information (Gan and Wang, 2015; Alwitt and Prabhaker, 1992). In this context, "information systems" refer to the underlying structure and design of games, which incorporate various elements like narratives, visuals, audio, and gameplay mechanics to create an immersive experience for the users. Accordingly, those elements allow gamers to satisfy the need for crafting their virtual self. This personalization aspect resonates with the idea that games are information systems that allow players to convey their preferences, interests, and identity within the virtual space. Hence, the forthcoming chapter will discuss games, through the emerging thematic cluster of their hedonic use of identity-building and how they effectively engage players and present information in a captivating manner, making them an effective means of advertising communication and entertainment.

5.2.1 In-game Purchasing to Craft the “Ideal Self”

The meta-fashion era is characterized by a high level of creativity and personalization, as customers can experiment and customize their avatar outfits by digitally browsing from an extensive variety of virtual garments prior to purchase. That customer-centric approach heightens fashion's marketing opportunities in the metaverse by disengaging brands from mass-market characteristics, allowing the consumer to feel more individually involved in the garment creation experience and consequentially, fostering customer engagement. The present study material revealed that purchasing gaming skins to customize your in-game character can enhance the gamer's feeling of existing within the gaming world. Drawing back on Interviewee S. creating a virtual representation of yourself by embodying the imaginative possibilities of the gaming world

“gives you even more of this feeling that you are kind of in this world because you're playing as essentially you.” (Interviewee S.)

By incorporating fashion skins into the gaming experience, a higher level of customization and personalization is achieved, which in turn creates a greater sense of presence and interactivity. Thus, as experience feeds back to behavior and vice versa, the success of the virtual world heavily relies on the sustained engagement of players. Continuous virtual item purchases are a key aspect of this engagement, fostering a sense of connection and investment in the virtual world. Over time, these in-game fashion purchasing advantages enable the implementation of innovative marketing strategies, turning games into a dynamic platform for commercial development.

Interviewees H. and L. proceed to in-game fashion purchases to create their virtual avatar identity by mimicking their real-world consumer choices. Accordingly, during the interviews, both Interviewees M., S., and R. shared that the motivations behind customizing their virtual avatars sometimes reflect their "true self" and, at other times, embody their fantasized "ideal self" (Higgins, 1987). The distinction in their decisions was found to be closely linked to the type of game they were playing. In certain games that mirrored reality or provided opportunities for social interaction, Interviewees M., S., R. expressed a preference for reflecting their true personalities through their avatars, aiming to create digital counterparts that closely resembled their actual selves. Conversely, in more immersive and fantastical game worlds, they embraced the chance to bring their idealized versions to life, designing avatars that represented the envisioned perfect image of themselves. For instance, Interviewee M.'s interest in IGA purchasing fashion-branded products lies in aesthetical gratifications that derive from her need to both express and alter herself – *“I tend to make them look like myself but more animated and definitely taller”* – a process that happens *“with or without intention”* (Interviewee M.), as she declared. This highlights how avatar customization can become a deeply personal and context-driven process, allowing players to fluctuate between self-representation and self-idealization based on the virtual environments they choose to interact with.

5.2.2 In-game Purchasing to Craft the "Possible Self"

On the other hand, past research (Kaliyamurthy et al., 2022; Solomon, 2022) demonstrates that individuals engage in the consumption of products and activities not only to fulfil their basic needs but also to embark on a "self-creation project". In the virtual realm, the concept of virtual identity emerges as an entity created in cyberspace to articulate one's emotions and thoughts (Nagy, 2010). Through the lens of virtual fashion, the concept of identity becomes a fluid and evolving entity, shaped by the digital landscape and the interactions within it. Just as in the real world, clothing and personal style can say a lot about a person's personality, interests, and social status. In the virtual realm, fashion takes on a whole new dimension, as players can experiment with a vast array of imaginative and fantastical designs that may not be feasible or practical in the physical world. Deriving from the empirical data, Interviewees C., E., O., K. pay attention to developing their online gaming identities by encompassing images of the self that derive from their need to create a "*possible self*" Markus and Nurius (1986). Thus, fashion gaming skins serve for them as a tool to best experiment with various facets of their identity not typically present in their offline personas. In her own words, Interviewee K. described the process of customizing her virtual avatar allows her to project her chosen image and fashion preferences onto her digital character

"you see yourself inside the game with the clothes you want to see him in." (Interviewee K.)

Due to the positive perception of avatars possessing augmented abilities and possibilities beyond reality, virtual gaming worlds provide customization as an avenue for escapism. The players, enticed by the prospect of exploring and experimenting with various aspects of their avatar's appearance and digital identity, are driven by a desire for further discovery and satisfaction, which motivates the purchase of virtual fashion skins for users to delve deeper into customizing their avatars.

Additionally, the respondents of the present study have thoroughly pinpointed that the placement of virtual items to be purchased in gaming gives gamers the opportunity to renew their virtual character. By doing so, a gamer's new skin can highly correlate to higher profits. As Interviewee O. said:

“...most games are very linear but using a different skin for aesthetics can make the game feel like new and make it more exciting especially since it's a game I've played for a long, long time. You kind of need that boost to be motivated to keep going.”
(Interviewee O.)

Thus, players' level of game gratification can not only increase the game's profit margins by renewing the players' subscriptions (Guo and Barnes, 2012). Moreover, the gamers' need to renew their virtual self by in-game purchasing new fashion skins inflate the game's profit margin even further. As Interviewee S. best described it

“(brands) have found their way into an industry that they did not touch upon before, and I think when mixing video games with reality it's a good way to promote something or make people want to play the game.” (Interviewee S.)

5.2.3 Summary

Overall, virtual item purchase behavior reflects the active engagement and interest of players in the virtual world. Empirical findings demonstrate a strong correlation between in-game purchases and the construction of users' online personas. This correlation derives from the gamer's need for self-disclosure and self-representation, as well as their desire to create a virtual identity detached from the societal norms enforced in the real world. This sociological inquiry contributes to a broader critical understanding of how digital environments shape contemporary consumer behaviors and identities by drawing back on Baudrillard's (1994) *“Simulacra and Simulation”* theories. By addressing the question of simulacra in the context of fashion in-game purchases, this study proposes that fashion in-game purchases exist as either a copy of their real-world counterparts, closely linked to tangible social issues (first-order simulacra), or they are merely evolved into the gaming realm where every connection to societal contexts has grown increasingly detached (second-order simulacra).

Hence, virtual purchases can increase the level of in-game immersion as by acquiring virtual items, players can customize their avatars, environments, or gameplay experiences to reflect either their real-world experiences or to create new ones. This level of personalization contributes to the success of the virtual world and can lead to a higher level of player engagement (Guo and Barnes, 2012). In Interviewee E.'s words:

“When playing a video game, the best feeling is when you can immerse in their world. To achieve that many factors are important, like fashion.” (Interviewee E.)

Consequently, marketing practitioners should take into consideration the different level of self-disclosure and self-representation that distinguishes the virtual game worlds from the virtual social worlds, as well as the set of different rules that highlight the different gaming environments.

5.3 In-game Purchasing as a Social Gratification

Moving forward with the coding of the empirical data, another theme that the researcher identified amongst most of the transcriptions was the gamer’s need to elevate their social standing, by purchasing gaming skins that would distinguish their online identity from other players.

Following the psychologies of clothing consumption, consumers have the tendency to proceed to purchases that contribute to the construction of their social identity (Elliot, 1997). Moreover, as Holbrook and Dixon (1985:110) emphasize, fashion is presented as *“public consumption,”* affording individuals the means to effectively communicate the image they aspire to project. The digitization of one’s self requires a similar level of personalization and customization that will fulfil the gamer’s social gratification. As the unanimity among almost all participants indicates, since all characters look the same for each user in default settings, purchasing fashion gaming skins can make your avatar unique from the other players. As Interviewee S. declares,

“They (avatars or gaming characters) all look the same right they want to have something that makes them stick out.” (Interviewee S.)

For Interviewee O., owning a skin that costs real-world money was even the reason behind choosing the particular avatar and particular game as for him

“it was like a status thing to have a different skin that cost real money.” (Interviewee O.)

Furthermore, the act of purchasing in-game items, particularly gaming skins, goes beyond functional benefits. Owning certain sought-after skins can convey a sense of status, popularity, and exclusivity within the gaming community, thus using in-game purchases as a means of social distinction (Nagy, 2010; Khare, 2014; Guo and Barnes, 2012). Interviewee C. eloquently expresses this concept when discussing avatar customization in the gaming world as

"a way for me to express my individuality and stand out. Skins can make your avatar more visually appealing, unique, and distinctive" (Interviewee C.)

Clothes serve as a method of decoding our interlocutor's personality and -consciously or subconsciously- as a first mean of social categorization. Interviewees L., K. and O. all agreed that having the latest skins allows them to appear *"cool"* in the virtual world. This implies that keeping up with new in-game purchases and being an early adopter can contribute to one's social status and, consequentially, how the user is perceived within the gaming community. Elaborating further on this matter, Interviewee K. highlighted that fashion skin purchases not only hold functional value within the game but also act as a representation of the user's real-world social standing. This finding indicates how in-game fashion purchases encompass both utilitarian and symbolic dimensions. Consequently, Interviewee K.'s perspective illuminates the socio-cultural cues these purchases convey, not only within the gaming environment but also beyond it:

"They (gaming skins) signify some kind of social standing or power within the game or establish meaning. It is like the gamer says 'I can afford that skin and afford to spend this amount of money or that amount of money to look beautiful or enhance my player skills'. It serves a purpose like within the game and maybe it signifies some things outside the game too... that the gamer declares he's got money to spend on cosmetics which not everybody does." (Interviewee K.)

Hence, within the gaming realm, consumers' choices are not solely driven by the practical utilities of products - which refers to how the product will be used in the gaming context-. While functionality may still be a consideration, it is not the sole or primary factor guiding their decisions when making in-game purchases. Instead, gamers often consider the symbolic meanings, associations, and identities attached to the products, such as in-game items focus on how the chosen skin reflects their personal style, preferences, or the image they want to project

in the virtual world. For instance, Interviewee C. recognizes the significance of certain skins as status symbols within the gaming community, highlighting that IGA in gaming with collaborations such as the Louis Vuitton and Fortnite collaboration

“can bring a sense of exclusivity and desirability to certain skins, making them even more valuable in the eyes of players”. (Interviewee C.)

Consequently, all informants agreed that purchasing IGA fashion products serves mostly their aesthetical criteria, linking the product to its symbolic meaning rather than solely to its in-game utility (Baudrillard, 1994; Giddens, 1991).

It is important here to highlight, that when asked the reasons behind choosing gaming as a hobby, all respondents cited “being social” as a significant factor. Hence, as our realities are constantly moving online and every human experience is based on the creation of a copy to represent the user in the society of a “simulation” (Baudrillard, 1994), players may be driven to showcase their social status through virtual representations, such as their avatars or in-game clothing choices. Interviewees M. and L. expressed their interest in gaming fashion purchases is related to their desire to foster a sense of “belonging” within their gaming community. More precisely, Interviewees M. and L. acknowledged that paying attention to their follow gamers’ avatar customization choices, has influenced their own personal purchasing decisions.

“Sometimes I have been convinced to buy that skin because I’ve seen other people using the skin and I’m like ‘well that’s cool’” (Interviewee L.)

“There’s definitely been times where I really wanted the same skin or items as other players.” (Interviewee M.)

Thus, advertising fashion brands within the gamified environment can leverage on the sense of community gaming provides, by taking the factor of “social status” and its impact on user engagement and behavior into consideration.

5.4 Hypothesis 1 Examination: Analyzing the Correlation between Digital Fashion Purchases in Online Gaming and Real-World Fashion Interest

The first hypothesis aimed to determine whether individuals who have a higher level of interest in fashion in their real lives are more likely to engage in purchasing virtual fashion items while gaming. First, data derived from the interviews confirms the correlation between in-game purchases and the creation of digital identities that coexist alongside the users' real-world identities. For Interviewees M., L., and E., in-game fashion purchases are an extension of their real-world fashion interest as it presents an opportunity for creative expression, allowing them to experiment with various clothing choices and styles that align with their fashion tastes.

“I also see fashion as a way of expression, and you can do the same in games with your character customisation.” (Interviewee M.)

In consequence, since gamers perceive gaming as much more than an entertainment medium and utilize it as a medium for identity building, in-game fashion choices can inspire offline consumer behavior. The concept of avatar customization encourages gamers to depict their virtual avatars with styles that do not always resonate with their personalities and preferences. Interviewee K. described the process of customizing her virtual avatar as

“ mostly like me but with other stuff and features I wouldn't wear normally to kind of you see how that would potentially fit with your style in real life.” (Interviewee K.)

Accordingly, as Interviewee E. suggested, implementing a seamless and respectful IGA strategy, aligned with the game's narrative, could potentially inspire users to adopt fashion choices for their avatars that they would consequentially imitate in the physical world. Thus, these digital representations can inspire gamers to experiment with new looks that they might not have considered before. This process fosters a heightened sense of confidence, as users feel more empowered to explore and express their fashion preferences, mirroring the sense of self-assurance displayed by their virtual counterparts. This aligns with Guo and Barnes' (2012) perspective highlighting how within the gaming metaverse, satisfaction is linked to the enhancement of a player's self-esteem through personalizing their character's appearance.

“If done correctly, users could imitate their avatars in their real life and maybe, feel as confident as their avatars too.” (Interviewee E.)

Hence, clothing as a means of expressing the unconscious self (Flügel, 1929), translates into the gaming experience. As players select clothing and accessories that align with their personal aesthetics and preferences, they are unconsciously displaying their inner thoughts and emotions in the virtual world. For Interviewees R., E., and M., this creation of a virtual representation of their ideal self subconsciously translates into real-world confidence. This perspective highlights the significance of self-expression and identity-building within the gaming environment, as avatar customization plays a crucial role not only in shaping players' in-game experience but also in formulating feelings of confidence that can be then extended to real-world purchasing behaviors.

However, for Interviewee H. and R. the fashion industry and the gaming community are two separate groups of targeted audiences. Using his own gaming community as a point of reference, Interviewee H. expressed the belief that gamers that he has conversed have little or no interest at all in the concept of fashion.

“Certainly, there can be some (fashion and gaming collaborations) overall but from all the people I have met and conversed with from the gaming community, my understanding is that most of them are not very interested in fashion as a hobby.”
(Interviewee H.)

Accordingly, as Interviewee R. expressed,

“I don't see really gaming and fashion relating so much as of yet because I don't really pay attention to fashion. Although I could see it happening in the future with the metaverse and more normal looking avatars. Then there will be people, I think, with a high interest in fashion that will bring a bigger move of fashion into actual gaming.”
(Interviewee R.)

For Interviewee H. and R. nevertheless the level of immersion within the gaming environment, IGA fashion purchases are dependent on the gamer's real-world interest in fashion. In other

words, the motivation to invest in virtual fashion items for their in-game avatars is closely tied to the gamer's existing interest in fashion outside of the gaming context.

Therefore, an important aspect to be taken into consideration here is that whilst all the respondents are highly interested in in-game purchases, only five out of nine are expressing an interest in real-world fashion too. For fashion marketing practitioners, this can have significant implications. More precisely empirical data indicated that nevertheless their enthusiasm for buying in-game fashion items that gratify their social, immersion and identity-building components, gamers might not express a similar level of interest in real-world fashion. The duality of this was highlighted particularly by Interviewee O. who expressed that he could spend up to one hour per week to browse online for fashion products, whilst for browsing and purchasing gaming skins he allocates up to four hours per week. Understanding such preferences is crucial for fashion brands seeking to effectively target and engage with the gaming audience through in-game advertising strategies. This scenario aligns closely with the "uses" approach in advertising, which posits that people's values, interests, and associations, play a pivotal role in shaping their perceptions of the content they encounter. Individuals actively curate their responses to what they see and hear based on these personal and societal influences. In the context of your study, gamers' selective focus on in-game fashion, despite a potentially lesser interest in real-world fashion, reflects how they "fashion" their preferences based on the specific context they're engaging with.

In summary, the first hypothesis was formulated with the objective of investigating the potential correlation between individuals' elevated interest in real-life fashion and their propensity to participate in the acquisition of virtual fashion items while engaged in gaming. This connection can be elucidated through several factors. First, examining how individuals perceive and interpret advertising messages within the metaverse, specifically through the lens of their avatars (Kim, 2021). Second, the effective maintenance of recall and attitudes is contingent on an advertising campaign's consistency and repetition, with in-game brand exposure, such as seeing the same branded apparel repeatedly during gameplay, likely contributing to heightened brand familiarity. Biel (1990) further underscores this notion, suggesting a positive correlation between ad likability and subsequent behavioral preferences. To delve deeper into this correlation and explore the potential influence of gaming experiences on brand discovery, interviewees were asked if they have discovered a brand through gaming. Drawing back on Interviewee's L. answer:

“As a said before I love following Instagram trends, so I have discovered a lot of new brands from there that I later saw in the gaming environment and that sometimes surprised me I was like ‘oh wow I’ve seen this brand recently’. Like brands that I recently discovered through Instagram made their appearance in games as well, that is really surprising and cool for me.” (Interviewee L.)

Hence, empirical data results showcased that brand recall and engagement are more likely to occur when gamers come across fashion IGA that resembles their real-world fashion tastes. This verifies the first hypothesis that fashion enthusiasts are more likely to proceed in in-game purchases for avatar customization, and vice versa.

5.5 Hypothesis 2 Examination: Analyzing the Correlation between Digital Fashion Purchases in Online Gaming and Real-World Purchasing Patterns

This chapter will delve into the second hypothesis of the study, which posits a strong correlation between purchasing digital fashion products within the online gaming world and gamers’ purchasing behavior patterns in the real world. By exploring this relationship, the researcher aimed to acquire valuable insights regarding how players' engagement with virtual fashion items is connected to and influences their overall consumer behavior in the digital realm. Additionally, it aims to determine whether these virtual experiences have the potential to extend beyond the confines of the computer-mediated environment and be translated into real-world economic profits (as emerged from open-ended discussions with gamers). To evaluate the plausibility of whether fashion IGA is a plausible advertising concept to be further used the researcher followed a two-step approach.

First, the researcher tried to identify purchasing behavior patterns in the real world. To do so, data was collected through questions that tried to reveal the participants’ purchasing patterns for fashion products, including separating between online and offline methods. Several factors were taken into consideration as potential influences on purchasing behavior, such as convenience, price, product variety, customer service, and brand recall. Interviewees E., S., C., H., and M. expressed their shopping activities are mostly evolving in the digital sphere, whereas they occasionally enjoy physical shopping experiences. For fashion enthusiast Interviewee M., the advantages of online purchasing are numerous:

“You also skip the queue and choose items in your own phase, re-think, revisit items and so on. Most of the time, the pieces I want are not available in my country, so it makes sense and easier for me to order them.” (Interviewee M.)

Secondly, the research tried to reveal the gamer’s feelings about considering a future real-world living where no physical stores exist, and all clothing purchases are to be made online. A significant paradox arises from the fact that despite online purchases being the primary mode of shopping for the respondents, Interviewees E., and R. expressed a feeling of discomfort when asked about the prospect of a complete transition of all shopping activities to the digital realm. In their perception, the act of shopping extends beyond a mere task and assumes a significant social interaction, which they consider as more than just a utilitarian activity. As R. explained,

“I feel like if everyone was to buy everything online and all stores were to close that would make me sad. Because I feel like we would lose something that a lot of people do enjoy, for example going shopping with your loved one or with your families or even just going shopping by yourself. Some people have it more as a hobby, rather than just browsing pages on their phone” (Interviewee R.)

In a similar tone, Interviewee E. elucidated,

“Shopping is a form of therapy, a form of communication, an emotional and physical boost. This experience is lost when purchasing something online only.” (Interviewee E.)

Whilst the convenience, competitive prices, customer reviews and extensive variety of online shopping satisfy the majority of the interviewees’ shopping needs, the "fitting" factor remains a significant consideration that limits the complete transition of their shopping activities to the digital realm. To address this issue, the interviewee's ideal platform for learning, browsing, and purchasing clothes in the hypothetical scenario of no-physical stores was sought. In contrast to conventional online shopping methods, Interviewees M., C., E., and H. acknowledged VWs as a promising platform that has the potential to address the "fitting" issue and enhance the online shopping experience. Contrasting with conventional online shopping methods that involve

"search," "scroll," and "add to basket" actions, augmented reality in-gaming offers users a virtual "changing room" where the user's virtual bodily depiction can allow him to virtually try on products, bridging the gap between online and offline shopping experiences. Interviewee H. best described this contradiction:

"I always want to try everything on before buying it. I think a website would be ideal, but we could also have a corresponding app based on AR (augmented reality) and gaming that would superimpose the clothing I wished to buy on my body" (Interviewee H.)

Interviewee S. specified it further as a *"virtual in-game pencil"* which the user could use to customize their avatar and which would allow the user to realistically *"feel"* (Interviewee S.) the fit of the clothes in the metaverse. This integration of gaming metaverse in the outfit tryout imitation allows customers to gain insights into how the outfits would look on their virtual bodily depictions before making a purchase. Drawing back on Chen et al. (2010), consumers' level of satisfaction or brand likability on a pre-purchase face can significantly impact their intention to proceed with the purchase. More specifically, that refers to the individual's level of satisfaction with the product information, reviews, or experiences before deciding. Hence, utilizing games as an advertising environment provides the brands with the advantage of exposing users to an interactive version of the product, unlike traditional advertising methods such as static images or text-based advertisements. Their interactive nature and their immersive opportunity for online identity building allow users to interact with the product virtually, virtually try it out, and experience its features in action. Drawing back to prior research (Schlosser, 2003; Bleize and Antheunis, 2016), immersing consumers in a virtual environment while experiencing a product can heighten its interactivity. This, in turn, fosters the development of a vivid mental image within the consumer's cognition, subsequently leading to a heightened intention to make a purchase (Schlosser, 2003).

In general, it is important to recognize that the purchasing patterns of online consumers when purchasing virtual items differ from the process of using digital platforms to purchase real-world items (Guo and Barnes, 2012). The distinction lies in the degree of hedonic gratification attained, which refers to the delight derived from the purchasing experience. Hence, when purchasing virtual items, consumers are frequently motivated by the item's symbolic value, its ability to enhance their virtual identity, and its potential to foster a sense of social status and

belonging in the virtual community. In contrast, when digital platforms are used to purchase in-world objects, the utilitarian aspect may take precedence. This distinction emphasizes the significance of comprehending consumer motivations and behaviors in virtual gaming worlds, taking into account both the utilitarian and emotive factors that influence gamers' purchasing decisions.

5.6 Gamers' Perspective: The Intersection of Luxury Fashion Collaborations and the Gaming Landscape

In an upcoming subsection, the author will examine the unique perspectives revealed by the interviewed gamers, providing valuable insight into their thoughts on IGA and their feelings regarding possible luxury fashion collaborations in the gaming realm.

When confronted with the inquiry regarding the compatibility of luxury fashion collaborations within the gaming sphere, it became evident that all respondents unanimously regarded this as a promising avenue. From Interviewee O.'s perspective, the synergy between luxury fashion and gaming emerges as a promising advertising platform. Interviewee O. acknowledges the social aspect of gaming, with games providing an exceptional platform for fostering connections among individuals, and in a parallel manner, views fashion as a means of bringing people together.

“I think that game gaming is a wonderful way for people to connect and since fashion is already a way for people to connect, they can like coincide with that and bring two wonderful cultures together with fashion and gaming.” (Interviewee O.)

Hence, luxury fashion collaborations within gaming have the potential to not only enhance the immersive experience but also to create a bridge between the two industries, fostering a cross-cultural interaction that merges the expressive nature of fashion with the engaging world of gaming. In a similar manner, Interviewees L., S., and K. delved into a critical aspect of luxury fashion collaborations within gaming: democratizing access to high-end brands.

“I've played many games where they've done collaborations with big brands and it does very well because not everyone can afford their real life and they can afford it and end game and so yeah it is a really cool initiative especially since we gamers tend to pay a

lot of hours building our in-gaming persona and we want to stand out, be the coolest.”
(Interviewee L.)

Consequentially, in the metaverse realm, the notion of democratization is transformed to transcend geographical and socioeconomic constraints and move towards a more inclusive accessibility to high-end fashion brands. Moreover, by making luxury fashion accessible in-game, these collaborations exceed mere advertising tools and align with Interviewee L.'s observation that gamers invest significant hours in crafting their virtual personas. Hence, in-game investments extend beyond gameplay mechanics and enter the realm of personal identity and expression. Virtual fashion purchases mirror the gratifications gamers seek from gaming experiences, further defining the intricate connection between in-game consumption, self-expression, and the intrinsic motivations that drive gamers' engagement with the gaming environment (Guo and Barnes, 2012).

When responding to the above inquiry, Interviewee C. added to the analysis the unique and creative dimension fashion can contribute to the gaming environment. Interviewee C.'s perspective aligns with the core motivations that drive gamers' engagement with in-game fashion, namely the aspiration to express one's identity, as well as to create a distinctive virtual persona. Building upon this notion, Interviewee R. echoed similar sentiments, asserting that as the gaming community continues to grow, the quest for status and the desire to showcase fashionable attire will persist.

“I wouldn't see why not luxury luxurious brands of clothing could not collaborate well with gaming I mean gaming is only growing from here and on so and people will always look for status to show off their clothes.” (Interviewee R.)

Interviewee R.'s contribution to the discussion further reinforces the analysis, emphasizing that the allure of luxury fashion collaborations within gaming transcends the present moment, anticipating a future where these partnerships remain not only relevant but also reflective of gamers' innate desires.

The author claims that the above insights represent an initial standpoint in the ongoing discourse surrounding luxury fashion collaborations within the realm of gaming. The unanimous agreement among the interviewed gamers highlights the alignment between high-

end fashion collaborations and the gaming environment, indicating their confidence in the potential success of future fashion IGA initiatives. This not only acknowledges the social and self-expressive aspects of gaming but also highlights the potential for cross-cultural interactions and innovative avenues for advertising.

5.7 Balancing Commercial Interests and Gaming Experience in Fashion In-Game Advertising

An important aspect to be taken into consideration here is the contradiction between studies that suggest virtual purchases enhance immersion and empirical evidence from studies that indicate that overusing advertisement placements in gaming can lead to negative user reactions and reduce the game's realism (Lewis and Porter, 2010). Interviewee H. was the only one among the participants to highlight this contradiction. While supporting the idea that gaming is an underutilized platform for various industries, the interviewee emphasizes the need for proper implementation without compromising the core gaming experience. This suggests that while gaming holds promise for commercial ventures, fashion IGA can only succeed

“If implemented appropriately and without jeopardizing the core gaming experience, but instead, enriching it” (Interviewee H.)

Thus, one can conclude that striking a balance between commercial interests and maintaining an enjoyable gaming environment remains a challenge. Accordingly, following a media information-processing approach that seeks to unravel the cognitive and emotional responses of users to ad messages in the metaverse through their avatars (Kim, 2021), Interviewee E. suggests that fashion should *“blend into the ecosystem of gaming,”* (Interviewee E.) finding ways to engage with the gaming community authentically and seamlessly. Thus, to optimize their advertising strategies in the gaming metaverse and create more meaningful and impactful brand engagement, fashion can tap into the vast potential of the gaming ecosystem by remaining authentic and respectful of the gaming community's values and interests.

Due to the impact of algorithms and predefined templates, the way consumers present themselves online involves a dynamic interplay between their personal interests and the standardized design preferences set by the platform owners (Kaliyamurthy et al., 2022). Online self-presentation is not merely a direct reflection of an individual's pre-established identity but

rather emerges as an outcome of users navigating and accommodating the inherent principles and rules established within the platform's design. These platform-driven factors guide and influence the way users express themselves. In a similar manner, the process of self-presentation in gaming appears as a complex interplay between players' individual preferences and the design parameters predefined by game developers. Thus, the customization of avatars is subject to the limitations and possibilities defined by the game's mechanics and aesthetics. Interviewee E. further highlighted this dynamic interaction between personal expression and the game's design impact, when discussing the presence of luxury fashion collaborations within the gaming sphere. Interviewee E. argued that avatar customization is a

*“constant battle between our own desires for self-expression and the boundaries set by the game itself... From my point of view, luxury fashion brands should imitate some of the clothing within gaming as it makes the experience even more valuable and immersive, bringing aspects of the real-world into the gaming experience. Otherwise, we (gamers) are limited to fantasy avatars and skins for skill enhancement, like guns, which is not entirely reflect my real-life persona I would say *laughs*.”* (Interviewee E.)

The interviewee's insights into the role of luxury fashion collaborations within gaming highlight the impact of the interplay between individual creativity and the game's design on players' experiences. This dynamic interaction reveals the importance of making informed choices when it comes to selecting an advertising platform, particularly within the realm of fashion advertising. Players' engagement with fashion within the game's context goes beyond just aesthetics; it becomes an extension of their personal expression. Integrating recognizable fashion items into the virtual world not only enhances players' in-game aesthetic but also provides a unique way for fashion brands to connect with their audience. By doing so, fashion brands tap into the players' desire for self-expression, which is a fundamental aspect of gaming, and offer a platform for players to visually represent themselves with the added layer of self-disclosure. As a result, choosing games as a fashion advertising platform can be highly strategic, allowing brands to leverage the engagement and emotional attachment that players have with their in-game avatars and virtual experiences.

6. Concluding Discussion

This study aimed to contribute to the understanding of the dynamic relationship between fashion and gaming by providing empirical evidence to answer the research question: How do gamers utilize games as a fashion advertising platform and what makes them so appealing? By investigating the ways in which gamers engage with games as a medium for fashion IGA, the purpose of the research was to shed light on the underlying motivations, behaviors, and factors that contribute to the appeal of fashion IGA from the gamers' perspective. The study addressed gaming as an interactive fashion IGA tool, aiming to explore its impact on the fashion industry's digital marketing landscape and to provide substantial theoretical and practical insights for scholars and professionals interested in IGA, fashion advertising and marketing communication within the metaverse.

Grounded in an open-ended dialogue approach, the present study illuminated the intersection of gaming and fashion. Thereby it unveiled the first empirical evidence sourced from the insights of gamers themselves. The collected data first reply to the research inquiry by suggesting that the gratifications behind purchasing virtual fashion items could be considered as a subset of the gratifications of engaging in virtual gaming worlds (Guo and Barnes, 2012). The research analysis initially delved into prominent gratifications sought in gaming, encompassing escapism, socialization, advancement/challenge, and customization. Thereafter, results revealed that hedonic and social gratifications are obtained from purchasing and using fashion products within the gaming environment. Consequently, understanding the alignment between these gratifications and the impact of advertising on fulfilling consumer needs becomes a pivotal consideration when evaluating the efficacy of promoting fashion brands within gaming contexts.

Despite fashion's economic proliferation over the metaverse, from a sociological perspective, fashion's entry into the metaverse does not come as a surprise when considering trespassing the real-world borders and developing online lives through digital avatars. Thus, the primary hypothesis seeks to establish a connection between individuals with a heightened interest in real-life fashion and their likelihood to participate in purchasing virtual fashion items during gaming. Through investigating the U&Gs that motivate gamers to adopt a positive attitude towards fashion IGA and brand recognition, the hypothesis aimed to shed light on the factors that make games an appealing medium for fashion brand advertising within the metaverse.

Virtual fashion purchases mirror gamers' gratifications from gaming experiences, unveiling an intricate link between in-game consumption and self-expression. The collected data indicated that fashion IGA consumption provides a tool for the gaming community to immerse themselves further in the virtual gaming experience, whilst personalization can unlock a sense of achievement and further in-game engagement by collecting distinct fashion skins. The integration of virtual fashion items in online gaming activities presents a promising economic opportunity for both the gaming and fashion industries. Players' willingness to invest real money in virtual fashion items creates new revenue streams and mutually benefits game developers and fashion brands. Moreover, the discussion emphasizes the promising alignment between luxury fashion and gaming, not only as a means of advertising but also as a bridge between two culturally significant domains. The analysis underscores how these collaborations democratize access to high-end brands, transcending economic boundaries within the metaverse. This raises new sociological discussions on how digital environments can sometimes level social hierarchies and provide opportunities for self-expression and connection that are not contingent on one's offline social standing. This symbiotic relationship between the two industries facilitates growth and innovation, not only by acknowledging social and self-expressive aspects of advertising but also by implementing innovative cross-cultural interactions in advertising strategies.

Furthermore, by exploring the correlation between in-game consumption needs and real-world consumption behaviors, the second hypothesis contributes to the existing literature by delving into the motivations behind gamers' attitudes towards fashion IGA and brand recognition and exploring the effectiveness of in-game marketing strategies from an advertising perspective within the context of media and communication theories. Thereby, findings derived from the second hypothesis suggest that understanding gamer preferences and gratifications behind economic transactions within virtual gaming worlds can help advertisers as well as VW developers to tailor the IGA experience to meet player demands. The analysis of the study material addresses the gap between fashion brands' expectations and their actual achievements in the metaverse economy. Hence, the study empirically contributes to mass media theories by highlighting how digital and physical worlds are correlated, showcasing that media - especially mass-mediated gaming environments - have tangible effects on real-world behaviors. In other words, in modern, media-saturated societies, the distinction between offline experiences and online simulated ones becomes increasingly difficult to discern. The empirical findings related to the second hypothesis enrich our understanding of contemporary consumer behavior within

virtual environments, and thus, how media and communication theories are applied in the metaverse societal model as a simulacrum - a world in which reality and representation have become intertwined to the point where the distinction is blurred (Baudrillard, 1994).

With the rise of the meta-fashion era, customers can now personalize and customize their avatar outfits, which fosters customer engagement and provides a sense of individual involvement in the creation of the gaming experience. In the context of postmodern consumer culture, the construction of meanings and identities is intricately tied to the act of consuming, with fashion and brands assuming a prominent position in the formation of these meanings. Accordingly, in the meta-consumer culture, the customer-centric approach disengages brands from traditional mass-market characteristics and fosters new possibilities for marketing fashion brands in a more personalized and creative manner. Advertisements and marketing campaigns are strategically crafted with the intention of not just showcasing their products, but also constructing narratives and storylines that effectively connect with customers' wants and personal identities. Games have a common concept whereby they exceed the simple display of things and instead, use narrative as a means to immerse players in intriguing virtual worlds. Accordingly, when engaging with fashion IGA, individuals are immersed in storylines that reflect their own objectives and identity. Therefore, the author posits that games might serve as an optimal platform for fashion businesses to cultivate emotional engagement with their target audience and develop a prominent presence in the metaverse, resulting in heightened brand loyalty and awareness.

Overall, the present study highlighted the opportunity for fashion advertising strategies to leverage on the gaming metaverse, as the unanimous agreement among respondents indicates confidence in the success of future fashion IGA initiatives. In an effort to bridge the existing knowledge gap concerning the anticipated outcomes of fashion IGA and their actual effect on gamers' purchasing choices, a U&G approach was utilized, uncovering the gratifications for in-game fashion purchases. While acknowledging the limitations of the empirical sample in this study, it's essential to recognize that this research was designed as an open-ended discussion, aiming to provide initial insights and reach the point of saturation where no new answers emerged. Notably, the study's focus on advertising within the media and communication field extended beyond advertising as a tool to support commercial capitalism. It delved into the profound dimensions and implications of advertising in shaping a society that is increasingly digitalized. The insights highlight the creative dimension fashion contributes to

the gaming environment, as well as the persistent need among gamers to express their identity and social position. It becomes evident that we are indeed immersed in a kind of simulation. Users are embracing this media-based existence as an opportunity to disconnect from real-world issues and seek refuge in the immersive environments of gaming, where our identities, social connections, and consumer habits are primarily forged within digital environments, increasingly blurring the boundaries between the digital and the real world.

Consequently, the study proposes that the collected empirical data presents an initial standpoint in the ongoing discourse on luxury fashion collaborations in gaming. Yet, this cooperative relationship hinges on careful execution that preserves the core gaming experience without undermining it.

6.1 Expanding Theoretical and Methodological Horizons: Key Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, utilizing UGT in advertising has allowed me to shift my focus from understanding the mere message from the advertiser's perspective, but how gamers actively engage with and seek gratifications from these messages. Advertising within the gaming metaverse can meet brands' demands for an interactive communication channel. However, the integration of marketing techniques within the gaming environment can potentially compromise the immersive, fantasy-driven nature of games, transforming them from a form of '*escapism*' into a vehicle for capitalizing on technological determinism. Through the lens of UGT, the present study understands consumers not as passive recipients of advertising but as active participants who choose media and content based on specific needs and desires. Thus, the novel application of UGT in IGA adds a new dimension to the media theory by examining how gamers' motivations and needs align with meta-advertising techniques.

The researcher acknowledges that as UGT was developed in the era of traditional media, it may not fully address the unique challenges posed by digitalizing the advertising environment with social media platforms and the blurring of content and advertising (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011). Hence, the proposed "*metaverse advertising model*" (Kim, 2021) of the current research extends the theory into emerging digital spaces, highlighting the importance of adapting advertising strategies to the evolving dynamics of virtual worlds and recognizing the growing influence of immersive, interactive environments on consumer behavior and brand

engagement. Additionally, this research showcases how existing advertising theories can be adapted and applied effectively in the context of new digital societal environments like the metaverse, contributing to the development of the evolving field of mediated reality advertising theories.

Furthermore, the UGT thoroughly describes how individuals use media to satisfy their needs (Katz et al., 1973) but does not provide a causality between media choices that lead to specific gratifications or outcomes, such as underlying behavioral mechanisms that drive individuals to consumer content based on understanding the “*medium is the message*” (McLuhan, 2001). To bridge this gap in the theoretical model, the present research aimed to provide a framework to understand why gamers engage with IGA by identifying the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that influence gamers’ in-game purchasing choices. Moreover, by incorporating postmodernism theories the researcher aimed to add depth to the analysis of how products and brands in virtual gaming spaces exceed the mere “commodity” use. Rather they provide symbols for identity and social expression, gratifying the user’s hedonic and social gratification needs. Hence, postmodernism theories of “symbolic value” (Baudrillard, 1994; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) add a new layer to existing UGT in advertising research by acknowledging the evolving nature of consumer-brand relationships in the digital age.

Therefore, addressing advertising practices within the context of media and communication studies aims beyond benefiting advertising experts with insights on how to further capitalize on the gaming metaverse. Contrariwise, it contributes to the understanding of the commodity fetishism of the “*society of the spectacle*” (Debord, 1995) by understanding how digital mass-mediated platforms – such as games – have become a dynamic space for community and identity-building, through in-game consumption behaviors. In summary, this research, grounded in sociology, takes a critical approach to explore the interplay between media and consumerism not solely from its transactional nature, but as a complex process through which people digitally re-construct their self-expression and sense of social belonging, emphasizing the need to consider symbolic value, hyperreality, and the influence of digital environments in shaping modern consumer behavior and societal dynamics.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the methodological approach of the study contributed to the field of media and communication by offering insights on how to approach and collect data on U&Gs related to emerging media platforms. The use of in-depth interviews allowed for a

comprehensive exploration of players' motivations, attitudes and gratifications when engaging with games as a medium for fashion IGA. Thus, the empirical evidence created a preliminary list of U&Gs for engaging in in-game fashion purchasing, filling a gap in the existing literature, which lacks substantial empirical evidence on how gamification meets intrinsic consumer behavior needs.

6.2 Limitations & Future Research

The researcher hopes that the findings will spark additional theoretical exploration and empirical investigations, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of fashion IGA purchase behavior in VWs. Besides providing valuable insights into purchase behavior within VWs as well as developing a better understanding of the notion of the new consumer, the present research also ignited intriguing questions for further research.

A limitation defining this study is the lack of scope, including demographics and gender when explaining media or advertising usage. The present research approached consumers from a holistic point of view and chose not to focus on gender, or demographic parameters that could influence users' perception of fashion IGA towards future purchasing actions. Thus, the author proposes that future research should take into consideration potential variations in responses and preferences that could arise from specific demographic backgrounds or gender perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between IGA fashion advertisements and consumers' future purchasing intentions. The present research focused on gamers who can and are willing to invest substantial sums of money in virtual fashion products, creating a paradox yet to be examined from a sociological point of view. Gaming's virtual marketplace, where users eagerly spend on digital fashion items, appears to stand in contrast to the economic and societal challenges faced in the real world, such as increasing poverty rates and the shift of spending habits toward online platforms. Hence, the new metaverse advertising model as applied in the fashion IGA realm questions advertising's role as a social practice by bringing to the front considerations such as: Are fashion in-game purchases a copy of an original with a clear connection to the real world (first-order simulacra), or have they lost their connection to the social issues surrounding them (second-order simulacra)? In this context, fashion IGA is utilized within a simulacrum - a virtual, idealised version of reality with limited connection to society's pressing issues (Baudrillard, 1994). As such, understanding the impact of advertising within this digital hyperreality is not only a matter of consumer behaviour, but

also a reflection of how virtual spaces such as games construct their own unique economic and social ecosystems, cut off from the complexities of the real world. This calls for future research to explore the dynamics of IGA and consumer behaviors across a broader spectrum, including considerations of social class and financial accessibility, including gamers who may not have the means to engage in such virtual consumerism.

Another limitation when collecting and analyzing data to understand consumer intentions occurs in often considering consumer behavior as a logical and linear process. However, it is important to keep in mind that purchasing actions often tend to differ from purchasing intentions and more variables -such as time and money- have to be taken into consideration. The present analysis focused on empirical data collected from interviews, oversimplifying consumer behavior by focusing on U&Gs alone. Future online ethnographic research focusing on gamers who stream their gaming activities online, particularly those who engage in wearing and purchasing in-game fashion skins, would enhance the research with a more holistic understanding of how fashion in gaming skins influences gamers' in-game decisions and social interactions. By conducting real-time observations within virtual gaming environments, future research could examine the influence of virtual fashion choices on social interactions, the impact of peer influencers and their role in shaping consumer patterns. In doing so, the ethnographic approach could provide insights to dissolve any limitations associated with linear models of consumer behavior analysis.

Moreover, the present study was a first attempt to examine whether games serve as a medium for fashion brand advertising. To do so, the author considered it important to first highlight the correlation between the two industries, fashion and gaming, in the context of forming online communities and identities. Future research should aim on identifying if games as a fashion advertising medium can affect brand identity. Correspondingly, it should be further examined whether building a brand's image, vision and culture within the gaming environment can affect the consumer's attitude and perception of the brand, and therefore influence brand profit. Furthermore, the author suggests that future research should focus on identifying how and if aspects of the virtual gaming environment can contribute to shaping a brand's image, as well as explore the best practices for managing these elements to achieve successful branding within virtual gaming worlds.

Present research data briefly touched upon how different factors such as game aesthetics, player engagement, and gameplay dynamics can influence the receptivity of players to advertisements. Future research may consider further specifying the types of games or gaming platforms. For instance, immersive role-playing games may offer opportunities for more integrated relevant in-game advertisements, while competitive multiplayer games might benefit from strategic placements that do not disrupt gameplay flow. By focusing on specific games or platforms, researchers can delve into how the characteristics of these environments interact with in-game advertising strategies. Therefore, identifying which types of games or platforms are better suited for IGA could provide fashion marketers with valuable insights for crafting more effective and tailored advertising approaches.

A notable limitation of this study lies in the dynamic nature of the metaverse landscape, particularly concerning the influx of new brands and developments that have occurred since the commencement of this thesis. Notably, numerous emerging brands have entered the metaverse, whilst established fashion magazines, like *Vogue Business* (2023), have been consistently releasing articles (e.g. McDowell, 2023a, 2023b; Chitrakorn, 2023) to spotlight fashion's increasing presence within this digital realm, along with its potential impacts. However, navigating this swiftly evolving environment posed challenges in terms of keeping pace with the influx of new information. The process of data collection, analysis, and writing is an ongoing endeavor that demands time to gather materials and comprehensively evaluate them. As a result, while the study provides valuable insights into the subject, it acknowledges that the metaverse's continuous evolution and the subsequent influx of data post-initial research initiation could not be entirely encompassed within the scope of this study.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview Guide

To understand the interviewee's relationship with gaming:

- How would you describe your personal relationship with gaming?
- How much time and days per week do you find yourself playing video games online?
- What type of games do you usually play?
- What do you feel like you are gaining on a personal level from the time you spend gaming?
- Do you or how likely is it that you would observe another streamer play on live platforms like Twitch and why?

To gain insights about how the interviewees depict/customize themselves online:

- Can you describe your favorite avatar? / Can you describe what you look like in the gaming world?
- What does your avatar mean to you?
- Do you pay attention to your avatar's customization? If so, for what purposes?
- What are your thoughts on the value of gaming skins?
- How often do you pay attention to someone else's avatar clothing?
- How much money have you spent, or would you spend customizing your avatar?

To understand the interviewee's relationship with fashion & trends & online purchasing:

- How would you describe your relationship with fashion?
- Do you consider yourself to be influenced by current trends as they appear on social media channels like Instagram?
- Do you tend to purchase your items online or offline? If so, how often would say you buy or browse clothes online compared to the time you spend for physical purchases?
- What is most important for you when browsing/purchasing clothes online? (eg. the price, the website, and the advertisement)

To understand the interviewee's point of view on fashion in gaming:

- How do fashion and gaming relate to each other from your point of view?
- Have you ever discovered a new brand through gaming?
- Have you come across the terms "metaverse" and "gamification" previously? If so, can you please define them?
- It is the year 2030 and no physical stores exist. Every clothing purchase is to be made online. How would you feel about such a change?
- If a change like that was to happen, which would be your ideal platform to learn, browse, and purchase clothes?
- Do you think that luxury fashion collaborations have a spot within gaming?

Appendix 2. Informed Consent for Interview Participation

Before we proceed with the interview, I would like to provide you with an overview of the study. I am conducting this research as part of my master's thesis, which aims to delve into the relationship between in-game fashion engagement and real-world consumer behaviors, from the gamers' point of view. By exploring this relationship, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how virtual experiences influence consumers' purchasing decisions and the potential implications for the fashion industry in the digital age.

The interview will follow a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility for both guided questions and open discussions. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse answering a question without any reasoning.

Any information shared during the interview will be handled confidentially and will only be used for the purpose of this research. It is important to note that the information gathered will be used solely for the purpose of this academic research.

If you have any further questions before starting the interview, please feel free to ask. Otherwise, we can begin whenever you feel ready.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix 3. Themes and Codes

A. Themes Derived from Analyzing Gratifications for Game Engagement

Identified Themes	Corresponding Interviewees	Interviewee's Quotes
Escapism/ Relaxation	Interviewees E., H., M., C., L., S., O., R., K.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Gaming for me is a chance to escape from daily angst and responsibilities as well as a chance to enter a different world."</i> (Interviewee H.) • <i>"Allowed me to forget about like all of the things that I was stressed about it's like a nice way to get away from reality."</i> (Interviewee S.)
Socialization	Interviewees C., L., S., O., R.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"The reason why I game is to have a good social relationship with my friends."</i> (Interviewee E.) • <i>"It's getting increasingly harder to keep a relationship with my friends and but with the gaming we can enjoy each other's company."</i> (Interviewee O.)
Advancement/ challenge	Interviewees M., H., C., S., R., K.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Because there's a lot of inspiration, learning and strategy behind gaming and it has taught me a lot of things that school couldn't do."</i> (Interviewee M.) • <i>"Gaming has also had a transformative effect on me. It has helped me develop problem-solving skills, strategic thinking, teamwork, and even creativity."</i> (Interviewee C.) • <i>"...at some games you do learn some skills like management managing"</i>

		<i>your time or assets and stuff like that.</i> ” (Interviewee K.)
Customization	Interviewees M., L., C., E., S., O.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Customizing my avatar allows me to create a unique and personalized gaming experience.”</i> (Interviewee C.)
Self-expression	Interviewees M., L., C., R., K.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“It has become an important aspect of expressing my identity.”</i> (Interviewee C.)

B. Coding Process to Identify In-game Purchasing Gratifications.

THEME	CODE	VERBATIM	DESCRIPTION
In-game purchasing as a Gratification of Identity-Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflect their "true self." • virtual avatar identity by mimicking their real-world consumer choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“gives you even more of this feeling that you are kind of in this world because you're playing as essentially you.”</i> (Interviewee S.) - <i>“you see yourself inside the game with the clothes you want to see him in.”</i> (Interviewee K.) 	Purchasing gaming skins to customize your in-game character can enhance the gamer’s feeling of existing within the gaming world
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to create a "possible self" • customization as an avenue for escapism • a tool to experiment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“I prefer to make them as I would imagine a perfect person/ a perfect me would look like.”</i> (Interviewee E.) 	Fashion gaming skins serve for them as a tool to best experiment with various facets of the user’s identity not typically present in their offline personas.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • motivation to continue playing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“but using a different skin for aesthetics can make the game feel like new and make it more exciting”</i> (Interviewee O.) 	Fashion in-game purchases as an opportunity to renew the gamer’s virtual character.
In-game purchasing as a Social Gratification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to elevate their social standing • social distinction • symbolic value • functionality is not the main purchasing factor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“They (avatars or gaming characters) all look the same right they want to have something that makes them stick out.”</i> (Interviewee S.) - <i>“The fact that they signify some kind of social standing or power within the game or establish meaning oh I can afford that skin and afford to spend this amount of money.”</i> (Interviewee K.) 	Fashion in-game purchases are motivated by the gamer’s need to establish their social standing.