

Dressing Up for the Digital World: Consumer Motivations toward Digital Items for Avatars

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Introduction. The video game industry in the U.S. has increased at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.6% and is expected to grow to 34.4% by 2028 (Burns, 2023; Sharma et al., 2022). As the game industry is expected to grow, business opportunities for fashion brands have also expanded. For instance, fashion retailers have collaborated with game companies by ramping up digital fashion products in online game spaces (e.g., The Sims, Second Life, Roblox, etc.). Particularly, digital space, which provides people with lifelike experiences (i.e., metaverse), has allowed luxury fashion brands to increase their customer base by selling virtual goods to youth consumers (Joy et al., 2022; Youn & Cho, 2022). Luxury fashion, such as Gucci, Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Balenciaga, has provided digital products to players, and this trend has been accelerated by advanced technology (e.g., non-fungible token and blockchain technology; Joy et al., 2022). According to a current report, global spending on virtual goods is expected to generate values of up to \$5 trillion by 2030 (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Recent research has revealed consumer purchase motivations for virtual items for gaming, focusing on the desire for self-expression and consumption value (Chen & Chen, 2020; Ko & Park, 2020; Sharma et al., 2022). Thus, this study aims to adopt and expand these perspectives by exploring several factors influencing consumers' purchasing or not purchasing branded digital fashion products in the games through a qualitative approach.

Literature Review. This study adopts two theoretical perspectives as guidelines for inductively interpreting the mechanisms and factors of consumer behavior for purchasing/non-purchasing of brand digital fashion products. They are consumers' perceived value theory (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) and self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959; Kim et al., 2012). First, the perceived value theory was established by integrating and modifying multi-dimensional values from the consumption value theory (Seth et al., 1991; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). It explains four key value dimensions of consumers' perception that influence their consumption choices by integrating utilitarian and hedonic aspects – emotional value, social value, cost-related functional value, and quality-related functional value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). According to the theory, emotional value refers to enhanced feelings generated by purchasing products. Social value refers to perceived social identity through shopping. Cost-related functional value refers to

consumers' evaluation of product value compared to spent costs for purchasing the product. Quality-related functional value refers to consumers' perception of the product's quality or performance. The perceived value theory has been adopted in online game studies to examine consumers' purchase intention on game items (Yoo, 2015). Second, the self-presentation theory explains individuals' motivations to express their desired self-image to others (Kim et al., 2012). Goffman (1959) introduced the theory and it has been adopted by scholars focusing on the consumption of avatars and virtual items (Chen & Chen, 2022). The theory explains two important motivations for expressing self-identity. One is to gain attention from others, and the other is to participate in online communities (Kim et al., 2012). This study adopts these two frameworks for data interpretation to explain the critical reasons behind digital fashion product consumption.

Methods. The data were collected through an open-ended qualitative online survey using MTurk. The survey participants were 18 years old or above, living in the U.S. A screening process was implemented to recruit eligible participants with experience playing Sims. The Sims is a popular life simulation online game that allows players to create and control virtual characters (i.e., Sims) by customizing their appearances (i.e., digital fashion items and beauty items). It has over 200 million users worldwide, and the recent version (i.e., Sims 4) has sold over 30 million recently, making it one of the best-selling video game series of all time (PCGamesN, 2023). A total of 57 responses were collected and analyzed. Approximately 61% of the respondents were female, and 37% were male. The majority of the respondents were in ages between 18 and 29 years old (42%), White or European (82.5%), obtained a college-level degree (38%), earned annual income ranges between 50K and 99K (39%), and have spent up to \$100 on gaming technology in the last three months (74%). A content analysis approach was adopted to analyze the data (Parameswaran et al., 2019). The open-ended survey responses were coded based on meaningful word phrases, and two researchers extracted the significant themes.

Results. The content analysis results projected several themes that explain reasons for digital fashion consumption behavior. The survey participants were divided into two groups based on their digital fashion consumption experience. 46% of the respondents have tried branded digital items when playing Sims. The most common theme (reason) for digital fashion item consumption was brand loyalty (50%), followed by the desire for a better-looking avatar (28%), feelings of having more control over online presence (11%), and enjoyment (22%). Most of them have purchased branded digital items because they like the brand or think the branded items look good on their avatar. These themes represent emotional, social, and quality-related functional value under the perceived value theory. Also, the desire for a better-looking avatar represents the

motivation for showing others an individual's preferred self-image in the virtual game world (i.e., self-presentation theory. For example, respondents answered that they have tried the branded digital items because "I am loyal to those brands," "the designs were unique, and it looks nice," "it gives me more control over online presence than ever before," "virtual dress-up was playful and liberating without the need of physicality for that." The brands they have tried were Nike, Adidas, H&M, Levi Strauss & Co., Gucci, Moschino, etc. In contrast, 54% of the respondents have not tried branded digital items in the game. The major reason for not trying the digital items was a lack of interest in purchasing the digital items (43%), followed by not knowing the existence of branded digital items (39%), dissatisfaction (9%), difficulty (5%), and waste of time (4%). For instance, respondents indicated reasons for not purchasing branded digital items as follows: "I am not interested in them and dislike them," "I haven't thought about it," "I don't really pay attention to it," "I tend to think the clothes do not look good," "not easy," and "lack of time." These themes represent emotional value and cost-related functional value within the perceived value framework. Additionally, the results indicated that consumers are concerned about purchasing digital items created by other users (creators) due to a lack of trust in the provider or a fear of computer viruses.

Discussion and Conclusion. This study provides scholarly and managerial implications for the fashion business. It expanded the existing framework by incorporating several more factors in explaining consumers' motivation to purchase or not to purchase branded digital fashion items in the game by adopting a qualitative approach to understand the authentic opinions of users. From a management perspective, by understanding consumer motivations for purchasing gaming items (i.e., skins), the findings of this study will better equip fashion retailers and gaming companies with the strategies and services they need to successfully collaborate. Promotion strategies such as a free giveaway of digital items would allow consumers to try branded items. It will also enhance users' brand awareness in the virtual context. For consumers who are anxious about revealing themselves in the virtual space, fashion brands and game companies can consider safe systems and protocols that can ease consumers' concerns.

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