

Fashion in Video Games: Exploring Consumer Attitudes and Preferences

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Introduction and Purpose: Of the \$120 billion spent on video games in 2019, 80% was spent on digital outfits called skins that change the way a character appears in the game and enable certain functional capabilities called stats (Palumbo, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2024). Clothing in the digital world is an important aspect of one's identity (Choi, 2022) and how players express themselves in the digital realm is often more important to them than how they express themselves in the physical world (ABC News In-depth, 2023; Debter, 2021). The digital life, including appearance and self-presentation, are increasingly popular and important especially among young Gen Z and Millennial consumers, and fashion brands are using digital fashion in video games to reach this tech-savvy audience (ABC News In-depth, 2023). McDowell (2022) states that "this level of engagement and interest in digital fashion and identity represents a massive opportunity for brands that want to extend their presence into the metaverse."

Using video games can help brands generate brand awareness and offer unique experiences that put their clothing in front of a large audience that plays video games (Park & Lim, 2023). Brands such as Gucci, Ralph Lauren, Valentino, Timberland, and others have collaborated with various video game platforms such as Roblox and League of Legends to offer digital skins and apparel as well as fashion shows and other virtual experiences (Barton, 2021; McDowell, 2022). While video games have long offered in-game clothing in the form of skins and interchangeable clothing items, fashion brands entering the world of video games and offering digital apparel brings fashion to a whole new era and unlocks new areas for research such as design processes, marketing, consumer behavior and experiences, etc. *The purpose* of this study was to examine young consumer preferences and attitudes regarding digital fashion in video games to guide brands in developing video game fashion products. While some research exists on consumer motivations and preferences for video game skins and apparel items, research on apparel from fashion brands is limited.

Methods: A Qualtrics questionnaire containing mostly open-ended questions was used to gather data. The link was shared via Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Discord to recruit participants, who had to be at least 18 and play video games on a weekly basis to be included in the study. Participants were asked to indicate what video games they played and provided general demographic information. Qualitative open-ended questions were asked to allow participants to freely express their opinions and to gather rich and in-depth data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questions asked about the kinds of aesthetics and styles participants liked in their video game clothing, the kinds of stats they typically dressed for and how they felt about dressing for stats, how they felt about the functionality and fashionability of video game clothing, and how the ability to customize a character's outfit impacted their gameplay experiences. Participants

were also asked about their thoughts on fashion brands creating clothing for video games, the time and money they spent on customizing their characters, and their willing to purchase virtual clothing in video games. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data from the questionnaire. Open-ended responses were analyzed through qualitative open coding.

Findings: Fifty participants were included in the study, with the average age of 22.07 (18-28 range); 66% were between 20-23. Approximately 65% of participants were White, 15% Hispanic, 8% Black, 6% Asian, and 6% were of other ethnicities or preferred not to answer. Majority had some college completed (42%) or had bachelor's degree (27%), while 18% had high school diploma and 9% had Master's. Most participants' annual income was below 30 thousand (31%) or 31-60 thousand (24%), while 13% indicated more than 90 thousand. Participants reported playing about 20 video games in total (most played multiple games), with Minecraft, Among Us, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, Hogwarts Legacy, The Legend of Zelda, and Fortnite being the top choices.

Discussing design elements, styles and aesthetics, participants indicated preference for dark and neon colors and various garment styles and types (e.g., pants, capes, dress). Some preferred clothing that “mesh” with the game setting, others wanted to dress in “realistic” real-life cloths. Cyberpunk, fantasy, everyday/realistic, and matching to game settings were most common preferred aesthetics. Some participants wanted their video game fashion to reflect their personality; others wanted their fashion to reflect the abilities and personalities of the characters they play. While some participants preferred stats/functions, others considered fashionability of their characters more important, one indicating that they “put how it looks over what it buffs.” Stats such as attack, speed, health, and protection were desired, yet many participants stated that dressing for only stats may be limiting in terms of styles. Their needs related to dressing for stats included better colors, style matching the abilities, ability to customize the outfits, etc. It seems, dressing for stats or function might require sacrifice in fashion and style. Yet, fashion was important to gameplay experience and enjoyment for many participants as they wanted to “like how the character looks” or wanted the character to be an extension of themselves.

Generally, participants expressed a positive association between the character's fashionability and customizability in the game and their enjoyment of the gaming experience. Many mentioned engaging in “grinding for currency to unlock new outfits” to enhance their gameplay. Furthermore, most participants exhibited a favorable attitude toward apparel featured in video games from real world fashion brands. Some were concerned that “realness” would affect feeling of immersion in the game and they wouldn't feel represented by the brand as they would not be able to purchase their product in real life. More participants were unwilling to buy game fashion from real brands as they expected to pay more, or valued the garment style rather than brand names, or had no loyalty to a brand. Several factors would affect motivations to buy real brand fashions, including uniqueness, design/style, stats, brand awareness, cost, fit within a game. Participants willing to buy video game fashions for their characters were willing to pay in the range of \$5-\$30.

Conclusions: Understanding consumer preferences and attitudes related to digital fashion in video games could be helpful in developing digital apparel for video game platforms as well as other virtual realms that better address consumer needs and expectations. This information may

also help to offer more engaging and effective brand-consumer virtual experiences such as fashion shows and pop-up stores. Using video game platforms, brands can generate brand awareness and reach a large group of audience that plays video games, especially young consumers who are highly invested in digital lives (Park & Lim, 2023). As video game fashion is a relatively new area of endeavor for apparel brands and new experience for gaming consumers, the study results could also help with marketing and advertising efforts to reach the consumers. It is also an emerging area of study in academia; thus, the study contributes to the knowledge base in virtual or digital fashion and consumer experiences.

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