APPROACHING FASHION IN THE METAVERSE

A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

ROMANA ANDÒ
Sapienza Università di Roma
romana.ando@uniroma1.it
Orcid 0000-0002-7897-9656

Abstract

Although there is not yet a consolidated and shared definition of metaverse, this concept has established itself in recent years within the public debate, in particular within specific markets, such as in the case of fashion.

We constantly read in specialized and non-specialized magazines, about brands who landed in the metaverse or opened their first store there, or released their first Non Fungible Tokens (NFTs).

However, the apparent concreteness of these statements corresponds to a widespread confusion from the consumers' side.

The aim of this article is to reflect, starting from the results of a qualitative research on international Millennials and Generation Zed consumers, on the meanings associated with the metaverse, on the overlap between it and the concepts of fashion digitalization and digital clothing; finally on the effective media literacy and expectations of who should be the target of these innovations. In particular, the goal is to investigate the well-known relation between fashion and individual self-presentation within the metaverse.

Keywords: *Metaverse, Fashion, Consumer, Digital Clothing, Digitalization*

THE METAVERSE IN SEARCH FOR A DEFINITION

Although there is not yet a consolidated and shared definition of metaverse, this concept has established itself in recent years within the public debate, even more than in the scientific field; in particular, the idea of the metaverse is mainly evoked with reference to its economic business potential within specific markets, as in the case of the fashion. Before going into the broader reflection on the effective potential of the metaverse for fashion consumers, we need to accomplish a first necessary goal: that of understanding what is the common shared definition of 'the metaverse'. As a matter of fact, although the term has forcefully entered the storytelling of many companies and their business and investment strategies, there is still no common

or unanimously accepted definition (Kim 2021). The lack of clarity also derives from the different perspectives from which the so-called 'metaverse' is observed: namely it is fundamental to notice whether the focus is on the technological dimension of immersive digital environments and on the augmented reality, virtual reality (AR, VR) tools used there; or whether we generally refer instead to the synchronous online sharing of space or time (which obviously overlaps the social network sites experiences); or whether, finally, we see the metaverse as a simple evolution of the Internet in terms of potential for interaction, especially when it comes to e-commerce services, etc. One of the most comprehensive definitions of the metaverse has been offered by Ball (2022) who suggests that the metaverse is:

A massively scaled and interoperable network of real-time rendered 3D virtual worlds which can be experienced synchronously and persistently by an effectively unlimited number of users with an individual sense of presence, and with continuity of data, such as identity, history, entitlements, objects, communications, and payments.[1]

According to Ball the metaverse is persistent (it just continues indefinitely), synchronous and live (just as in 'real life'), providing each user with an individual sense of 'presence' and with an experience that spans between digital and physical worlds, private and public networks/experiences, and open and closed platforms. It also provides a fully functioning economy, offers unprecedented interoperability and it is created and operated by an incredibly wide range of contributors.[2]

THE METAVERSE AFTER *SECOND LIFE*. A LITERATURE REVIEW

Media scholars will be able to immediately notice that many of the characteristics that emerge from the definitions of the metaverse clearly evoke the experience of *Second Life*: launched by Linden Lab in 2003, it promised to build an online space that Internet users could access by creating their own avatar. The goal was to allow its users to escape the confines of the material world and of their corporal and psychical selves within a virtual space in which to experiment the self, independently of their offline life.

Within *Second Life*, fashion already represented an interesting space for experimentation, both as a shopping experience and more generally with respect to the relationship between fashion and the body, where in Second Life the user was asked to build their own avatar, with a body, an identity style of which clothing and accessories were the main tools (Liao 2013). In an experience like that, it became even more evident and tangible than in physical life as to how much clothing becomes a technology for managing identity (Davis, 1992). As a matter of fact, in the physical world, within social media, within *Second Life* or within the more recent frame of the metaverse, it is through clothing that the body is made an object in public space. As Calefato (2004: 2) states, "the clothed body expresses the way in which a subject is in and

of the world through his/her aesthetic and physical appearance, his/her relation with other bodies and lived bodily experiences". Starting from the consideration that clothes provide the body with experiences, this becomes even more true in the virtual world, where clothing has to provide avatars with body experiences. In other words, the virtual body needs clothes, just as the physical body does, since "dress or adornment is one of the means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity" (Entwistle 2000:7).

From Second Life experience we have learnt that every part of an avatar could be customized, from the physical shape of one's body, to eyes, hair, skin color, up to one's gender, identity or age. The idea that *Second Life* represented a second life, a world that is alternative to the physical one, in a certain sense prompted individuals to experiment with those aspects that would not have been modifiable (with rare exceptions) in offline life.

Within this context, fashion as an economic system assumed a strategic role. The purchase of virtual clothes for one's avatar could become a millionaire business, while satisfying the aspiration towards a fashionable identity, which is definitely bounded by the fashion industry. Referring once more to Entwistle (2000: 39) dress is a "situated bodily practice", and the wearing of clothes is an embodied activity within a social (and economic) environment.

The experience of Second Life as a daily management of an alternative life was a failure, except for the educational field. However, starting from it we can reflect on the potential of the metaverse, on the uncertainties and enthusiasms of brands toward it and on consumers' expectations regarding digital fashion consumption and its meanings.

First of all, it is worth noting the different technological context of the current metaverse: in twenty years the evolution of connecting technologies and the diffusion of mobile devices have made the difference between being online and offline totally invisible to the users/consumers. Mobile applications make technology increasingly transparent in terms of daily use and closer to daily interaction (also thanks to the implementation of AI within online systems); the development of 3D environments, experimented in particular in the gaming world, has made the representations of online experiences progressively more convincing, close and attractive. At the same time, media

---

1 https://www.matthewball.vc/all/forwardtothemetaverseprimer
2 https://www.matthewball.vc/all/themetaverse

and technological competences are increasingly growing among the younger generations.

Finally, from a brands' perspective, digitization has gone from being an option to an imperative, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic: the digitization of fashion has emerged in terms of design, product customization, but also, inevitably, in terms of communication and consumer engagement.

Another crucial aspect to consider is inherent in the different raison d'être of *Second Life* and the more recent metaverse experiences, especially in relation to the fashion system: *Second Life* allowed its users a sense of an alternative agency, to connect with others, to love, to shop, to live, to be. What it guaranteed was namely a complex life experience, perceived as an alternative to the physical one, where goals could be fulfilled, especially if in the physical life this had not been possible up to that moment. The empowerment within *Second Life* is similar to that of some gaming experiences where the user takes on the role of a character, with characteristics that are very often totally different from those of everyday life: special powers, alternative physicality, in some cases even non-human shapes, as well as behavioral models that are alternative to those ethically accepted within the society where the player used to live. They are precisely alternative worlds, where the user can assume the subjectivity of a character within a world, which is as convincingly naturalistic as the external lifeworld (King, Krzywinska, 2006). On the contrary, the user who today enters the metaverse proposed by fashion brands is a consumer who has already experienced his/her multiple identity on a daily basis through online environments, where they can experience sociality, relationships, to develop passions and interests, to share professional skills.

Even more, new technologies and online environments that have become part of everyday life operate in terms of enhancing the users' personal identities within a technology that pushes towards experiential reality. As Bolter and Grusin (2003: 24) have written, digital technology has the "need to deny [its own] mediated character" through the promotion of the notion of a transparent or invisible interface. Our immersion in the digital experience then allows us to deny or better to ignore the fact that the experience is merely digital; it is exactly this denial that allows the process of immersion.

An incontrovertible confirmation of this emerges when we observe the self-presentation of the individual within the platforms they habitually attend and participate in: users tend to present themselves with their own face, with their name and surname, with their own characteristics, maybe customized on the basis of both the goals of each platform or the kind of available network

As we will see presenting the results of the research, the contemporary consumer mixes in their expectations towards the metaverse a certain pragmatism combined with a desire for experimentation. The latter results in being able to play with fashion in ways that life conditions, the economic, social, cultural context, have not allowed. But pragmatism leads to turn self-experimentation into concrete actions of consumption, whose role is to let the user enter into the experiential reality that is most proper to them.

APPROACHING THE METAVERSE FROM A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE. METHODS AND RESEARCH GOALS

The objective of the research, conducted in 2023[3], was to investigate the relationship between fashion and the metaverse, starting from the point of view of the consumers, also exploring their expectations, fears, resistances or enthusiasm in relation to the different levels of awareness among fashion consumers. The identified target was that of both the Zed Generation and Millennials, considering their level of familiarity with digital technologies and their potential role in the future of the metaverse.

Considering the high level of novelty associated with the concept of the metaverse and a general lack of clear shared explanations, we have chosen a qualitative method – more specifically the semi-structured in-depth interview – in order to collect definitions, opinions, ideas and expectations. Moreover, the goal was to understand how much the potential experience of the metaverse by fashion consumers could be connected with the level of skills expressed in terms of media literacy and online fashion consumption.

The interview track was then organized in different sections, aimed at different but complementary

---

3   The research was conducted as part of the Fashion Branding and Consumer Experience course activity at Sapienza University of Rome, Fashion Studies Master Programme.

goals: first, we aimed at investigating the interviewee's digital media consumption and media literacy, as a background that would explain their views, their potential expectations of the metaverse and even their concrete approach to it. The second and third sections concerned the interviewee's fashion consumption habits, both in-store and online, investigating in particular the resistance to online shopping and how it was partially overcome during the pandemic.

Then, in the next section the interviewees were expected to reflect on the topic of fashion digitalization, in order to identify meanings and potential misunderstandings related to such a broadened concept. This section opens a gateway for the final discussion about the metaverse.

We have collected 132 interviews, equally divided between the Zed Generation (10–25 years old) and Millennials (26–41 years old), from different countries. It is worth noting that we did not find differences between interviewers from different countries and cultures, while generation seems to be an element to be considered when it comes to inclination for innovation.

MEDIA LITERACY, GAMING EXPERIENCE AND THE COVID PANDEMIC AS PREMISES TO THE METAVERSE

As we might expect, every participant has acknowledged themselves to be an active Internet user, defined by the usage of various mobile devices, but most prominently mobile phones and computers/laptops.

Overall, the interviews confirm the evidence that Millennials and Gen Zed are heavy Internet users with a high level of media literacy. The number of applications downloaded on their smartphones confirm the total integration and transparency of technology in daily life and the potentialities in terms of empowerment they can guarantee.

Social media are also used in relation to fashion consumption (as in the case of Pinterest or Instagram), but when it comes to define the role of the influencers in their life the interviewees asserted themselves as being very selective and to choose to follow people who have an authentic style that aligns with their taste. As Maksymilian (21 years old) explains: "They wear everything that's trendy right now, but not majorly [influence my purchasing decisions], because I still have my own style. I like what they wear but it doesn't mean that

I would wear it too."

Another aspect we have considered as a premise to the metaverse is the diffusion of the gaming experience among young people. In our hypothesis this may count for a lot, both in terms of avatar construction (as in metaverse-like games such as *The Sims, Animal Crossing, Habbo*, particularly widespread among female players) and in the fictional universes' management.

Self-presentation is crucial for player experience in avatar-based games, and in-game purchasing has further revealed the focus on individual factors as a motivation to players' digital consumption (Cai, Wohn, Freeman, 2019).

Considering as an example the very famous online game *Fortnite*, the in-game items are designed to be merely cosmetic with no instrumental functions to improve someone's gameplay performance. All the items bought by the player from weapons to outfits simply serve as fashionable accessories to personalize players' avatars, providing the player with a more pleasing aesthetic experience of the game (Wang, Sun, Luo 2022).

This consideration must have prompted fashion brands to be part of this kind of gaming experience. To name a few examples, Balenciaga created skins for *Fortnite*, Burberry collaborated with *Minecraft* and a digital version of the Gucci Gardens was created in *Roblox*.

Another significant factor at work in terms of increasing digital media literacy, in general, and in relation to online fashion consumption has been the COVID-19 pandemic.

As confirmed by all the interviewees, the house confinement during the lockdown periods and the impossibility of shopping for items that were not considered essential (i.e. fashion items) have been the drivers to overcome many of the resistances associated with e-commerce (Bhatti et al. 2020), particularly in reference to fashion.

More specifically, in the case of fashion the consumers' resistance is connected to various factors: the lack of tactile verification of clothes to buy, the lack of trying on an item of clothing in the dressing room, and very often also the lack of the leisure dimension of the in-store shopping experience.

The majority of our interviewees have expressed a clear preference for the in-store experience, particularly because of the chance to try on clothes and to be sure about the item they are buying. Another negative aspect of the online experience

is the sense of disorientation that can be perceived when shopping online and the problems with return services. As Charline (female millennial   ) stated:

But what I don't like online is that, for me, there are too many things and it's difficult to really understand if this piece of clothing will be really good for you, yes or no. And I don't like to return the clothes. It takes so much time. This is the reason why my online experience is not great. I will say I prefer to buy in shops.

However, these elements do not presuppose a total closure toward online shopping, if anything, they are more a slowdown waiting for innovations more in tune with the real needs of the consumer. Moreover, online shopping is perceived as an unmissable opportunity to reach brands that are not locally available.

Although fashion brands have strongly invested in promoting their online communication, strengthening the relationship with consumers and developing online assistance services, interviewees felt that many websites are still quite unreliable, as the product sizes differ and the quality of the material is not as described, as well as the process of delivering the parcel to their home.

But something is going to change in the consumer expectations: as mentioned by Lorena (female zed), who preferred the app because "you have your user, they give you points or they recommend sizes from other purchases", the implementation of online shopping may lead to a more customized experience, made available by big data and customer profiling – and open the door to the metaverse.

WHAT DOES FASHION DIGITALIZATION MEAN?

As has already emerged from the previous paragraph, the most common and shared idea of fashion digitalization has to do with the potential transformations in the online shopping experience, especially if brands are engaged in making the process easier and more efficient.

As clearly envisioned by Deniz (female zed):

I feel, like, just having an online store for your actual store, um, well, your physical store, everything that you had in the store, the sections, the accessories, everything being transferred into an online store and at the same time you can have advertisements on there and pay online. Like, it's just literally a virtual physical store for me in that sense.

Other interviewees underlined the need for an improvement in the customer experience, to be managed by brands through social media, where the same brands can potentially receive customer feedback and invest in consumers' engagement. Beside this idea of fashion digitalization, the interviewees also have referred to fashion digitalization as a strategy to make the fashion industry more sustainable and less polluting. In this case, the focus is on how digitalization can intervene in the production process – for example, reducing waste and producing just according to the actual needs of the market.

More interesting for the purpose of this paper, was that perspective on digital fashion that directly addresses the objects of fashion, introducing the so-called 'digital clothing'. The opinions on this topic are quite heterogeneous, while a general sentiment of resistance or a lack of comprehension have emerged around it.

The most part of the interviewees consider brands that only make digitized clothes, a bit useless, while others have tried to make sense of digital clothing associating it with other kinds of experiences and objects, as in the case of art and the expression of creativity allowed by digital technologies, recognizing the value of the digital object in the effort spent in producing it.

With regard to digital clothing, there is not a lack of technological competences or media literacy but rather a sense of uselessness. When asked "Could you imagine a world, for instance, where fashion is just digital?" one interviewee answered, "Intellectually I could, but it doesn't make sense to me intuitively." (male, zed)

The most skeptical interviewees have evidenced that virtual clothing could have sense only in relation to a tangible version of it, but it is worth noting that when invited to reflect in more depth on this topic, the interviewees started to be more aware of the potentialities of digital clothing even in everyday life. As Illyas (zed female), said:

Yeah, I saw, like, different brands during COVID, creating these types of clothes that you buy for 10€, 20€, and then you can wear them, like on your stories or Instagram photos. I saw that. I feel like it's still useless because people are not just buying clothes to show on Instagram or whatever, you know? Well no, I'm lying. Yeah, some are

doing that, but I feel like they still don't have the reputation that will have the last 'it-bags' on your photos.

This consideration leads us to reflect on the sense of continuity that the younger generations feel between their habits on social media and the potentialities of digital fashion. We cannot fail to mention here the high usage of digital AR filters among adolescents on social media in order to present a better self. As a matter of fact, the popularity of AR face filters is evidence that they clearly tap into specific user needs, most of them related to hedonic motivations and important identity-related gratifications (Javornik et al. 2022). Coming back to our research results, then, most respondents tend to view virtual clothes as a way to showcase their individuality and creativity, often incorporating them into their online persona and social media presence. The perception of the potential of digital clothing also in terms of enhanced shopping services seems to be less evident among them. The AR filters are very often used as tools for shopping purposes (Hilken et al. 2017; Kumar, 2022), from make-up products, to sunglasses, to clothes. The usage of filters that are superimposed on the consumer body (as now happens through the magic mirrors in-store) can promote and facilitate the consumer's decision, while at the same time providing enjoyment and fun as it happens on social media every day.

A FASHION DIGITAL WORLD. INTRODUCING THE METAVERSE

All participants have at least heard about the metaverse. Many of them even provided a partially correct definition of it, focusing on specific different perspectives or examples related to it. Some talked about the metaverse as a general and abstract concept, while others clearly referred to the services proposed by Meta. Many of them borrowed keywords and ideas from their gaming experience.

The Gen Z Maksymilian (male) explained it simply:

It's basically an idea of a fully virtual world where you have an online society, and where everyone has their avatar that represents them in this virtual world. It's like the real world but online and with more cool stuff, I guess.

An important aspect of this definition concerns the lack of opposition between 'real' and 'virtual'; moreover a normalized idea of the avatar clearly emerges.

To better understand this point, we can underline that most of the interviewees were more interested in building an avatar resembling themselves than experimenting with an alternative identity. As previously anticipated, the relationship with one's online identity is now certainly mediated by the experience of social media platforms, where users present themselves with their own profile, even though one tries to make it as attractive and fashionable as possible, i.e. using AR filters. Digital fashion, then, can, be considered a filter or a mask, through which the consumer can play in the variable representation of the self. As clothing embodies different social identities, there are always some kinds of clothes that one appreciates but does not wear, because of the price, social roles associated with them, and/or the shape and size of one's body. The metaverse seems to allow consumers to overcome the physical world limits (materials, social and cultural), providing a kind of identity experimentation through which consumers can play with the qualities of its subject. As Tiffin and Rajasingham(2003: 146) stressed in their essay about virtual university, the avatar may represent the physical appearance and reflect the emotional condition of desire of its user; "*it would also be possible to adjust the avatar cosmetically so that it looked more the way a person wanted to be seen or it could be anything at all.*"

- "*I would wear similar clothes but with some different colors, more exuberant, things that I don't wear normally but still following my own style*". – (male, millennials).
- "*As I said before, my style would be more futuristic, although now thinking about it I think it would be fun to dress my avatar the same way I would dress*". – (male zed).

The metaverse, therefore, is not perceived by the interviewees as excessively futuristic, but very practical, as in the case of digital clothing, which can be applied to any digital interface and any personal device.

Our interviewees then see the metaverse as a reflection of real life and can function as an instrument for making decisions that affect the real world. So, it may work as an element of inspiration or an opportunity to virtually test products, clothes or accessories, or trying styles, haircuts or make up. It also includes the use of filters or virtual clothes to create content for social media. All these elements

are produced digitally but their final objective is to improve a real visual identity:

In the future, if everyone will have their one-to-one similar avatar, people will be able to try on different digital fashion products without ever leaving their house, which will make purchasing clothes much more convenient. Less time will be needed to purchase it, because the catalog would be right in front of you and your avatar will try it on (male, zed).

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

The first aspect that emerged from this exploratory research experience on the metaverse and on the digitization of fashion from the point of view of the consumer, is that the younger generations generally show a curious attitude and are open to the innovation prefigured by the metaverse. They reflect on it in extremely concrete and practical terms, and they always try to emphasize the continuity with previous consumer experiences rather than interpreting it as a revolution. Even when skepticism seems to prevail, it emerges above all in terms of the impossibility of grasping a concrete use value for technology rather than for any cultural resistance whatsoever.

The reason can be found, of course, in that sense of familiarity with digital technologies and online platforms that are constitutive of the younger generations' everyday life.

Despite this positive attitude of consumers towards the metaverse, they seem to be little considered and included by brands in the overall development process.

Perhaps one aspect that brands could develop in addition to the immersive amplification of the consumption experience is to encourage a greater inclusion of consumers in the production processes and in building awareness of consumption practices that also take into account the goal of sustainability. Exactly in the same way it is now possible to enter the virtual shop in the metaverse, so it will be possible to enter the industries, to become part of the production process, turning into prosumers, as imagined by Toffler in the third wave, where the consumer had the possibility of supporting the industry in goods production: AR tools may allow customers a holographic trial (product preview or virtual try-on) when the physical product is still absent and the brand could be able to plan its production according to this process of co-creation. Moreover, brands could allow all their customers

to virtually tour their production lines or supply chains so as to connect further with their customers, to enhance transparency, and to focus on responsible sourcing. It is perhaps here that an important challenge for sustainability in fashion could be played out.

REFERENCES

Ball, M. (2022). The metaverse: and how it will revolutionize everything. Liveright Publishing.

Bhatti, A., Akram, H., Basit, H. M., Khan, A. U., Raza, S. M., & Naqvi, M. B. (2020). E-commerce trends during COVID-19 pandemic. International Journal of Future Generation Communication and Networking, 13(2), 1449–1452.

Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. (2003). Remediation. Understanding new media, 2, 24.

Cai, J., Wohn, D. Y., & Freeman, G. (2019, October). Who purchases and why? Explaining motivations for in-game purchasing in the online survival game Fortnite. In Proceedings of the annual symposium on computer–human interaction in play (pp. 391–396).

Calefato, P. The clothed body. (2004). (L. Adams, Trans.).. Berg

Kim, J. (2021). Advertising in the metaverse: Research agenda. Journal of Interactive Advertising, 21(3), 141–144.

Davis, F. (1992). Fashion, culture, and identity. The University of Chicago Press.

Entwistle, J. (2000). The fashioned body: Fashion, dress and modern social theory. Polity Press,

Hilken, T., de Ruyter, K., Chylinski, M., Mahr, D., & Keeling, D. I. (2017). Augmenting the eye of the beholder: Exploring the strategic potential of augmented reality to enhance online service experiences. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 45, 884–905.

Javornik, A., Marder, B., Barhorst, J. B., McLean, G., Rogers, Y., Marshall, P., & Warlop, L. (2022). What lies behind the filter? Uncovering the motivations for using augmented reality (AR) face filters on social media and their effect on well-being. Computers in Human Behavior, 128, 107126.

King, G., & Krzywinska, T. (2006). Film studies and digital games. Understanding digital games, pp. 112–128.

Kumar, H. (2022). Augmented reality in online retailing: A systematic review and research agenda. International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management, 50(4), 537–559.

Liao, C. (2011). Virtual fashion play as embodied identity re/assembling: Second Life fashion bloggers and their avatar bodies. Reinventing ourselves: Contemporary concepts of identity in virtual worlds, 101–127.

Tiffin, J., & Rajasingham, L. (2003). The global virtual university. Psychology Press.

Wang, L., Sun, Y., & Luo, X. (2022). Game affordance, gamer orientation, and in-game purchases: A hedonic–instrumental framework. Information Systems Journal, 32(6), 1097–1125.