Clothing the Virtual Self: An Exploration of the Purchase and Use of Virtual Apparel by Gamers

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From dinosaur costumes and icicle wings, to feathered cloaks and fluorescent boots, gamers are spending billions of US dollars each year on clothing not for their physical bodies, but for their virtual ones (Statista, 2019). Massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are virtual worlds that operate in real-time, are governed by a set of rules, and allow players to interact with the world and with each other (Manninen & Kujanpää, 2007). These games have traditionally sold *functional skins* (i.e. clothing and accessories for a character that can be purchased to give a gamer's character a special ability). However, newer MMOGs, such as *Fortnite* and *League of Legends* have introduced *aesthetic skins*, which are purely cosmetic outfits for characters. A recent increase in interest in purchasing aesthetic skins is notable, because gamers are now making purchases that function only to change the “look” of their character. With this change, gaming companies have had to quickly figure out how to keep up with the new phenomenon. *Fortnite*, a video game owned by Epic Games, is one of the leaders in the creation and selling of virtual apparel, grossing \$318 million USD in May 2018—revenue that was primarily generated from virtual apparel purchases (Molla, 2018). Along with the variety of virtual products *Fortnite* itself offers in the game, they also partner with entertainment entities, including pop music artist Marshmello and Marvel Worldwide Inc. to create unique skins for gamers to purchase for their in-game characters. Finally, with the rise in esports viewing and activity over the past several years (Byers, 2019; Jackson, 2013), the visibility of this phenomenon will continue to grow, likely generating even greater revenue for companies who sell virtual apparel, and therefore creating a new opportunity for fashion brands.

Despite this growth and opportunity, there is minimal empirical knowledge about how consumers purchase and use virtual apparel within MMOGs. Prior studies have examined the concept of virtual economy (Lehdonvirta, 2009), but not specifically the purchasing of virtual apparel and accessories. Other studies have examined shopping in social virtual worlds, such as *Second Life* and *Habbo Hotel* (Domina, Lee, & MacGillivray, 2012; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2013), but these contexts are different from gaming virtual worlds in that there are no obvious tasks or goals in social virtual worlds as there are in gaming worlds. In order to address gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study was to explore consumers' experiences with purchasing virtual apparel-related items in MMOGs. Two objectives were developed to address the purpose: (1) to understand the reasons for purchasing virtual apparel for video game characters among gamers, and (2) to explore how this apparel communicates identity, both on and offline. Symbolic interaction theory (Mead, 1934) was used in combination with identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) as the lens through which an understanding of how gamers “acquire identities through social interaction” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 5) using apparel-related items for their character in the game setting.

A qualitative approach was employed to address the purpose and objectives. With IRB approval from the researchers' university, semi-structured interviews were used to explore 12 participants' (all males) experiences with purchasing virtual apparel in MMOGs. Criteria for participation in the study included: (1) at least 15 years of age, (2) play video games weekly, and (3) have purchased at least one purely aesthetic skin in a video game in the past six months. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify appropriate candidates for the interviews. Interviews were conducted via phone or in-person and were audio recorded with the participant's consent. Interview questions started with the participant's history and experience with video games and progressed to exploring the nature of the participant's shopping, purchase behavior and use of virtual apparel. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Spiggle's (1994) suggestions for analysis and interpretation were followed for data analysis and interpretation. Three emergent themes were identified as a result of the iterative process and then confirmed with participants (Hodges, 2011). The three themes were used to structure the interpretation of results and interpreted through the lens of social identity and symbolic interaction theory: *Communicating a Communal Identity*, *Not Keeping it Real*, and *For the Fun of It*.

After the opening discussion of the participant's history with video games, each was asked to list and describe their top three favorite things about video games, which consistently included the idea of a community of individuals expressing their identity virtually, or a *communal kind of identity*. Interestingly, although this did not seem to be the primary driver of purchase behavior, the gamers' communal experiences definitely impacted their perception of certain skins and, on occasion, their desire to purchase. "I check to see who has a skin, 'cuz I just wanna see what it looks like...maybe I wanna buy that skin" (M07). This is consistent with symbolic interaction and extends the theory into the virtual space in that humans are social creatures and the self is shaped by social interactions even in virtual worlds (Denzin, 2007).

When asked to describe their virtual style, a majority of participants mentioned two different approaches. One was a more realistic style, often reminiscent of the gamer's aesthetic in the physical world. "[M]y character looks very similar to me...normally it's a manifestation of how I would look in real life" (M09). The other, more common styles was about *not keeping it real*, or enjoying the freedom to look however they want to look, regardless of their identities in the real world. Participants described the enjoyment that they experienced when dressing their character. "I am currently dressed as ridiculously as possible...in this game there's a specific helmet that I just enjoy so much, and I have been using it for literally everything I do in game." (M12). This theme of multiple styles is consistent with identity theory's explanation of persons having multiple identities based on context but extends it into the virtual environment (Stryker & Burke, 2000). On occasion, gamers mentioned they would switch skins depending on their mood or performance in the game. "[I]f I've played this champion for four games in a row...if I lose two games, I'm pro'ly gone change the skin up...it's a mental thing" (M07). Feeling a disconnect between their performance in the game and what their character was wearing, they would change skins, or identities, to alleviate any cognitive dissonance. Current literature on virtual consumption does not explore the effect that virtual clothing of an avatar has upon mood

or emotion of the gamer in the physical world. This finding suggests that altering the virtual identity may impact the emotions or mood of the gamer in the physical world.

Another theme that emerged from this study that does not appear in extant literature was that participants' purchase and use of virtual apparel was purely for their enjoyment, or *the fun of it*. "I played female characters...in some sort of robe or gown...If I'm gonna be staring at it all the time, I want it to be pretty" (M08). Some participants explained that they really enjoyed the collector aspect of skins in the game and bought them so that they could view them in a gallery and wear them when they were no longer available for purchase because of the uniqueness or rarity of the skin.

This study fills several gaps in the literature. First, this is one of the first studies that specifically examines the purchasing of virtual apparel and accessories. Second, this study is among the first to examine the experience of gamers in purchasing and using virtual apparel in the context of a gaming virtual world. Third, this study provides preliminary information regarding the use of virtual apparel in relation to a gamer's virtual and physical world identity.

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