From Digital Gatherings to Real-Life Gains: How Fashion Metaverse Platforms Catalyze Brand Loyalty and Psychological Well-Being

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Introduction. The metaverse may generate up to USD 5 trillion in value by 2030 (McKinsey & Company, 2022), transforming marketing from one-way messaging into immersive, user-driven interactions (Kalender & Guzmán, 2024). Platforms like Roblox, ZEPETO, and VR-based fashion venues host virtual runway shows and creative brand experiences for millions worldwide (Ahn et al., 2023). For instance, Gucci Garden on Roblox in May 2021, which drew 20 million visitors, illustrates the vast potential of such engagements.

While fashion-based metaverse initiatives can boost sales, amplify brand reach, and strengthen brand equity, questions remain about how these digital spaces might also improve user well-being. Metaverse-based social experiences, including multiuser interactions and interactive brand events, can foster a sense of belonging that enriches individuals' mental health (Price & Launay, 2018). However, skepticism persists regarding whether virtual communities can genuinely replicate or enhance real-world social benefits (Smith & Anderson, 2023). Despite debates, emerging evidence suggests that shared virtual endeavors can indeed spark meaningful social connectedness, thereby contributing to both brand loyalty and psychological well-being (Rafi et al., 2025). Therefore, this study investigates how social interactions within a fashion-focused metaverse environment might cultivate an intensified sense of belonging, and in turn, influence brand equity and subjective well-being. By examining the ways immersive brand events and community-building efforts shape both consumer engagement and mental health, this study offers strategic insights for fashion brands looking to create virtual experiences that are simultaneously profitable and conducive to users' overall quality of life. Grounded in Sense of Community Theory and an emerging body of literature on digital well-being, this study highlights the potential for fashion metaverse platforms to function not just as lucrative marketing channels but also as catalysts for positive psychological and social outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review. According to Sense of Community Theory (SCT), four interconnected elements—membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection—underpin collective identity formation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Metaverse platforms embody these elements through interactive fashion events, small-group communications, and "co-present"

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viewing, all of which strengthen perceived membership and enable users to feel influential (Ahn et al., 2023; Rafi et al., 2025). In addition, moving beyond top-down promotion, brands increasingly shift toward co-created ecosystems emphasizing socialization, entertainment, and escapism (Bae, 2018). Socialization fosters shared emotional connections by immersing participants in communal dialogues (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). Entertainment—like virtual concerts or brand-themed exhibits—triggers collective excitement, cementing a sense of belonging (Chung & Koo, 2015). Escapism appeals to users desiring a break from daily stress, uniting them around a shared sense of relief (Price & Launay, 2018). Together, these factors correlate with elevated subjective well-being, particularly when users perceive their involvement as valuable and supportive (Sun et al., 2019). Although some remain skeptical about whether online ties can mirror real-world friendships, research consistently shows that well-structured digital communities can yield psychosocial benefits, especially when members feel emotionally connected (Rafi et al., 2025). Such belongingness also fuels brand loyalty and advocacy, boosting brand equity over time (Chung & Koo, 2015). Consequently, immersive metaverse experiences hold promise not only for commercial gains but also for nurturing individuals' mental health and social support, supporting the hypotheses that (H1) socialization, (H2) entertainment, and (H3) escapism strengthen shared emotional connection, while (H4) this connection elevates belongingness, which in turn positively affects both (H5) brand equity and (H6) personal well-being.

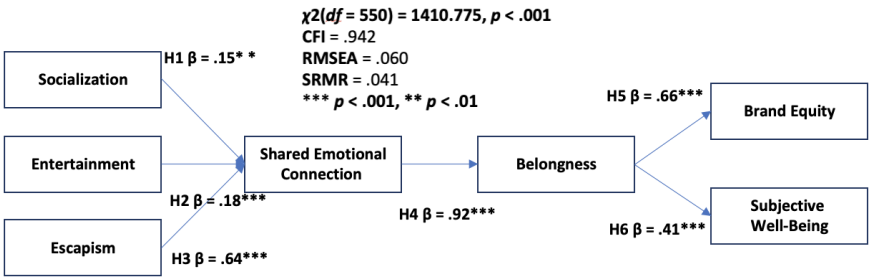

Figure 1. Proposed Hypothesized Model

Method. Data were collected from 466 US-based consumers via Prolific, all of whom had experience with virtual or augmented reality. Participants were 60.1% female and 39.7% male, with ages ranging from 18 to 77 (M = 38.93, SD = 13.47). Of these respondents, 68% identified as White/European American, while 32% represented other racial/ethnic backgrounds. A majority (55.9%) held at least a bachelor's degree, and household incomes varied (e.g., 16.5% reported $60,000–$79,999, while 15% reported $40,000–$59,999). Most participants (94.4%) reported some familiarity with the metaverse. Previously validated, seven-point Likert-type scales were employed for all construct measures. A confirmatory factor analysis indicated good model fit ($\chi^2(539) = 1370.34$, $p < .001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04), and Cronbach's alpha

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coefficients for all scales exceeded .70. To test the hypotheses, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using Mplus, which also demonstrated good fit (χ^2 (550) = 1410.78, $p < .001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .04).

Results. SEM results supported all hypothesized paths (see Figure 1). Socialization (H1 supported: $\beta = .15$, $p = .003$) and entertainment (H2 supported: $\beta = .18$, $p < .001$) positively influenced shared emotional connection. Escapism emerged as the strongest predictor of shared emotional connection (H3 supported: $\beta = .64$, $p < .001$). In turn, shared emotional connection significantly enhanced belongingness (H4 supported: $\beta = .92$, $p < .001$). Finally, belongingness positively impacted both brand equity (H5 supported: $\beta = .66$, $p < .001$) and consumers' subjective well-being (H6 supported: $\beta = .41$ $p < .001$).

Discussion & Conclusion. This study underscores that virtual engagement in a fashion-focused metaverse can yield significant real-life benefits. Escapism, the strongest predictor of shared emotional connection, highlights how participants unite around stress relief, immersion, and novelty. Because shared emotional connection positively affected belongingness that consequently enhanced equity and subjective well-being, users who feel profoundly connected also exhibit stronger loyalty and elevated well-being. These findings reveal that brands can cultivate supportive digital communities, balancing revenue objectives with genuine psychological enrichment for users. Hence, the metaverse becomes far more than a mere marketing channel, bridging virtual interactions with tangible improvements in everyday life, thereby benefiting both users and brands.

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