

# Introducing digital luxury wearable assets: imaginaries and practices

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## Introduction

The metaverse has gained prominence in marketing and luxury industries, with attention given to Digital Luxury Wearable Assets (DLAs) — virtual garments and accessories used in metaverses, games, or social media platforms (“The Opportunity in Digital Fashion and Avatars Report | BoF Insights” 2021). The hype around DLAs coincides with Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) (Belk, Humayun and Brouard 2022) and advancements in artificial intelligence technologies (Puntoni et al. 2021), enabling luxury brands to reinvent themselves, reduce emissions (Kapferer and Laurent 2016), and engage younger audiences.

This paper explores challenges luxury brands face in virtualization by adopting sociotechnical imaginaries (Augustine et al. 2019; Granqvist and Laurila 2011; Jasanoff and Kim 2013) and practice theory (Arsel and Bean 2013; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021; Reckwitz 2002; Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012) as theoretical lenses. We ask: what challenges must DLAs overcome to establish practice? How are these challenges entangled with sociotechnical imaginaries? How are different practices (luxury wearing and video games) entangled in this future practice?

To answer these questions, we analyzed 20 international consultancy reports on metaverses and conducted 35 in-depth interviews with luxury consumers and gamers. Findings reveal that consulting companies frame metaverses as tech-utopian (Kozinets 2008) goldmines for luxury companies. However, they also highlight unanticipated challenges in materials, meaning, and competences, building on practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002).

This research contributes to understanding DLAs and related practices. We showcase the challenges of changing practices, contributing to practice theory literature (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021; Hand and Shove 2007; Zanette, Pueschel and Touzani 2022). Luxury companies can use our insights to adapt their marketing strategies for Web3.

## CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

### *Sociotechnical imaginaries: envisioning futures*

Marketing and management literature have recently seen a growing interest in the imaginaries that conceive futures (Augustine et al. 2019; Preece, Whittaker and Janes 2022; Sörum and Fuentes 2023) that can have unintended consequences when it comes to new technologies (Oomen, Hoffman and Hajer 2022). To prevent these consequences, it is important to understand the process of creating futures through imaginaries. Imaginaries can be defined as collective ideas that shape and frame action on a social scale (Augustine et al.

2019). These imaginaries, particularly those involving technology, consist of what Jasanoff and Kim (2013) call sociotechnical imaginaries, “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (p. 9). These visions of desirable futures are envisioned by different actors; for instance, technical intermediaries (Knorr-Cetina 2010) such as consultancy companies that play a significant role once they help articulate the cultural and fictional ideologies into orchestrations of practices, providing strategic pathways for companies to put in place materials and meanings with which consumers will enact their own practices (Dolbec, Fischer and Canniford 2021; Ferreira and Scaraboto 2016).

### ***Practice theory: enacting futures based on the present***

Practices establish patterns of action shared among people, guiding their actions (Dolbec et al. 2021). Shove et al. (2012), and others who follow their conceptualization (Arsel and Bean 2013; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021) understand that practices depend on three components: (1) materials, which include resources, objects, and infrastructures; (2) meanings, which include social and symbolic significance of actions; and (3) competences, which is how materials and meanings are arranged by consumers. Importantly, practices can be orchestrated by social discourses, sociotechnical imaginaries (Oomen et al. 2022). Besides these factors that are external to the daily enactment of practices, they can also be modified, reconfigured, or remodelled by material changes.

DLAs entail a novel practice. However, this novel practice seems to be considerably influenced by already existing practices that include luxury wearing and video game playing and a new material component: NFTs.

The comparison of luxury-wearing and video-gaming practices are summarised in the first three columns of the Table.

NFTs, specifically, can confer certain proprietary characteristics to digital materials and could bundle luxury wearing and video game playing practices, aiding the materialization of DLAs’ practices in metaverses. However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that existing practices of luxury wearing, and video game playing will pose to the establishment of this new practice, considering as well the phenomenon of NFTs and its consequences on the materials involved in these practices.

## **METHOD**

The research involved two main stages: a qualitative analysis of industry reports and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Taking into account the novelty aspect of the topic, we have chosen a qualitative research design (Churchill and Iacobucci 2006) as the most relevant approach.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Using snowball sampling (Aurini, Heath and Howells 2016) we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews, of which 17 interviewees were active gamers (some also consume luxury), and 18 were consumers of real-life luxury products (Kapferer and Laurent 2016). The interviews lasted between 30 and 76 minutes, were transcribed and coded thematically (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014) matching to the elements of practices.

20 relevant reports from consultancy agencies were purposefully selected, for instance, agencies catering to the fashion sector. They were coded in an iterative manner (Spiggle 1994), both to unveil what sociotechnical imaginaries they conveyed, as well as how these imaginaries suggest the orchestration of a new practice: wearing DLAs.

Our findings map the sociotechnical imaginaries envisioned by consulting companies and explore three main challenges in consolidating a DLA practice based on current practices of games, luxury wearers, and NFT-based technologies.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Envisioning DLAs imaginaries*

Consultancy companies' materials present a tech-utopian view of metaverses, merging practices like NFTs and gaming with the belief that classic luxury tenets will prevail over digitalization. They optimistically envision the material component of DLAs-related practices, placing significant hope in NFTs' practical effects.

These imaginaries suggest that NFTs will transform virtual worlds into commercial spaces, creating scarcity and addressing possession concerns. However, this imagined future contrasts with non-commercial perspectives that envision the virtual world as abundant and collaborative. Reports assume that scarcity and community-building are not contradictory, with DLAs' practices in metaverses involving luxury meanings and community building meanings, despite the unclear contribution of NFTs.

Paradoxes are downplayed when considering competences, anticipating that consumers will use branded items for collecting and displaying in gamified, possession-based distinctions. However, this overlooks the competences required for online communities. Reports expect DLAs to work in metaverses like digital objects such as skins in video games, drawing inspiration from gaming, community building, creativity, and bonding in virtual spaces.

In sum, these knowledge and future creators seem to envision an optimistic future in which practices that are not yet fully configured will emerge from existing luxury and gaming worlds without any apparent contradictions. But is it so?

### ***Mapping challenges***

#### **Material challenges**

The idea of using NFTs to grant scarcity and ownership in digital luxury assets (DLAs) faces challenges as consumers struggle to reconcile DLAs with their physical possessions. For example, Marc (21) finds it strange to engage with digital clothes not part of his physical wardrobe: *I find it very strange to tell myself that I post pictures of myself with clothes that are not in my [physical] wardrobe.* This challenge may stem from differing materiality between DLAs and physical clothes, leading to difficulty embracing digital luxury assets due to a perceived lack of value or purpose.

Additionally, luxury wearing practices involving physical objects are challenged by DLAs. To justify their cost, DLAs require scarcity and ownership, potentially achieved through NFTs. However, DLAs practices are unable to equalize other luxury-related practices, such as the exclusivity and exorbitant cost associated with obtaining luxury items. As a result, virtual versions of luxury are often viewed as being of inferior value than the real-world versions when compared to the tangible qualities of luxury items crafted from physical materials (Atasoy and Morewedge 2018; Denegri-Knott, Jenkins and Lindley 2020). Amelie (28) highlights this concern, stating that easy online access to luxury items doesn't align with the concept of luxury: *Luxury means scarcity, that is hard to get. But if it is that easy, like you can really get it online with a low cost without owning the physical item, I think that's not what luxury is.*

Moreover, the gaming practice of acquiring, trading, and wearing digital cosmetic items, known as skins, is an established routine. However, introducing commercial items into game spaces alters material practical experiences in metaverses, as they are perceived as alternative spheres not entirely governed by market logic (Almaguer 2018). This liminal space between real-world market logic and game-world external identity can negatively impact the gaming experience. Harley (27) expresses concern that commercialization could diminish the gaming

experience gamers enjoy, claiming that *it won't be the experience that I like, but it'll be about commercializing all that.*

Further, we explore the challenges identified as more related to meanings.

### **Meanings Challenges**

Sociotechnical imaginaries envision digital luxury assets (DLAs) as encompassing identity construction, community building, status signaling, and sustainable consumption simultaneously. However, luxury practice carriers view DLAs as a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994) of luxury, lacking substance and disrupting luxury meanings. As Alex says, *"[...] they've never had them. I don't know, it bothers me. I don't like it. This is very wrong."*

For gaming carriers, virtual objects are central to their practices' meanings, validating and sustaining meanings similar to real life (Molesworth and Watkins 2016). In-game items show a gamer's worth, while default looks are for "noobs" (Almaguer 2018). Dan (26) expresses disdain for spending real money on virtual items, calling it *"[...] ridiculous [...] and dumb."*

However, the discrepancy between skin-wearing meanings and the new meaning imparted by luxury brands is less contentious when it reinforces existing video-game connotations, such as fostering social connections and community-building. Yonji (28) exemplifies this by highlighting the role of virtual items in enhancing the social practices of gaming culture and identity expression, making the game experience more fulfilling and self-expressive: *"Without skins, you will feel that the whole game seems to be lacking something."*

### **Competences' challenges**

The new practice of digital luxury asset (DLA) wearing is challenged when typical competences of luxury wearing, such as combining and displaying taste (Arsel and Bean 2013; Zanette et al. 2022), are complemented or replaced by competences of speculation, connected with NFTs. Lisa (30) says, *"I might look at Kenzo to get the artwork, but I don't see any value in that specific NFT."* Aesthetic competence disappears, replaced by trading competences related to reselling, a recent phenomenon in the luxury world (Loussaïef, Ulrich and Damay 2019).

In gaming, competences require mastery earned by merit, ability to recognize skin meanings, and appreciation of their rarity. Such aesthetic competence tends to merge with others, like socializing, community building, and game progression. Pilgrim (22) explains, *"Skins are important because [...] I recognize them if somebody plays with [the] most [rare] skin."*

In both luxury and gaming practices, envisioned competences for DLAs do not entail essential aspects of previous carriers' competences: combining, displaying taste, displaying mastery, and achieving results through efforts. DLAs seem to require competences of reselling and collecting, which are considerably antagonistic to how carriers enact related practices.

## DISCUSSION

Our study explores challenges DLAs need to overcome to establish a practice around them and how these challenges intertwine with sociotechnical imaginaries built around DLAs and existing practices (luxury wearing and video games) (Jasanoff and Kim 2013; Shove et al. 2012).

**Table:** Envisioned practices and challenges from legitimating traditions of DLAs

Practice's element	Luxury wearing	Video game playing (MMORPG)	Sociotechnical imaginaries envisioned practices	Vestiges of related practices that challenge the legitimation of DLAs-related practices
<b>Materials</b>	Garments, places, retail, bodies	Software, networks, digital objects that afford power, avatars	Scarcity warranted by NFTs Possessions similar to matter-made objects	Virtual garments do not feel like 'real possessions' for luxury carriers Gaming carriers are afraid their material experiences in metaverses will be altered
<b>Meanings</b>	Status, exclusivity, aesthetic pleasure	Community, mastery, meritocracy, accumulation, creation, and instant gratification	Identity construction, community building, status signaling	Luxury practices do not entail meritocracy but do entail real possessions. Gaming practices concerned with possessions that are acquired through meritocracy.
<b>Competences</b>	Combining / knowing brands and products, body posture, and carrying of luxury objects	Dexterity over controls/input, understanding of game's mechanics, engaging with events/ community, keeping up with updates/patches	Buying and collecting	Luxury carriers feel that the only DLA-related competence is speculation Game carriers worry about the loss of mastery competences

These challenges result in issues that researchers, consultants, and practitioners must tackle before realizing the envisioned future of DLAs (Belk et al. 2022; Denegri-Knott et al. 2020; Joy et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2022). We first outline the theoretical challenges to understanding such practices and then address the managerial threats and opportunities.

### ***Theoretical Challenges and Contributions:***

Skepticism through over-optimistic sociotechnical imaginaries:

The tech-utopian portrayal of metaverses, driven by consultancy firms (Kozinets 2008), has fueled tech euphoria. However, some voices raise caution about these optimistic views (Granqvist and Laurila 2011). Our research demonstrates the challenges and pitfalls that tech-utopian sociotechnical imaginaries encounter when consumers compare the futuristic version of a practice with their actual enactments.

Envisioning an emergent practice out of a digital material feature (NFTs):

Our research shows that changing practices is a complex process that often requires using traces of old, well-established practices (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021; Hand and Shove 2007; Zanette et al. 2022). In the context of DLAs, luxury-wearing and video-gaming are distinct practices, but digital materiality, such as NFTs, can assure ownership and connect with physical objects, allowing for the coexistence of these practices.

### ***Practical Challenges and Contributions:***

Based on the theoretical conclusions, we suggest companies view NFT versions of luxury products as extensions of existing practices by connecting physical items with their NFT versions (Schau, Gilly and Wolfinbarger 2009). This strategy might help consumers transfer some elements of stabilized practices, such as physical products' competences and meanings. However, DLAs are often seen as 'invaders' by gamers, disrupting the gaming world with 'real-worldness.' Luxury companies could address this by introducing branded elements of skins that do not reject original gaming practices' materials, meanings, or competences.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This paper has limitations, including the fact that not all luxury consumers in the sample were familiar with or engaged in popular metaverses like Decentraland or Sandbox. Additionally, the carriers of the gaming practice mainly belong to the millennial generation. Further research should examine the practices of Gen-Z and Gen Alpha when consuming digital luxury wearable assets in various contexts.



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