

# The Future of Fashion in Web3: A Netnographic Case Study of the Gucci Discord Community

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## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the digital realm has witnessed the rise of Web 3.0, heralding greater data transparency, user ownership, while also allowing individuals to be active contributors. Central to this transformation is the "metaverse"—a collective virtual environment that merges augmented physical reality with persistent virtual space, though it remains in its formative stages. While sceptics view the metaverse as a sprawling digital replica of the physical world, its real promise lies in enriching reality through Extended Reality (XR).

The fashion industry, having change at the very core of its DNA (Easey, 2009), recognises the potential of emerging technologies to influence consumer behaviour (Amed & Berg, 2022) and to attract young, digitally-savvy customers (Amed et al., 2019), which is evidenced by heavy investment in the space.

With the metaverse projected to evolve into a trillion-dollar market (Bobier et al., 2022; Moy & Gadgil, 2022), brands are prioritizing discussions around its potential. Web3 technologies are reshaping the way narratives unfold, emphasizing a growing trend of collaboration (e.g. Moncler & Fortnite), which results in the formation of specific digital communities.

Discord is one of these "web3 friendly" platforms and Gucci has begun operations there. The brand launched "Gucci Vault", a concept designed to experiment with web3 strategies. Through collaborations with platforms like Sandbox, Gucci offers immersive digital experiences that extend its reach into the metaverse.

As part of this initiative, the brand is pioneering gamified brand experiences and offering non-fungible token (NFT) collectibles to engage with a digitally-native audience. These efforts showcase Gucci's exploration of web3 technologies and their potential to transform how fashion brands interact with communities on platforms like Discord.

In this way, technologies are reshaping how individuals form networks, share information, and engage in activities, transitioning from personal websites to social media and now to web3 platforms. And although many fashion brands have trialled

similar concepts, their efforts to establish communities on platforms like Discord show varying success rates.

Given the limited research on what drives the success or failure of these communities and their significant commercial and social stakes, further investigation into the development of web3 technologies in the fashion industry is essential.

This study will explore new communication narratives and activities, as well as the overall structure and broader implications of these web3 digital communities centred around fashion brands on Discord. In this way this study aims to provide a first, in-depth description of web3 communities centred around a (fashion) brand to guide the development of communities in the metaverse, as well as to inform fashion brands in the space.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **New Social Platforms**

Web3, the third iteration of the internet, promotes decentralised, democratic online activities, allowing users to own their data. It uses blockchain and digital signatures for trust and security (Hendler, 2009), emphasising collaboration, open communication, and co-creation, requiring innovative business strategies (Garrigos-Simon et al., 2012). It meets the needs of Gen-Z consumers in fashion, who value authenticity, authority, and impact (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

The Metaverse, as web3's immersive shift, integrates technologies like blockchain, NFTs, 5G, and AR/VR (Barnes & Mattson, 2011), offering engaging digital experiences (Cook et al., 2020). Damar (2021) defines it as “the layer between you and reality.”

Unlike traditional web2 platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, Discord embraces web3 principles. Originally a gaming chat service, Discord fosters deep community interactions with features like personalised profiles and transparent file-sharing, avoiding algorithmic content recommendations (Owens et al., 2017). With 196.2 million monthly users, Discord aligns with web3 values (Geyser, 2021). In fashion, brands see Discord as a space where brand personality, culture, entertainment, and gaming converge, connecting to "virtual worlds" like Decentraland or Sandbox, early versions of the decentralised metaverse (McDowell, 2022; Kim, 2021).

### **Community**

In community psychology, a community is characterized by a sense of belonging and connection to a reliable group (Sarason, 1974). McMillan and Chavis (1986) outline four essential components: Membership, Influence, Fulfillment of Needs, and Emotional Bond. These elements reflect feelings included within the group, the

mutual exchange of influence among members, the satisfaction of various needs, and the cultivation of a shared sense of belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996). Community identity is strengthened through shared symbols and mutual acceptance, fostering both personal growth and deeper connections (Perkins & Long, 2002).

Communities, therefore, act as crucial support systems, shaping individual identities and fostering collective growth. Community psychology highlights the significance of envisioning a brighter future for the group (Watts et al., 2003), resonating with utopian ideals and serving as a driver for societal change (Levitas, 2013) while inspiring progress (Bloch & Adorno, 1988). In conclusion, communities are more than gatherings of individuals. They serve as pillars of support, identity, and mutual growth, constantly evolving through their members' interactions.

### **Brand Communities**

Online brand communities are virtual spaces where individuals connect over a shared affinity for a brand, marked by collective identity, active participation, and common values (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Kristof (1996) suggests that a brand's consistency allows people to see themselves reflected in it, while Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) explain that a brand's alignment with personal values increases its appeal. In virtual settings like Discord, individuals have more control over their identities, with anonymity helping to bypass stereotypes related to age, race, or gender, fostering a sense of safety and acceptance (Peck & Bourne, 2010; Ciesielska, 2010).

### **Belonging**

Additionally, in digital brand communities, members' sense of well-being deepens emotional attachment to the brand (Grzekowiak & Sirgy, 2007; Ren, 2012), strengthening brand loyalty through shared values and experiences (Safeer et al., 2023). Social support within virtual communities, offering mutual support and practical assistance (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997), has been widely studied, with evidence showing the internet as a social space for valuable exchanges and support (Mickelson, 1997).

Beyond their tangible roles in information exchange, virtual communities also play a crucial role in identity formation. Social identity theory (Hogg, 1996; Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1987) suggests that individuals shape their identity based on their perceived affiliation with social groups.

For fashion brands, this emotional connection and collective identity amplify loyalty, self-esteem, and self-expression (Hogg & Mullin, 1999). This emotional bond leads brand advocates to defend their chosen brands online shielding them from criticism (Cant et al., 2014). Thus, the concept of social identity pivots around the profound

emotional resonance of belonging within a community (Bhattacharya et al., 1995).

### **Manifestation of a better future**

Yet, for communities to evolve and adapt, a forward-looking perspective is essential. Communities are dynamic systems, requiring a range of behavioural skills, including critical awareness and the ability to envision a better future (Kloos, 2012; Watts et al., 2003). These skills align with principles of utopianism (Levitas, 2013) and the utopian impulse (Basso & Krpan, 2022).

Social theorists like Chomsky (1999), Mannheim (1991), and Polak (1961) emphasize the importance of utopian thinking and collective responsibility in envisioning improved societies. Utopia, coined by Thomas More in 1516, originally described a society of perfect harmony. Scholars like Bloch (1986) and Levitas (2000) redefined it as a cognitive act, a desire for a better life. Levitas (1990) notes its dual function: as escapism, helping individuals imagine an ideal society and compensate for reality's constraints. This mental contrasting reflects a universal engagement in daydreaming and serves as an escape from society's shortcomings (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987).

### **Utility of Utopia**

Utopian thinking, as argued by Levitas (1990) and Mannheim (1991), is not just a dream but a method for building better societies (Levitas, 2013). It serves as a catalyst for societal transformation, inspiring change and progress (Bloch & Adorno, 1988). Both Levitas (2013) and Bloch (1986) highlight the link between utopian thinking, hope, and social progress, with mental contrasting driving activism and societal engagement (Fernando et al., 2018). Recent studies by Basso & Krpan (2022, 2023) show the utopian impulse predicting prosocial and pro-environmental behaviours beyond traditional psychology.

Hermand (1975) sees utopian thinking as essential for progressive ideas, blending creativity with empirical analysis. Utopias, therefore, are not just daydreams but powerful tools for envisioning a brighter future.

### **Value Creation**

Research has, finally, investigated value co-creation within digital communities, where engaged members create resources or share knowledge or feedback which raises the brand's overall value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The Starbucks' online community, for example, invites active participation through service feedback, fostering a two-way exchange of value by offering a rewards system for members. On the other hand, these interactions continue to revolve around high-quality content, with various content types serving a variety of functions

from expressing opinions to formulating solutions (Herring, 2004). This dynamic supports social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976), which contends that interactions are supported by reciprocal exchanges. In virtual communities, members reciprocate through information contribution, reinforcing communal ties and sustaining engagement (Mathwick et al., 2008).

Although the digital revolution has yet to reach its full potential, its transformative impact on businesses is already evident and evolving (Meeker, 2019). This phase is marked by fashion brands exploring innovative strategies to attract and retain customers, with early indications suggesting that traditional marketing methods face considerable challenges in web3 environments (Langer, 2022). Although the existing literature offers valuable insights into the dynamics of virtual communities across psychological and marketing domains, empirical research specifically addressing the phenomenon of web3 communities in the fashion context remains scarce.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to provide a first in-depth examination of web3 communities centered around a brand in the fashion sector and to guide fashion companies in developing effective community-building strategies within the web3 space. This research seeks to uncover new communication narratives, community activities, and broader implications of these digital spaces, addressing a significant gap in existing literature.

This study will explore new communication narratives and activities, as well as the overall structure and psychological dimensions of these web3 digital communities. As McLuhan (1991) argues, only a holistic exploration of an environment can yield accurate conclusions. Netnography, which studies communities as integrated wholes within their unique contexts, aligns with this perspective. By employing this method, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how these communities operate, interact, and influence brand relationships. The findings will help fashion companies in developing effective strategies to engage with digital communities in the web3 space. The study will focus on the following research questions:

1. **How do web3 brand communities work?** What are the activities and behaviours exhibited by community members?
2. **How do digital communities form within web3 spaces?** What characterises and distinguishes them?
3. **What are the psychological implications for users of digital communities, and how do these influence their relationships with (fashion) brands?**

## **METHODS**

### **Methodological Background**

To explore these research questions, a non-participative, netnographic approach was

adapted due to its unintrusive and authentic characteristics of observation of digital communities (Kozinets, 2002, 2006, 2022). The study received ethical clearance from [anonymised institution]. Netnography operates as an investigative approach for studying human activity and relationships within virtual environments (Boellstorff, 2010; Horst & Miller, 2012). This perspective doesn't position the virtual realm in opposition to the real world; instead, it serves as a context where behaviours, beliefs, and practices unfold autonomously, with emerging connections between the two realms (Lahlou et al., 2021, Heitmayer & Schimmelfennig, 2023).

### **Procedure**

The Gucci web3 community was chosen for its high engagement levels and large membership (53,066 participants at the time of data gathering). The dataset consists of approximately 12,000 text and visual entry inputs, each accompanied by its corresponding reactions and comments. During July 2023, community members posted an average of ten comments daily. To deepen the understanding, the research also examined the past five months of activity in the "main" Discord chat.

### **Data analysis**

The methodology was adapted to the digital context, following netnographic guidelines with three stages: investigation, interaction, and immersion (Kozinets, 2022). In the investigation phase, data was collected through exploration, selection, scraping, and downloading of online site segments. During immersion, the researcher engaged with the data, recording insights through personal notes. Analysis of these messages revealed community behaviours, patterns, and themes. Microsoft OneNote was used to organize data (text, links, visuals), reflecting the connection between images and technological communication (Baetens, 2013). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, using inductive analysis to explore the novel subject without pre-existing theories, as recommended by Clarke et al. (2015).

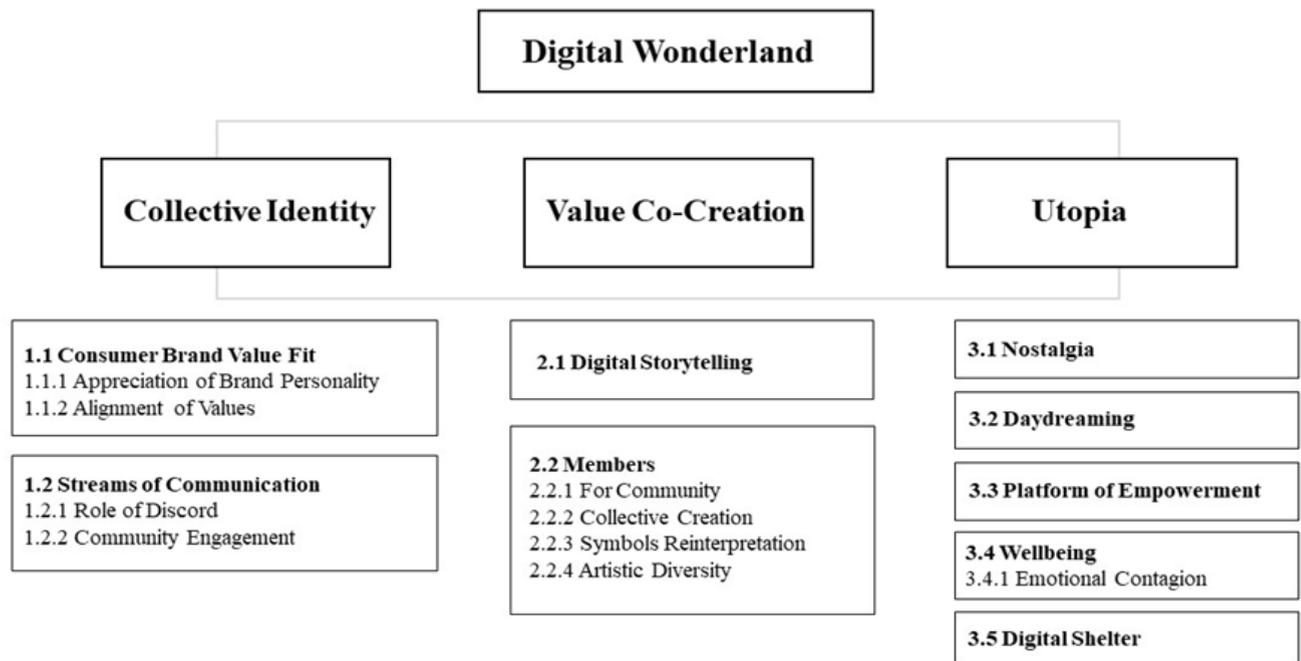
### **Participants**

The participants in this study represent a diverse group with varied backgrounds, including individuals with families, established careers, young professionals, and students. They include Gucci fashion owners, NFT enthusiasts, and aspiring customers, united by their passion for the brand. As joining the Gucci Discord community requires having a crypto wallet, the presence of children within the community was virtually non-existent, eliminating any possibility of underage participation.

## **RESULTS**

The thematic analysis of Netnographic data identified 3 themes with 2 to 5 subthemes, respectively (see fig. 1). The themes are: *Collective Identity*, *Value Co-Creation* and

*Utopia*. All the quotes from community members have been anonymised. In this short paper, only highlights of the findings are presented.



**Figure 1:** Overview of Themes and Subthemes

## 1 Collective Identity

### 1.1 Consumer-Brand Value Fit

#### 1.1.1 Appreciation of Brand Personality

Members actively discussed the brand's personality attributes, emphasising nouns like "*creativity*", "*luxury*", "*commitment to quality*" and placing special emphasis on innovation. Their sentiments were captured in quotes such as "*What a time to be alive, history in the making,*" and "*Gucci is pushin*", highlighting their appreciation for Gucci's innovative spirit and excitement "*I am so happy*", "*Lego Gucci*".

#### 1.1.2 Alignment of Values

Members frequently described Gucci's brand values that align with their own. Comments such as "*My favourite aspect of Gucci is their commitment to equality and sustainability*" and "*Gucci is dope*" exemplify this sentiment.

### 1.2 Streams of Communication

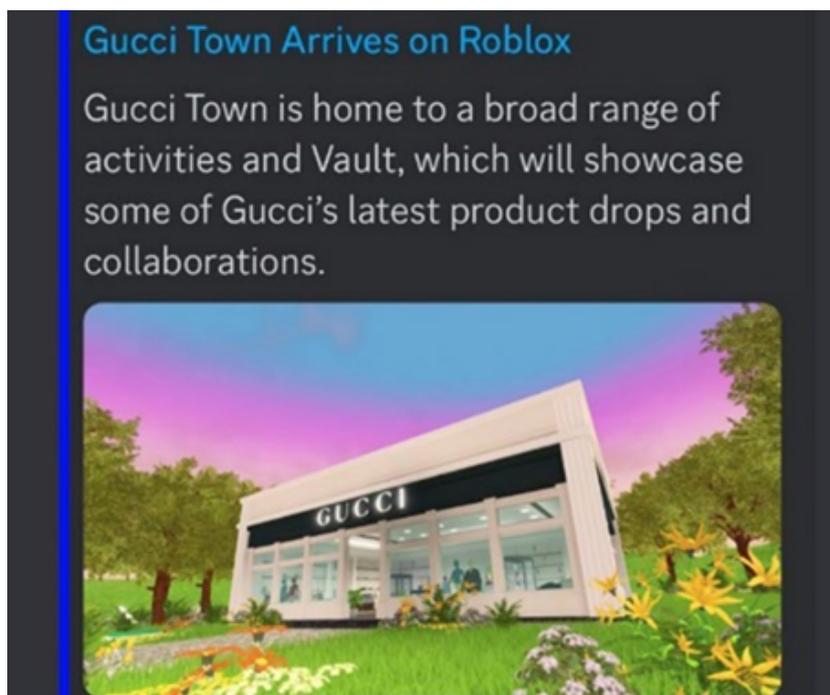
#### 1.2.1 Role of Discord

What sets the Gucci community apart from conventional brand engagement strategies is its utilisation of Discord as a communication medium. Discord does not recommend content algorithmically and encourages a more diverse range of expressions like curated memes, videos, special emojis and stickers than traditional social media. Members chat freely on Discord, where conversations flow naturally

due to a transparent format, often with multiple discussions happening at once.

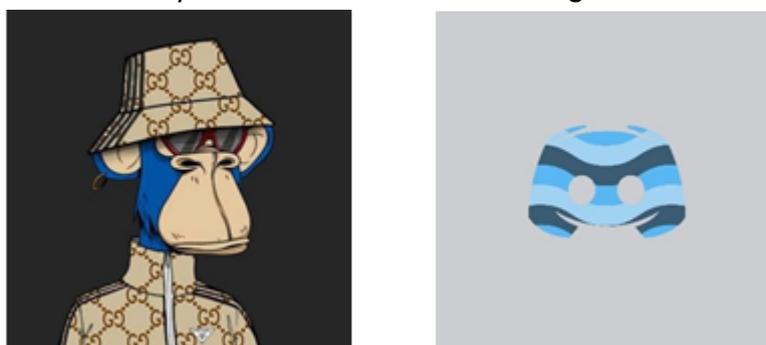
### 1.2.2 Community Engagement

The Gucci Discord is a place where members engage in a wide array of conversations about fashion and the Gucci brand, but also casual topics like food recommendations. Furthermore, the community fosters an environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing personal matters like career changes and the challenges of daily life. Additionally, the community regularly highlights that they are part of the group by using collective pronouns (“we”, “us”): *"What an amazing community we have"*, *"We are Gucci family"*, *"The community matters to us!"*. Moreover, members refer to themselves as *"Gucci Gang"* and proudly proclaim their



association as part of the *"Gucci family"*.

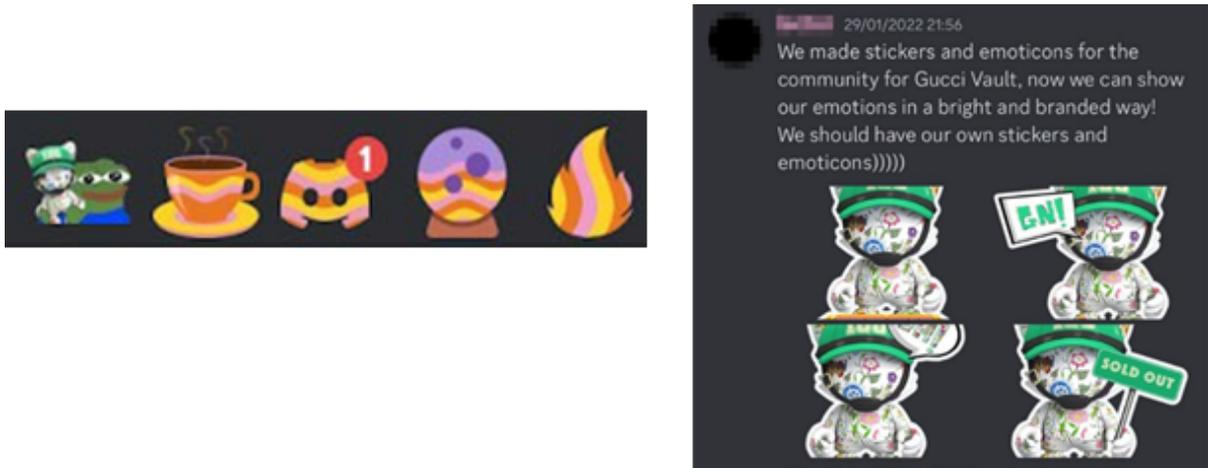
**Figure 2:** Profile pictures on Discord showing affiliation to the brand.



## 2 Value Co-Creation

### 2.1.1 Digital Storytelling

Gucci is introducing digital innovations to its community by providing links to immersive experiences on platforms like Roblox. These mini Gucci-themed worlds allow users to engage with the brand's narrative in a unique digital space, often navigating through avatars (see fig. 3).



**Figure 3:** Digital GG World.

## 2.2 Members

The Gucci community has a unique way of enriching the collective experience and identity beyond mere brand celebration. Members create diverse forms of art inspired by Gucci symbols and products, including images, videos, music, and forms of animation.

### 2.2.1 For Community

*"From community for community."* One of the examples is the collaborative effort of members who created Gucci stickers, designed to be used as reactions by all members during their chat interactions (see fig. 4). This exemplifies their dedication to enhancing the community's shared experience with collective enjoyment of creativity.

**Figure 4:** Example of members' reactions stickers.

### 2.2.2 Collective Creation

The interpretation of brand storytelling is usually subjective, whereas the Gucci Discord community is creating their own collective symbols to communicate with each other. Members collectively create their own symbols and interpretations of brand storytelling, enriching the narrative and fostering a dynamic collaborative art space, as illustrated by the transformation of real Gucci Fashion show models into NFT characters shared in the chat (see fig. 5).

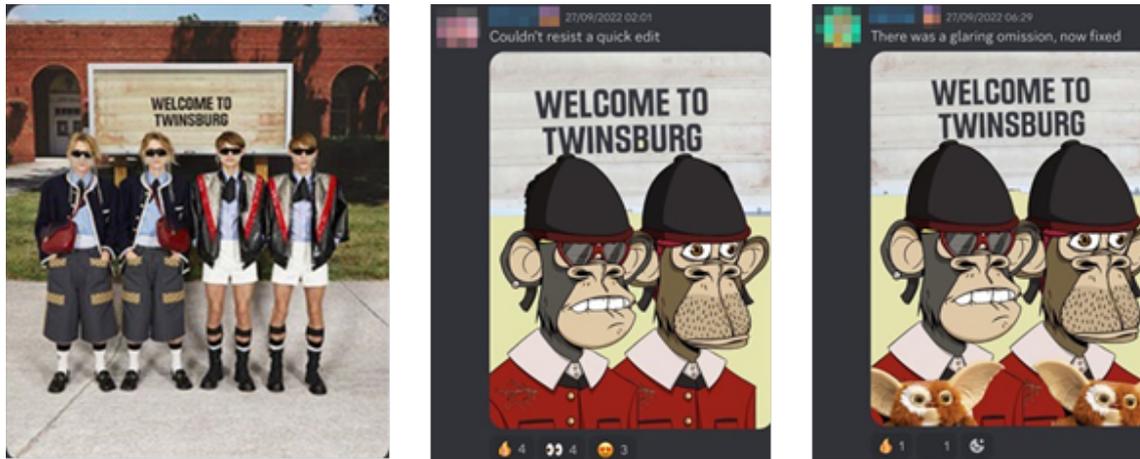


Figure 5: Collective art creation process

### 2.2.3 Symbols Reinterpretation

Members create in a variety of artistic styles, but the reinterpreted source material is always the same. The resurrection of the "Gucci Ghost" concept serves as an example. Members talked about how Gucci and Trevor Andrew collaborated after Andrew turned Gucci bed linens into a Halloween costume. These conversations then sparked fan artwork, showing how brand narratives can evolve.

### 2.2.4 Artistic Diversity

The Gucci Discord Community provides a secure platform to engage in the creation of art centred around Gucci, allowing members to incorporate symbols without legal concerns. However, it is worth noting that art creation within the community attracts all members and is not only the domain of artists. Even individuals who openly acknowledge that they are not artists actively participate in this creative trend, highlighting that the motivation for engaging in these creative activities extends beyond traditional artistic recognition (see fig. 6).

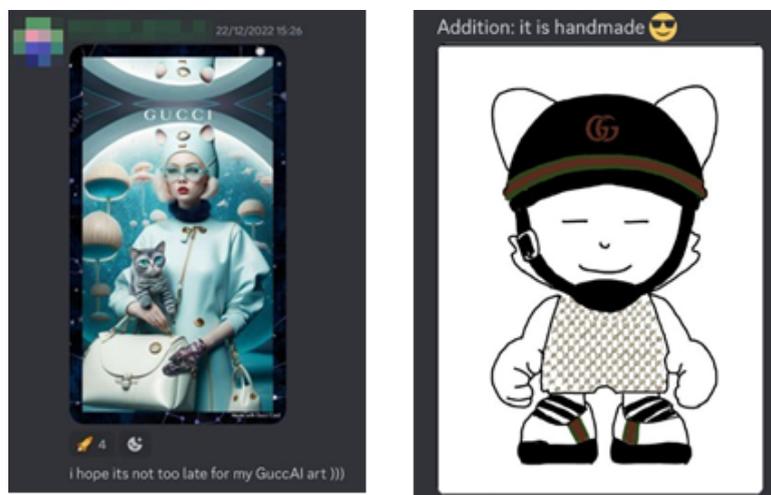


Figure 6: Examples of various art types created by the community.

### **3 Utopia**

#### **3.1 Nostalgia**

Within the GG Discord community, members often share stories of their youthful dreams and interests. For instance, they might share childhood aspirations for their dream jobs, reminiscing about the cartoons or shows that ignited their passions. One member might say, *"I wanted to become an archaeologist when I was around 8,"* while another fondly recalls, *"That cartoon got me into dinosaurs; I watched it a lot as a kid"*. These discussions serve as powerful reminders of youthful enthusiasm: *"I had a feeling of time travel."*

#### **3.2 Daydreaming**

Members of the GG Discord community collectively engage in daydreaming. A recurring theme in daydreaming revolves around fashion, serving as a primary catalyst for imaginative discussions. Members often express their desires in the form of aspirations, such as: *"To attend this show physically..."* or *"Must be beautiful in person"*, and in the form of shared sentiments: *"I love floating through space with all of you"*. Members also frequently envision a future where they can acquire outfits for their avatars in the metaverse, symbolising their forward-looking and technologically driven daydreams *"Imagine buying all the outfits for the avatar in the metaverse"*.

#### **3.3 Platform of Empowerment**

Members of the GG Discord community consistently offer strong support to one another, particularly when sharing their creative work. They respond with positive comments, emojis, and words of encouragement, creating a nurturing environment: *"I love it"*, *"This art blows my mind"*.

#### **3.4 Wellbeing**

There are numerous indicators that the Gucci community is making members feel good about themselves: *"Thank you Gucci fam you make me happy"*, *"That makes me very happy knowing my work is being enjoyed"*. Many individuals reported feeling deeply affected by the creative narratives and stories shared within the community. This emotional connection was often expressed through words such as *"inspired"* and *"moved,"* implying that the community's collective creativity evokes deep emotional responses among its members.

##### **3.4.1 Emotional Contagion**

Members of the GG Discord community exhibit emotional contagion, where one member's expression of joy or amusement triggers a ripple effect of positive emotions among others, which is illustrated for example by similar emoji reactions like faces crying with laughter and hearts, which showcases the community's strong emotional connection and shared sense of positivity.

### 3.5 Digital Shelter

Members frequently engage in comparing their real-life experiences to their interactions within the GG Discord community (see fig. 7). This practice often highlights a perception that the community offers a sense of fulfilment and relief to its members: "Chatting here is a good break for me, work is crazy" and "Feels good", "Whenever you come here you feel Gucci", "I feel that I am finally in a right place". Community fills a role of digital shelter: "Thank you, I can express myself freely here", "I am getting bullied in real life" and "Here, people understand me and my passion for Gucci". This highlights the vital role of this community as a shelter, offering acceptance and understanding that may be lacking in the offline lives.



Figure 7: Example of mutual support in GG community

## DISCUSSION

The current study employed a qualitative netnographic research approach to explore the complexities and nuances of digital communities, particularly focusing on the Gucci Discord community. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the research questions focused on (1) understanding the structure and function of Web3 digital communities, (2) characterising these communities distinctiveness (3) investigating the psychological implications of being part of such digital communities, and (4) examining the specific activities and behaviours exhibited by community members. The thematic analysis of netnographic data has uncovered deep insights into members of the Gucci Discord as well as the community's dynamics.

### Understanding the Gucci Community

The Gucci Discord community differs from traditional online communities, as members are drawn together by both, appreciation of the brand personality (Mills et

al., 2022) and their personal values alignment with Gucci's (Kristof, 1996; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), constructing a coherent social identity (Heider, 1958). However, contrary to previous studies indicating information or entertainment seeking as reasons to join online communities (Brown et al., 2007; Hartman & Arnould, 2015), this did not appear as the primary driving force. Instead, the Gucci community is deeply invested in the brand and its values, leading to strong engagement not just with Gucci but also with fellow members who express and share those values. This engagement goes beyond the "what" of Gucci, including its products, design, and history, to focus on the "who" – the like-minded members and their shared experiences and values. It is a digital shelter where members express themselves without fear of skepticism or bullying. Membership in the Gucci community fosters diverse psychological associations, forging a collective community identity, in line with Social Identity Theory. Members derive a strong sense of belonging from their association (Day, 2011; Tajfel, 1978), which is illustrated by the profile pictures that members choose for example (Lee & Ottati, 1995; Simon & Pettigrew, 1990; see fig. 2). This way of digitally engaging with the brand is characteristic of web3 with its decentralised and user-centric ethos.

### **Community Integrated Brand Engagement**

Surprisingly, Gucci community members engage in spontaneous creative processes which they share on the Discord chat. They produce various types of art, in diverse formats. They individually or collectively reinterpret Gucci brand symbols, both visual and abstract, ranging from logos to intangible aspects of brand identity like stories, thereby adding new meaning to brand narratives and creating value for the brand and community. This is in line with research on communities establishing territory by symbols (Perkins & Long, 2002). Art creation is not encouraged by a brand, but occurs in an organic way, which is unique in comparison to co-creation when there is a reward system for member input (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Mathwick et al., 2008; Wasko and Faraj, 2000). There is also no indication that Gucci utilises or commercially exploits this art in any way, nor does it offer compensation or recognition to members. This spontaneous collective creativity represents a novel approach to both brand engagement and interaction within the digital community, between members.

The creation of art serves a dual purpose: Firstly, it celebrates the Gucci brand, enhancing brand engagement; secondly, it stimulates interactions among members. These interactions cultivate mutual support and engagement, strengthening group cohesion (Cai, 2023). The Gucci community's dynamic thus evolves beyond traditional brand engagement methods. We propose the term Community Integrated Brand Engagement (CIBE) for contexts where members interact with a brand through the social structure of the community in a creative way. Here, the community comes together not merely as passive consumers of content, but as proactive members

collectively celebrating a brand in a new way. This collective celebration not only fosters a deep connection with the brand but also shapes a community identity centred around it.

### **Implications**

The interconnected dynamics of this novel way of brand engagement, where members collectively express themselves creatively, forge a collective identity, and underscore the significance of the community, appears to be a disruptive phenomenon and has been organically witnessed within the Gucci Discord community. There is no scientific evidence of such engagement patterns in other online communities, suggesting that this collective creative approach might be a defining trait of web3 communities. It is therefore crucial to determine in future research if this dual-layered creative engagement is common in web3 communities, especially fashion-focused ones, or unique to Gucci's community.

### **"We are the Gucci family": Belonging and Engagement**

As expected, engagement within the Gucci Discord community meets fundamental psychological needs for belonging and connection, aligning with McMillan & Chavis' (1986) principles of community, offering a safe digital space for mutual support and empowerment. Therefore, key psychological implications of community participation relate to the community engagement, bonds and collective artistic involvement corresponding with CIBE. McAlexander et al. (2002) emphasize that shared experiences around a brand create deep connections, which in the Gucci community manifest through active participation in shared digital experiences. The longing for belonging is expressed uniquely here, with members not only conversing but co-living digital experiences, watching fashion shows, and engaging in collective creativity. While belonging is an intrinsic motivation, it is intertwined with social rituals and shared experiences. Allen et al. (2021) argue that traditional definitions of belonging focus on interpersonal contacts, but the Gucci community blends cultural identity with brand affinity, creating a collective identity that goes beyond relationships. This community exemplifies how modern digital groups seek social interactions and a meaningful role in the brand's storytelling. By contributing to the brand's evolving narrative, members feel significant. The Gucci community's unique combination of personal interactions and brand affinity in a web3 space adds to their sense of mattering. This highlights the psychological benefits of being valued in web3 communities, which can help buffer against anxiety and depressive symptoms (Dixon et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2012).

### **Wellbeing and Artistic Engagement**

The literature illustrates numerous psychological advantages of engaging with art. Artistic pursuits have been associated with cognitive resilience, emotional balance, and reduced stress, whether they involve invention, distribution, or merely passive

admiration (Gillam, 2018; Huotilainen et al., 2018). Therefore, co-creative processes and shared appreciation of art in the Gucci community elevate both individual and collective well-being and enhance self-esteem (Hogg & Mullin, 1999). This sense of well-being results in deeper emotional attachment to the brand (Grzekowiak & Sirgy, 2007; Ren, 2012), which in turn fosters brand loyalty (Safeer et al., 2023).

### **New Utopia in the context of web3 communities**

The Gucci community is an example of a modern community rooted in web3 and surprisingly, carries signs of utopianism. The community can be classified as a utopia because members within this community are driven by a desire for a better future, in line with Levitas' (1990) description of utopian aspirations, with the community's visual creativity reflecting elements of modern utopia (Bloch, 1986). Yet, it is important to mention that its members remain seemingly oblivious to the presence of the utopian element in the community. Utopia is a by-product of their interactions rather than a goal they pursue; members of the Gucci community rather seek belonging within different structures that resonate with their modern lifestyles (Macionis, 1978; Bauman, 2013). Consequently, digital communities might have become a preferred safe space, offering solace through shared values and aspirations with like-minded individuals. Utopian thinking influences societal and creative engagement (Badaan et al., 2020; Oettingen 2012; Fernando et al., 2018). When applying this perspective to the fashion industry, especially within communities like Gucci's, there is a remarkable shift in the balance of power. Nowadays, consumers do not want to only consume; they desire impact, and the emergence of utopian digital communities will further democratise their influence. These acts provide glimpses of a utopian vision, embodying members' aspirations for an enhanced future where a collaborative community essence is elevated and shapes the web3 transformation. The community thus acts as a manifestation of these desires, offering momentary escape (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987), crafting an aspirational narrative while aligning with a beloved brand, and potentially acting as a catalyst for progressive thought (Hermand, 1975). This resonates with Bloch's predictions that the concept of utopia would evolve into smaller, more focused micro-utopias as the world develops (Bloch, 1989).

### **Limitations, Implications and Future Research**

This study extends established theories of brand engagement and introduces new perspectives of web3-based community utopias utilizing Netnography as a way to gain insight into digital fashion communities (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). However, concerns exist regarding the reliability of data, as findings may not fully represent broader consumer demographics (Mkono, 2013; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Generalizing findings beyond specific online platforms or communities remains a limitation, akin to traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2002). Additionally, despite efforts to mitigate bias, the researchers' prior engagement with web3 may influence data analysis and

perspectives on the subject more broadly. Further research into web3 brand communities is therefore required.

Although Gucci's utopian community operates within a confined space, such communities can influence the broader fashion industry. Utopian communities may become influential during technological shifts like the metaverse or web3 evolution, serving as change agents that guide fashion brands and establish benchmarks for understanding the new reality of web3 (Boldero & Francis, 2002). Fashion brands like Gucci can leverage these micro-level utopian aspirations to drive macro-level change, paving the way for sustainable strategies that align with community expectations and reduce transition risks. A close relationship with the community helps brands adapt to the evolving digital landscape and meet the needs of digitally-native consumers. Ultimately, this utopia can help businesses validate current strategies or recognize the need for restructuring.

Future research should conduct in-depth interviews with web3 community members to gain deeper insights into their activities and motivations. Exploring other communities could also reveal whether findings are generalizable across industries. Further exploration of the CIBE concept using diverse methodologies will provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital web3 communities and their broader implications.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study presents the findings of an in-depth netnographic analysis of the digital Gucci brand community on the web3 platform Discord. The results indicate that this community represents a novel form of utopia, allowing members to engage with the brand as co-creators within an artistic and collaborative social framework, referred to as Community Integrated Brand Engagement (CIBE). As “utopias are [...] present futures” (Luhmann, 1976), this paradigm of brand engagement emphasizes the rising importance of digital communities as a distinct consumer segment. These study’s findings have critical implications for both fashion companies, which are encouraged to embrace collaborative strategies, and web3 developers, who are tasked with fostering dynamic, community-driven platforms. Quoting the Gucci Community: “We are dreamers and we come from the future”. As they look toward the future, they represent the next generation of consumers—an audience that must not be overlooked.

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