

EXPLORING META-EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY OF METAVERSE FASHION WEEK

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The aim of this development paper is to contribute to the nascent field of metaverse fashion, by exploring how metaverse environments influence fashion customer experiences.

Design/methods/approach – Applying Schmitt’s Strategic Experiential Modules framework, the study takes a qualitative multi-method case study approach, using diaries and focus groups.

Findings –Sight and sound cues dominated with opportunities to embed touch and smell cues to enhance the overall metaverse multisensory experience. Socially, the metaverse experience predominantly evoked emotions of loneliness and distance. The study shows significant scope to improve Metaverse CX in terms of both process and response.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the emergent field of metaverse fashion customer experience. It is one of few studies focusing on the fashion context and the only known study to explore metaverse CX through a case study approach. In doing so, it offers novel insights for scholars and industry alike to advance research and practices on enhancing metaverse CX strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The metaverse has attracted much attention and investment over the last few years, with the fashion sector considered an innovator in experimenting with this immersive space, offering rich use cases to explore virtual experience creation and consumer response (Park and Lim 2023; Yoo et al. 2023; Dwivedi et al. 2022b; Elmasry et al. 2022; Joy et al. 2022). Yet, despite accelerated scholarly and practitioner research, the term metaverse remains contested. This study draws on Hadi et al’s (2023:2) definition, which recognises the importance of experience, as, “a network of digitally mediated spaces that immerse users in shared, real-time experiences”. Specifically, Schmitt’s (1999) established Strategic Experiential Modules (SEM) customer experience framework is used to explore how the metaverse environment (i.e. features, atmospherics, interface etc.) influence customer experience (i.e. sense, feel, think, act, relate dimensions). Currently, metaverse conceptual research is burgeoning, but empirical studies are lacking (e.g. Barrera and Shah 2023; Hadi et al. 2023; Park and Lim 2023; Dwivedi et al. 2022a; Hollensen et al. 2022), especially related to the fashion sector (Mogaji et al., 2023) and customer experience (Hadi et al. 2023). The study aims to address this research gap by exploring metaverse fashion customer experiences through a case study approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

METAVVERSE RETAILING

The metaverse's current conception has evolved from Stephenson's notion of a dystopian virtual space 31 years ago (1992) to a more immersive and interconnected virtual space today, facilitated by new technologies (Barrera and Shah, 2023). Recent reports predict the metaverse opportunity to be valued at £4.7 trillion in global sales by 2030 and 64% of consumers are excited about the prospect of shopping in the metaverse (Elmasry et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2022), highlighting its attractiveness. Moreover, the fashion sector is seen as a forerunner in metaverse advancement, with many progressive players experimenting with it (e.g. Balenciaga, H&M, Nike etc.) (Park and Lim, 2023), seeking to enhance customer experience and engagement (Hadi et al., 2023).

The existing body of knowledge on the metaverse can be classified according to its definition (e.g. Barrera and Shah, Bourlakis et al., 2009), characteristics (e.g. Yoo et al., 2023), use cases (e.g. Cheng et al., 2022) assisted technologies (e.g. virtual reality, augmented reality) (Cheng et al., 2022) and benefits and challenges (e.g. Yoo et al., 2023). Whilst a universally accepted definition has yet to be reached, the one adopted for this study by Hadi et al (2023:2) as, "a network of digitally mediated spaces that immerse users in shared, real-time experiences" encompasses many of the agreed upon metaverse features: it is spatial, digitally mediated (by technologies), immersive (ability to stimulate the senses), social (shared space) and real-time (enabling a sense of user social presence) (Davis et al., 2009; Dwivedi et al., 2022a/b; Hadi et al., 2023; Yoo et al., 2023). The metaverse multisensory and social environment features are a point of focus of this study in influencing CX. The metaverse multisensory environment relates to the harnessing of the senses to generate sensory appeal, whilst social interaction is characterised as enhanced online collaboration, consumer immersion and digital personas (compared to e.g. social media). These two features and their influence on CX will be explored through the case study: Metaverse Fashion Week.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE (CX)

Customer experience is a well-developed research domain (e.g. Brakus et al., 2009; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Poorzaei et al., 2023; Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2009) and has become an increasing strategic priority for retailers (Euromonitor, 2023). As a construct CX is recognised to be both a process and a response (Nguyen et al., 2015). That is, customer experience encompasses both the experience incident itself and the cognitive, affective, sensorial and social responses to the stimuli (Chevtchouk et al. 2021:2). Schmitt (1999) posits that retailers can use the SEM framework to create different types of customer experiences to generate specific experiential outcomes, classified as SENSE (using the senses of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell to generate sensory appeal), FEEL (creating affective experiences to trigger positive emotions), THINK (creating cognitive experiences), ACT (creating physiological experiences by affecting behaviours) and RELATE (in relation to others). These SEMs are triggered through experience providers (ExPros) that include spatial environments and people. Applied to this study, the experience incident or ExPros relate to the metaverse's multisensory and social environment and consumer's multifaceted (SEM) response to it.

METHODOLOGY

Diverging from the dominant quantitative approach in online customer experience studies, a qualitative single case study is used to explore how the metaverse is experienced (Koronaki et al., 2023) using both diary and focus groups methods (n=20). The unit of enquiry is Metaverse Fashion Week (MVFW), an annual online global 4-day event, hosted on Decentraland, from 28-31 March 2023 (Yin, 2018). A case study is deemed highly suitable when asking how or why questions to elicit in-depth rich descriptions on contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). The overarching research question guiding the study is: How does the MVFW multisensory and social environment influence fashion customers' experience?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three key themes related to sensory and social experiences encountered in MVFW are presented followed by consumers' responses according to the five CX dimensions (Schmitt, 1999), below.

SENSORY EXPERIENCE

In relation to the sensory experience, sight and sound cues dominated, with participants citing the importance of colour, layout and aesthetics. Within MVFW, Coach, Tommy Hilfiger, Dear Vivienne and Adidas metaverse stores were positively perceived for their design, by combining sight, sound and gamification elements to create an immersive, imaginative, dynamic and entertaining spatial experience. The Institute of Digital Fashion played with scale, presenting larger than life avatars that were seen as 'unique and different' (P8) (see Figure 1). Conversely, some considered the metaverse visual renditions to be poor quality and unrealistic, limiting the ability to generate an immersive sensory experience.



Figure 1: Institute of Digital Fashion, fashion avatars

Multisensory cues were seen to be important to users. Whilst music was mainly viewed as contributing to a positive immersive, sensory experience, a few found it to be incongruous and general sound cues (as opposed to music) were nascent. Touch cues were impaired by the lack of intuitive interfaces within the virtual space, with clunkiness, glitches and lags leading to frustration for some. In addition, for some, the touch sensation was muted by avatars ability to move through other avatars without simulating any of the tactile feedback associated with physical touch experiences. Taste and smell cues were non-existent and thus a holistic multisensory experience was curtailed. Haptic technologies are deemed to be gaining traction, especially in online gaming, enabling users to smell and touch products that replicable physical retail experiences (Chrimes and Broadman, 2023), offering opportunities to leverage such technologies into fashion metaverses to heighten the sensory experience. Moreover, sensory immersion was marred by the MVFW interface, which did not require a VR headset and the use of a mere computer screen contributed to the disassociation some felt from the experience encountered.

SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The sociability cue evoked contrasting perspectives. The sense of community derived from interacting in metaverses was seen as important, reflecting existing studies (e.g. Hadi et al., 2023; Yoo et al., 2023), but this was contingent on mood, with participants either wishing to remain anonymous or socially active, and on familiarity - "who you know" (P13). Adidas was perceived to be the most socially attractive metaverse, conveying a vivid perception of the presence of others in the virtual space (Oh et al., 2023) (see Figure 2). In contrast with existing studies, many participants mentioned how empty MVFW spaces were, inducing feelings of loneliness and boredom, which in turn reduced time spent and level of avatar interaction. Most choose not to interact with other avatars in the virtual space.



Figure 2: Adidas metaverse sociability, MVFW

METAVVERSE CX RESPONSE

Affectively, different emotions were triggered, with more negative feelings described like “bored” “confused” and “lonely”, countering some online studies inferring that the greater perception of sociability the less lonely people feel (e.g. He et al., 2014; Depping et al., 2018), yet concurs with other researchers’ findings that metaverse interactions can lead to loneliness emotions (e.g. De Felice et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2023). Cognitively most participants were sceptical of fashion metaverses, perceiving them as emergent and lacking in utility. Behaviourally, only one participant actually purchased a virtual item during their MVFW interaction, some felt more brand affinity, whilst others felt it was time wasting. As discussed, socially, contrasting experiences were described, ranging from a few that were positively motivated to engage with others due to a fear of missing out, to the majority that expressed more negative reactions related to exclusion, isolation and inaccessibility, in relation to virtual fashion prices (deemed high), virtual identity issues, technological glitches and the lack of social presence.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a developmental paper, preliminary findings provide novel insights on this nascent scholarly field - fashion metaverse customer experiences, and in doing so, offers novel insights for scholars and industry alike to advance research and practices on enhancing metaverse CX strategies. An explanation of the implications, limitations and future directions are expounded below.

The metaverse is presented as a social and immersive space, yet the study shows it is still a speculative concept (Napoli and Tan, 2023), lacking in both sensory inputs (e.g. touch and smell and to a lesser extent sound) and in social experience specifically, with visitors to MVFW describing feelings of loneliness and distance. Schmitt (1999) asserts that firms should strive strategically to create holistic, integrated experiences that harness simultaneously SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE qualities to enhance CX responses, but the study reveals that fashion metaverses are not achieving or optimising this yet. As critiques of the realities of contemporary metaverse experiences become more prevalent, future research related to advancing the multisensory and social experiential aspects of metaverse retailing would prove fruitful. Moreover, as the boundaries between channels, physical places and virtual spaces continue to coalesce, a reconceptualization of online and offline as one continuous experience in cultivating enhanced, rich and realistic metaverse (phygital) experiences, that mobilize their respective advantages, would be a ripe area for additional research. This initial study is limited by size, scale, setting and time, yet points to much scope for evolving the exploration of metaverse fashion – including incorporating more case studies and novel methods of enquiry (e.g. netnography, experimental studies) over a longer period of time.

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