

AWAKEN IN DREAMS

Old and new inequalities in future fasion

by *Michele Varini**

Abstract

This study analyses the interaction between fashion and digital technologies, focusing on virtual environments such as video games. Traditionally, fashion has played a strong role in defining social classes, genders, body ideals and identities. With the advent of the digital, these dynamics have changed, amplified and extended beyond the physical world. Using netnography and visual ethnography, this research aims to examine how four extremely popular multiplayer video games (League of Legends, Apex Legends, Overwatch 2 and Valorant) represent bodies and genders, to explore whether traditional mainstream fashion models are reflected or, conversely, transformed. By examining official content produced by gaming platforms, the research seeks to trace how representations of body and gender are conveyed in a top-down manner, similar to traditional fashion communication. This investigation highlights the hybrid relationship between fashion, gaming and media, in which the boundaries between material and non-material, online and offline, constantly shift. The study also considers how the pandemic has transformed the ways in which consumers engage with digital fashion, making this area of exploration increasingly relevant.

Keywords

Digital Fashion, Digital Methods, Visual Methods, Body representation; Gaming

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of fashion has long been a subject of study within the social sciences and has been widely discussed. (Rocamora and Smelik, 2016). Fashion is a cultural industry capable of regulating the relationship between the material and immaterial content of its products and of interacting with its publics, which are also constantly changing, by soliciting their desires and proposing models of behaviour (Mora, 2009). By its very nature, fashion both influences and is influenced by society, which, in contemporary times, is characterized by an accelerated pace of change, increasing fragmentation, and unpredictability (Paltrinieri, 2013).

Fashion has always possessed a communicative dimension: as Crane (2004) asserts, “we dress for others, not for ourselves.” These “others” constitute increasingly interconnected audiences (boyd, 2010), as fashion, like many other phenomena, has become mediated, progressing hand in hand with technical and technological developments (Rocamora, 2013). Indeed, digitalization and fashion have been intrinsically linked since the very beginning, and today, the fashion industry is experiencing unprecedented transformations that impact not only communication but also the dynamics of perception, representation, and self-representation. These changes pertain not only to clothing but also to physicality and the representation of bodies (Sweetman, 2007). The interplay between the body and the fashion industry is a fundamental and inseparable relationship: garments envelop and shape bodies, just as bodies influence clothing, from sizing systems to tailoring and design. This interaction is cyclical, at times synergistic, and at times problematic. Not only do physical bodies play a role in this process (Zauner, 2023), but imagined bodies, beauty standards, and stereotypes are also integral to the production process, both in physical and mediated forms (Yan, Bissell, 2014). Given the longstanding role of fashion communication in shaping Western ideals of beauty (Cheang et al., 2022), it is imperative to consider the influence of certain key players in the industry (Castaldo Lundén, 2020), first and foremost fashion magazines. Historically, print publications - and subsequently, their digital counterparts - have played a pivotal role in constructing and disseminating these aesthetic paradigms (Pedroni and Mora, 2023). Images of bodies and their stereotypes have played a crucial role in the construction of imaginaries, generating a series of potential issues, especially in relation to female bodies.

One of the most significant entities in this domain is *Vogue Italia* (Piccolo, 2019), one of the most relevant titles in the last decades from a

graphic and communicative point of view. *Vogue Italia* has historically been one of the most influential fashion publications (Wissink, 2018), shaping models, ideas, and representations within the industry while exerting generational influence on women and young audiences worldwide.

The history of *Vogue* serves as a lens through which to examine social, cultural, and economic transformations over time (Kopnina, 2007). Simultaneously, *Vogue* exemplifies a top-down system of imagery production. *Vogue Italia*, in particular, occupies a unique position within the international fashion scenario, representing the “Made in Italy” approach to fashion while functioning as a key actor in Italy’s creative fashion cluster (Pandolfi, 2015). Artistic curation, especially under the editorship of Franca Sozzani, has been the hallmark of the magazine’s quality and worldwide reputation for decades (Noia et al., 2023).

The magazine’s visual orientation, bolstered by collaborations with internationally renowned photographers and artists, underscores the significance of visual communication in fashion’s dissemination (Kalbaska et al., 2018). The direction of communication in this media was one-way, top-down, with no possibility of direct interaction. The authority (in this case *Vogue*) was the broadcaster, who univocally produced input that was then to become standard with the receiving public. However, with the advent of participatory media and the interactive web, the communication landscape has shifted, enabling audiences to actively engage with and influence these dynamics (Kalbaska et al., 2019). The rise of social media, nowadays indispensable especially for the fashion industry, has further complicated this transformation, bringing to a new level a whole series of theories and theorisations that, before, were nothing more than speculations and ideas (Bruning et al., 2020; Nielsen and Ganter, 2022). Within this evolving ecosystem, fashion plays a pivotal role, particularly in the emergence and expansion of online celebrities and influencers - figures intrinsically linked to the fashion industry from its earliest digital engagements (Pedroni, 2023). The advent of new digital technologies and infrastructures has made possible what is often termed Web 3.0 (Choudhury, 2014) and the current media environment, where participatory platforms and social media are now part of the ordinary existence of billions of people. This phenomenon has been studied mainly by considering the dynamics of influence, from celebrity culture to the role of influencers (Muniesa and Giménez, 2020; Nannini, 2020), moving more recently to virtual influencers (Arsenyan and Mirowska, 2021; Mortara and Roberti, 2022). This development signals a fundamental

transformation: historically, the fashion industry has relied on physical bodies—bodies that are dressed, photographed, and represented. However, in the digital age, bodies are no longer necessarily tied to physicality; instead, they can become “dematerialized,” existing as data-driven, malleable entities unencumbered by the constraints of corporeal materiality (Han, 2022). While this phenomenon is not novel in fields such as digital media, visual arts, and illustration, its implications for the fashion industry are particularly profound, bearing similarities to the role of digital bodies in video games (Cover, 2016). In video games, digital bodies are crucial, they are an indispensable part of the dialectics and logic of many gaming platforms. The video game must necessarily rely on these digital physicalities (Richardson, 2021), which allow one to act and intervene within its reality. The same applies to the visual dimension, which is crucial for the vast majority of video games and their enjoyment. These common elements suggest a growing intersection between fashion and video games, as evidenced by increasing hybridization and cross-collaboration between the two sectors (Boughlala and Smelik, 2024). Video games and the reproduction of bodies in digital format is a phenomenon that, from an auroral phase of the video game industry, has necessarily been fundamental (Barlett and Harris, 2008). Consequently, the relevance of not only performative, but also cosmetic elements to make these bodies unique has always been an element that, within digital game universes, referred back to the phenomenon of fashion, in part laying the foundation for digital fashion itself (Boughlala and Mazzucotelli, 2024). Cosmetic and purely aesthetic elements have always been a widespread feature within various platforms, for example as rewards for player skill or dedication, even before they became purchasable, thanks to the advent of online gaming and micro-transactions (Tomić, 2017). The world of video games has therefore always been a space within which the fashion phenomenon has been able to experiment with forms of hybridisation, along with some of the potential of new digital contexts: many collaborations between brands and fashion industries, software houses and video game producers have flourished and multiplied. Marketing and communication scholars have explored these intersections, focusing on partnerships between major fashion brands and the gaming industry (Noris et al., 2021; Reay and Wanick, 2023). The world of video games, with its distinct aesthetic and semiotic systems, offers an “alternative” physicality—one that challenges traditional fashion paradigms. As fashion enters this domain, it introduces new questions regarding the negotiation of imagery, aesthetics, and representation within this interstitial space between the physical and the

de-physical, this new form of materiality.

In mainstream discourse, both fashion and video games have frequently been dismissed as “frivolous” pursuits. As Simmel (1895) has previously pointed out, the charge of frivolity was one of the traits that defined the fashion phenomenon up until a few decades ago, but it may also be applied to video games today. According to Simmel fashion was historically associated with frivolity - a perception intertwined with the marginalization of women, who were largely excluded from male-dominated spheres of economic production and power. Fashion was thus construed as a superficial pastime linked to gender and social identity formation. Similarly, video games were, until recently, largely associated with subcultures (e.g., “geek” or “nerd” communities) and with individuals seeking for a social identity in dynamic virtual communities. (Pedersen et al., 2018). Unlike fashion, however, gaming has traditionally exhibited a male-oriented aesthetic, with industry marketing often favoring hyper-masculine narratives (Smith and Moyer-Gusé, 2006). Nevertheless, the massive expansion of video games - accelerated further by the COVID-19 pandemic (Vargo et al., 2021) - has contributed to a shift in perception, broadening the market interest and diversifying gaming audiences, as well as their gender. From this phenomenon stems a further point of contact between the gaming and fashion worlds, as the audience of female gamers over the years has grown conspicuously, and with it also the availability of proposals and practices dedicated to them (Schott and Horrell, 2000; Witkowski, 2018; Yao et al., 2022). In this regard, too, we are witnessing a rapprochement with the fashion industry: which has always referred to a female audience, it is, however, situated in a context, that of Western society, where and male gaze and dominance are preponderant (Bourdieu, 2001; Lee, 2020). Given these evolving dynamics, this study seeks to explore select gaming platforms to determine whether the representation of bodies within these spaces, their instances and imaginaries (Hansen-Hansen, 2020), aligns with conventional fashion industry practices or whether digital affordances introduce novel, potentially democratizing paradigms that transcend the constraints of physical materiality (Bae, 2022; Varini, 2023).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research questions

With these premises, this relationship and these similarities between

fashion and video games, a number of questions may be raised. With regard to bodies, and in particularly their representations, which - as has been briefly described - represent a crucial element, common to both these fields in question, several issues can be addressed: are the dynamics attributed to fashion in the literature - such as the construction of imaginaries, aesthetic stereotypes, gender norms, and bodily representations - being reproduced in digital contexts like video games? And furthermore, how is the boundary between material and non-material, reality and imagination, being challenged within virtual play environments? Moreover, in compliance with this evolving link between the two universes of reference, fashion and gaming, do digital platforms and gaming environments introduce new modes of body and gender representation, or do they reinforce conventional ones, constructed by the traditional mainstream fashion system?

2.2 Research design and theoretical framework

In an effort to address these instances, a theoretical approach grounded in interdisciplinary principles has been adopted (Klein, 2007), aiming to reflect as closely as possible the diverse nature of the various objects of study. This approach seeks to integrate concepts and knowledge from academic fields traditionally concerned with fashion—particularly fashion studies (Lusty, 2021; Manlow et al., 2022) and gender studies, with specific reference to the body (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2016)—while also establishing a synergistic and coherent relationship with insights derived from media studies (Ott and Mack, 2020) and game studies (Raessens and Goldstein, 2011). The primary focus of this investigation, as briefly mentioned earlier, is the exploration of fashion's role in shaping imaginaries, bodies, and gender norms within hybrid digital environments. Data sampling was limited to four specific gaming platforms. Given the vastness of the video game landscape, the selection of game titles was carefully considered for both theoretical and methodological reasons, as will be elaborated upon.

2.3 Methods

The methodology adopted in this study employs a digital methodology (Addeo et al., 2024) combined with a grounded approach (Cutcliffe, 2000; Dey, 2004).

Given the visual nature of the data under analysis, it is necessary to implement a structured coding process. The development of the codebook also follows a grounded approach (Belgrave, Seide, 2019),

with the objective of minimizing arbitrariness and bias as much as possible (Verbeiren et al., 2014). The construction of the coding scheme involved multiple iterative cycles of analysis (Eugeni, 2004; Konecki, 2011), ensuring a systematic and reflexive engagement with the data (Gobo, 1993; Bovone, 2010). The resulting codebook is structured according to three levels.

- At the first level, where subjectivity and arbitrariness are minimized, fundamental elements such as the number of characters present in the image are considered. Subsequently, additional highly objective factors - always contextualized within the sampled dataset - were examined, including species, gender, and ethnic origin.
- Following this initial, more objective coding phase - designed to mitigate cultural and perceptual bias (Ostroot and Snyder, 1985) - the analysis proceeded to a second level. At this stage, character bodies were coded based on their alignment or deviation from the beauty standards traditionally endorsed by the fashion industry (Entwistle, 2023; Dwyer, 2004). This classification emerged inductively from the dataset, identifying three recurring categories: muscularity, thinness, and sexualization.
- The third and final level of analysis introduces a stronger interpretative dimension. At this stage, the images are not merely examined and categorized but are instead subjected to a process of 'reading' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020). Here, visual material is approached as:

'visual text, a fabric of signs whose conformations and correlations are functional to a project of interpretation aimed at the viewer'. The image becomes a metatext, creating a multidirectional relationship between the spectator, the object of the gaze and the reflective sum of this dynamic relationship. It becomes a 'device for building relationships between a spectator subject and certain symbolic entities' (Eugeni, 2004: 14-15').

At this point in the analysis it becomes necessary to undertake a process of interpretation and decoding, born in and with the previous levels of observation, in fact

The interpretative process is therefore cyclical and constructive; it is articulated and rhythmic based on progressive steps that correspond to the completion of a cycle and therefore to the elaboration of relatively autonomous cognitive constructs. [...] Each cycle of the interpretative process takes up and elaborates

¹ Translated by the author.

the constructs of the previous cycle or cycles; the higher cycles therefore imply the lower ones and the succession of cycles has a logical character.' (Eugeni, 2004: 19)².

All images embody, contain and concretise messages, characters, stories, narratives, a peculiar 'plot' (Penn, 2000; Aiello, 2006). The result of this third level of coding is the identification of recurring categories within the sample under examination, aimed at the development of codes referring to the recurring imagery and narratives (Castoriadis, 1987; Ivy, 1995; Strauss, 2006).

2.4 Sampling

The video game world, within which we have decided to develop this reflection, is not only continuously expanding (González-Piñero, 2017) but also highly diverse and dynamic (Goh et al., 2023). Consequently, the selection of visual material for analysis consists of official images from specific gaming platforms. These platforms were selected based on several criteria, including the possibility to create and customize a personal avatar with predefined characteristics and the presence of a multiplayer mode. The objective is to examine the representations of body and gender embedded within these virtual environments and how they are perceived, incorporated and discussed by consumers (Eckersley, Duff, 2020). In both physical and virtual social spaces (Ducheneaut et al., 2007), fashion and the body function also as communicative tools, making this an essential area of inquiry.

To ensure methodological rigor in the selection of gaming platforms, specific criteria were established to maximize the relevance and visibility of body representation and gender dynamics:

- The platform must support online multiplayer mode.
- The platform must be widely popular.
- The platform must feature anthropomorphic and sexually connoted characters.

The first criterion, multiplayer functionality, is fundamental as the social dimension of consumption and engagement plays a crucial role in both fashion and video games (Choufan, 2022). Without an interactive, 'social' component, the consumption and fruition of aesthetic or fashion-related elements and products would become entirely marginal or would

² Translated by the author.

in any case undergo different dynamics from those that characterise it in material content. Similarly, the representation of bodies gains significance primarily through social engagement and shared experiences within these platforms.

The second criterion, popularity, is another key factor linking fashion and gaming. The diffusion and widespread appeal of a platform are relevant aspects, both in terms of the extent of the phenomenon and the effects of imitation, emulation and ostentation, which have been the subject of attention since Veblen (2009) and Simmel (Craig, 2024). To operationalize this parameter, the study relied on statistical data from recognized sources, particularly the Active Player website, which is regarded as a reliable reference in gaming analytics³.

The third criterion, the presence of anthropomorphic characters - or, in cases involving zoomorphic characters, those exhibiting human-like traits (Koikem and Loughnan, 2021) - is necessary to explore the generative dynamics of fashion and body imagery. Thus, anthropomorphic (or human) figures are essential to the purpose of this research.

Furthermore, this study employs a combined data- and theory-driven approach to sampling, ensuring that the selection process is informed not only by empirical evidence but also by established theoretical frameworks. It is important to highlight that this sampling approach follows two distinct directions: one theory-driven and one data-driven.

With regard to the theory-driven dimension, it is essential to reiterate that fashion is understood as a social and cultural form of consumption (Barnard, 2014; 2020). Consequently, it must be examined within contexts of sociality, which - particularly in the post-COVID era - have increasingly hybridized with online and non-material phenomena (Kyrilitsias and Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2023). Regarding the decision to investigate representations of bodies in non-traditional, non-material contexts, a data-driven selection was necessary. Specifically, this required identifying platforms in which avatars with bodily characteristics suitable for the study's objectives were present (Bailenson and Beall, 2006).

The exclusion of the top three ranked games - Fortnite, Roblox, and Minecraft - was a necessary step due to their specific graphical styles and the limitations they impose on anthropomorphic and sexually connoted character representation. Roblox and Minecraft (Gupta and Kim, 2018) feature highly stylized, simplified avatars, which do not align with the

³ <https://activeplayer.io/top-15-most-popular-pc-games-of-2022/>

study's focus on detailed bodily representation. Although Fortnite does include anthropomorphized and gendered characters, their number is relatively limited, and the game's customization system prioritizes functional and aesthetic modifications over explicit bodily representation. A similar rationale applies to the exclusion of Counter-Strike 2, where character representation is not a central feature of the gaming experience.

By systematically applying these defined criteria, integrating both theoretical perspectives and empirical data sources, this study ensures that the sampling process remains methodologically rigorous and aligned with the research objectives. The selected gaming platforms, which offer significant opportunities to analyse the intersection of body representation, gender and fashion in digital environments, are as follows:

- *League of Legends*;
- *Valorant*;
- *Overwatch 2*;
- *Apex Legends*.

3. SAMPLING

Now that the sample in issue has been briefly clarified, it is necessary to explain the selection process for the photographs. As seen above, the goal of this section of the work is to investigate the dynamics of top-down creation by the media and communication product makers themselves. The decision was made to use only the official websites of the video games in issue as the source of the works being analyzed, in order to maintain scientific rigor. The resulting database has 2,142 entries in total, subdivided as follows:

Table 1. Sampling of the official images of the 4 game platforms under analysis, the total number of characters and their gender

	Number of Characters	Total images number	Female	Male	ND
League of Legends	166	1.783	63 (699)	102 (1.064)	2 (20)
Valorant	23	23	11 (11)	12 (12)	
Overwatch 2	39	182	19 (89)	20 (93)	
Apex Legends	25	154	13 (87)	12 (67)	
Total	253	2.142	106 (886)	145 (1.236)	2 (20)

Having outlined the methodological framework and sampling criteria, we now present the analysis of the sampled visual data, following the previously described steps, along with the various coding schemes developed from this material. As can be clearly seen from the information in Table 1, it is evident that *League of Legends* has the most content out of the four video games examined. This is undoubtedly also because there are a lot more characters accessible on the aforementioned gaming platform.

3.1 First level of the coding progress

The first level of coding developed, concerning gender, species (being faced with a database in which not all the characters are human) and ethnic origin, as specified above, presents a reduced level of arbitrariness, not requiring an elaborate interpretative dimension at all, or only to a minimal extent. The relationship between the sexes is fairly equal on all platforms, except for *League of Legends*, where we find a majority of male or male-dominated characters.

Proceeding with the coding, the ‘species’ dimension was examined. To make the categories created by this first level of coding more understandable, we have included some examples below. We have decided to designate as ‘Half-human’ any character that presents markedly anthropomorphic traits, even if not completely superimposable to human ones, with uncommon or preponderant elements of animal or technological hybridity. By way of example, we propose below a case among those mentioned above, taken from the *League of Legends* gaming platform⁴.

Also included in the ‘anthropomorphic’ category are those characters who, due to accessories, armour, covers, cannot be unambiguously identified and whose features are partially hidden, but who nonetheless present humanoid forms.

The ‘Beast’ category includes all those characters whose characteristics are animal-like, or in any case in which anthropomorphisation and elements that may lead back to the human figure are absent or in the minority. A similar discourse can be made for the category ‘anthropomorphic beast’, which differs from the previous one simply because of a more consistent presence of anthropomorphising elements.

⁴ https://ddragon.leagueoflegends.com/cdn/img/champion/splash/Kennen_6.jpg

Table 2. First level of coding of the 4 game platforms under analysis according to category: Species

First level of coding: Species					
	Human	Half human	Antropomorphic	Beast	Cyborg
League of Legends	1.047 (+12)*	147	153	51 (+12)*	93
Valorant	21	0	1	0	1
Overwatch 2	145	0	0	0	28
Apex Legends	138	0	0	0	16
Total	1.351 (+12)*	147	154	51 (+12)*	138

*Refer to images with two characters in them, one belonging to the category 'Human', one belonging to the category 'Beast'

Finally, as far as the ‘Cyborg’ category is concerned, this includes all those characters with robotic characteristics or, in any case, with a prevalence of technological and mechanical elements. An emblematic example can be Kay/o, a character from *Valorant*⁵.
As a third element of this introductory codification, the aspect of racialisation was addressed, as mentioned above.

⁵ <https://playvalorant.com/it-it/agents/kay-o/>

Table 3. First level of coding of the 4 game platforms under analysis according to category: Ethnic Origin

First level of coding: Ethnicity				
	Caucasic (F+M)	Afro (F+M)	Asian (F+M)	ND (F+M)
League of Legends	644 + 461 (1.105)	29 + 44 (73)	0 + 44 (44)	20 + 26 + 515 (561)
Valorant	8 + 6 (14)	2 + 3 (5)	1 + 0 (1)	0 + 0 + 3 (3)
Overwatch 2	52 + 36 (88)	21 + 26 (47)	6 + 4 (10)	0 + 10 + 27 (37)
Apex Legends	45 + 25 (70)	23 + 21 (44)	11 + 9 (20)	0 + 8 + 12 (20)
Total	1.277	169	75	621

A significant number of characters, both male and female, fall into the ‘Caucasian’ group, as can be seen in Table 3. Characters that fall into the ‘ND’ category do not have adequate characteristics to be attributed to an ethnic group or elements of racialisation; many of them are actually characters that belong to the ‘Cyborg’ or ‘Beast’ categories and do not display human or anthropomorphic traits. This category also includes images of characters entirely covered in armour, clothing or accessories that make it impossible to identify their features, either ethnically or, in some cases, in terms of gender connotations. As far as racial representations are concerned, stereotypes are present and preponderant (Abraham and Appiah, 2006), with a number of recurrences rather easy to identify. With regard to characters identifiable as ‘Afro’, for example, there are numerous references to hip hop culture (not only in bodies but also in clothing) and hairstyles inspired by ‘dreadlocks’. This is graphically evident in several cases within our sample, as well as a rather common phenomenon in the media landscape of yesterday and, especially, today (Ash et al., 2021).

We list below, by way of example, two different cases, one referring to a female character, and one to a male character, taken from *League of Legends* and *Overwatch 2* respectively. In the first case, the character in question, Senna, has what we might call street clothes and dreadlocks⁶. The second, Doomfist, in addition to extreme musculature, has features and clothing reminiscent of exoticism and the tribal world⁷.

⁶ https://ddragon.leagueoflegends.com/cdn/img/champion/splash/Senna_1.jpg

⁷ <https://overwatch.blizzard.com/it-it/heroes/doomfist/>

3.2 Second level of the coding progress

The second level of coding, as specified above, has as its object the dimension of conformity to the models and canons of body beauty traditionally promoted by the fashion system (Frith et al., 2005).

Table 4. Second level of coding of the 4 game platforms under analysis according to category: Conformity

Second level of coding: Conformity		
	Conformity (F+M)	Non – conforming (F+M)
League of Legends	607 + 553 (1.160)	91 + 511 (602) + 20*
Valorant	10 + 8 (18)	1 + 4 (5)
Overwatch 2	57 + 55 (112)	32 + 38 (70)
Apex Legends	61 + 50 (111)	26 + 17 (43)
Total	1.401	720 + 20*

*Refer to non-identifiable character images at the level of the ‘Genre’ category.

The relationship between bodies defined as ‘Conforming’ to mainstream fashion stylistic features and those ‘Non-conforming’ is unbalanced in favour of those aligned to certain pre-existing stylistic features and imagery (Dawney, 2011; Stojanowski and Duncan, 2015). Included within the category ‘Non-conforming’ are all those bodies that do not fully adhere to the gendered ideals of aesthetic beauty prevalent in Western culture, such as youthfulness, thinness, performativity, muscularity, sexualisation. Among them are several bodies with androgynous elements, some bodies that do not meet the criteria of thinness, some bodies that are not young. In *League of Legends* we find 8 images in total of older bodies, all referring to the same character, male. These are the only images of non-young bodies in the entire database. Another exception are bodies with features that could be described as androgynous (68 in the entire sample). By ‘Androgyny’ we mean all those bodies that do not or do not fully conform to the binary stereotypes that exist in Western aesthetic imaginaries regarding gender differences (Chattopadhyay, 2020; Cusack et al., 2022).

One possible example of this category is Seer, a character from *Apex Legends*⁸.

⁸ <https://www.ea.com/it-it/games/apex-legends/about/characters/seer>

A next level of analysis of the characters coded in the 'Conformity' category consists of three particularly recurring aspects, muscularity, thinness, sexualisation.

With regard to muscularised or muscular bodies (Hargreaves, Tiggemann, 2009), images have been selected that emphasise (with varying levels of intensity) the performative, athletic and, indeed, muscular dimension of bodies. As might be expected, this phenomenon is significantly more prevalent when the analysis focuses on bodies connoted as male. This gender-based disparity emerges as one of the most consistent patterns across the sample.

With regard to the aspect of thinness and skinny bodies (Volonté, 2021; Fixsen et al., 2023) - with varying degrees of intensity - a partial reversal of the muscularity trend is observed. In this case, the majority of such representations within the sample are associated with female characters. Again, there are cases in which thinness is taken to the extreme, in a particularly evident manner. With regard to the female characters present within this coding, we find a certain recurrence, both at the level of physical conformation and at the level of photographic compositions, very much in line with traditional advertising images (Dimitrieska, Efremova, 2020).

As in the two previous elements examined, the gender imbalance is evident. The phenomenon of sexualisation is particularly pronounced in the sample of female characters, again with varying degrees of intensity. The phenomenon of the sexualisation of female bodies in the media is well-known and present in the literature (Herndon, 2020), as is their stereotyping. Bodies that are canonically considered to be conforming, desirable, tend to be thin, lanky, Caucasian (Biefeld et al., 2021), and these aspects are also confirmed in the sample examined here. Although there are some differences, this aspect can be found in all platforms, with differences due to the nature of the aesthetics, the peculiarities of the game dynamics, and the history of each individual title. In several cases, these characteristics are taken to extremes; we propose here an example extracted from *League of Legends*, featuring the character of Janna⁹.

⁹ <https://www.leagueoflegends.com/it-it/champions/janna/>

Table 5. Second level of coding of the 4 game platforms under analysis according to the category.

Second level of coding: Conformity, sub-category “Muscularisation”, “Slimness”, “Sexualisation”							
	Muscularisation (F)	Muscularisation (M)	Slimness (F)	Slimness (M)	Sexualisation (F)	Sexualisation (M)	
League of Legends	16 + 1*	329 + 103*	649	449 + 3*	293 + 80*	29	
Valorant	2	4 + 1*	10	8	9 + 1*	0	
Overwatch	2	22 + 8*	70	48	15 + 1*	1	
Apex Legends	9	17	78	47	15	5	
Total	37 + 2*	372 + 112* (484)	807	552 + 3* (555)	332 + 82* (414)	35	

**Cases in which the Muscularisation, Thinness and Sexualisation aspects are taken to the extreme.*

3.3 Third level of the coding progress

The third level of coding, as previously specified, focuses on the imaginary dimension and therefore presents a semiotic interpretation of the images, with a greater presence of arbitrariness and possible bias (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997). The coding of the material using this approach produced some more clearly defined imaginary reference clusters. We will now list and describe the ones most present in the sample:

- Dark fantasy
- Fantasy
- Anime
- Arcade
- Cyberpunk

Certainly, references to ‘Dark Fantasy’ are evident, characterized by elements typical of fairy tales and fantasy literature, yet infused with dark, ominous, and horror-inspired themes (Brock, 2014; Fabrizi, 2018). Representations associated with this aesthetic are often melancholic, featuring a predominance of dark and twilight hues, set within shadowy or enigmatic environments, sometimes cosmic or surreal¹⁰.

Furthermore, ‘Fantasy’ elements are widespread, encompassing fairy-tale motifs yet devoid of the same level of darkness and gloom. These references are diverse in nature (Mendlesohn, 2002), often containing medievalism (Matthews, 2015), lighter and more varied color palettes, as well as more defined and less foreboding natural landscapes. Both of these aesthetic categories are prominently featured in *League of Legends*.¹¹

References to the ‘Anime’ world can also be easily found, with more or less explicit references to Asian culture (Sasaki, 2011; Cavallaro, 2013), settings rich in elements traditionally considered oriental (lanterns, hand fans, cherry blossoms), as well as the clothes worn, which often recall kimonos or traditional clothes from the East. Finally, the last two clusters identified are the ‘Arcade’ and the ‘Cyberpunk’ clusters, which present certain similarities. The first of these aesthetic categories can be traced back to a retro, pop-inspired visual style, drawing partly from the gaming culture of the 1980s and 1990s (Sharp, 2015) and partly from the Vaporwave movement and online nostalgia, incorporating utopian and

¹⁰ https://ddragon.leagueoflegends.com/cdn/img/champion/splash/Syndra_0.jpg

¹¹ https://ddragon.leagueoflegends.com/cdn/img/champion/splash/Taric_1.jpg

futuristic motifs (Koc, 2017; Cole, 2020). In contrast, the second aesthetic category is characterized by futuristic, technological, and robotic elements, often manifesting in various nuances and facets that frequently lean towards dystopian themes (Eriksen, 1991). Its references span the broader domain of science fiction (Russ, 1975), shaping both the visual and narrative dimensions of the settings. This latter category is particularly prevalent within the *Valorant*, *Overwatch 2* and *Apex Legends* gaming platforms¹².

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study was intended to explore the dynamics of the representation of bodies in the context of videogames. This specific context was defined during the sampling phase, when the focus laid particularly on multiplayer online videogames, in order to understand the dynamics of 'social' consumption, which are particularly characteristic of the world of fashion and its communication. This choice has allowed us to place the present work within a theoretical framework, that of the sociology (Kawamura, 2018) and the semiotics of images (Aiello, 2006), which we believe has several points of contact with the specific object of the present research. Based on this approach, the analysis does not reveal a revolutionary change in the production of images and imaginaries, nor even in the representations of bodies. On the other hand, many of the established canons of mainstream fashion communication and its supply chain, both past and present, seem to have been reaffirmed (Winterhalter, 2019), and in some cases strengthened. Notably, while fashion has been significantly increasing its attention to inclusion and diversity in recent years (Prasad et al., 2011; Doyle and Moore, 2023), reflecting the growing sensitivity of society and consumers towards these issues, the videogame context examined does not seem to manifest the same phenomenon. Most of the representations of bodies in this context remain linked to a dimension that we could define as performative (Meliakova et al., 2021). The images developed in the sample often appear to be anchored to aesthetics and stereotypes that the fashion industry is, to some extent, questioning or, where possible, trying to overcome (Entwistle, 2023). The female body, for example, continues to be represented in a manner consistent with the 'supermodel' image (Tovée et al., 1997): impeccable, accessible, available and passive. Similarly, the male body is often portrayed as the 'macho' (Mosher, 1991), strong, athletic and

¹² <https://www.ea.com/it/games/apex-legends/apex-legends/characters-hub/ballistic>

sculpted. Traits such as muscularity, thinness and stereotypical notions of Eurocentric aesthetic beauty (in particular hyper-sexualised representations of the female body) remain dominant (Bordo, 2023). This aspect represents a further link between the world of videogames and that of fashion, which until recently was predominantly a Eurocentric phenomenon, deeply rooted in Western society (Cheang, 2022). The photographic compositions within the sample predominantly feature a single subject, mirroring traditional fashion communication, most notably editorial styles (Smedley, 2013). These characteristics are represented in the medium of video games, with its rules and its peculiar elements, which aim to construct 'heroes' emphasising attributes such as strength, dexterity and extraordinary abilities, but which share with fashion publishing unidirectional, top-down modes of communication (Varini, 2024). With reference to images produced using top-down dynamics, it is essential to highlight the most important and controversial phenomena, once again concerning the female body. Women continue to be objectified in these representations, remaining subjects of the male gaze and the gaze of others (Ponterotto 2016; Oliver 2017). The intersection of digital technologies and fashion has given rise to a new hybrid reality in which digital bodies are supposed to reshape traditional representations and the very structure of the fashion system. Digital avatars, in particular, are now at the centre of the continuous evolution of fashion, presenting both new opportunities and challenges (Noris et al., 2023). These digital bodies offer unprecedented possibilities for creativity, inclusion and interactivity, but they also introduce new threats that need to be critically examined. One of the main advantages of digital bodies lies in their ability to transcend the physical limits not only of traditional fashion, but of the laws that constrain matter (Bench, Elswit, 2022). Unlike physical models, digital avatars can be modified, personalised and manipulated in potentially infinite ways. This freedom would seem to open the door to experimentation and artistic expression that was previously impossible. Designers can create garments and accessories that exist only in virtual spaces, enabling new forms of fashion presentation and allowing the exploration of unconventional materials and shapes (Zhang et al., 2022). Digital bodies could also facilitate the creation of fashion that is not bound by the limits of physical production, allowing the creation of garments that adapt to different body types and identities, reflecting a broader and more inclusive vision of beauty, apparently increasingly embraced by the industry supply chain (Prasad et al., 2011) and changing the supply chain and the professions involved in it (Barnard, 2020). Furthermore, digital bodies could

contribute to a democratisation of fashion. Through platforms such as virtual worlds, video games and social media, users are no longer passive consumers of fashion, but increasingly active participants, able to design, customise and showcase their own digital identities. These possibilities encourage greater self-expression, allowing people to experiment with a wide range of aesthetic choices, either by adopting avatars that reflect idealised versions of themselves, or by exploring new and imaginative avatars that break free from the norms and expectations of society (Bailenson, Beall, 2006). But while digital fashion would seem to offer interesting creative possibilities, the sample examined does not seem to support these theories. Moreover, the proliferation of digital bodies in the case examined here seems to exacerbate existing problems regarding imaginaries and body identities. While digital avatars can, by their very nature, offer freedom and flexibility, they can also create new forms of visual hyperreality that impose unrealistic standards of beauty and physical perfection (Kazansky and Milan, 2021). The ease with which avatars can be modified to resemble idealised versions of the body could further reinforce performative, unachievable and unrealisable ideals, particularly among the younger generations (Tovée et al., 1997). Furthermore, the digital world is predominantly characterised by Western beauty standards and the prevalence of typically thin, tall and young avatars in the analysed sample may contribute to the marginalisation of other body types, ethnicities and cultural representations. The design and representation of digital bodies, shaped by technology companies, platforms and dominant cultural norms, risks reinforcing dynamics of stereotyping and exclusion instead of countering them. This aspect also emerges from the analysis conducted here; in fact, there is a rather evident overrepresentation of certain groups to the detriment of others, often from minorities or non-Western contexts, which in addition to being underrepresented are also presented through neo-colonial or exoticism aesthetics and imagery (Kyrlitsias and Michael-Grigoriou, 2022). These dynamics, which reflect status and exclusion dynamics present in society and culture, seem to transfer and translate into new forms in the digital context (Hartl and Hess, 2017) and its aesthetics, as is the case with the dynamics of capitalism, which has adapted to this new terrain, developing an increasing integration with virtual spaces. Digital capitalism (Andrejevic, 2014; Zuboff, 2019) focuses on how data and attention have become key commodities in the digital age, shaping consumer behaviour, identity formation and economic systems. This perspective can be applied to the world of digital fashion and avatars, making virtual representations of bodies not only a simple form of artistic expression, but products

created, commercialised and consumed in a capitalist context, once again in a performative logic, synergic with dynamics of consumption and profit (Smelik, Rocamora, 2015). Digital bodies become a tool for the commodification of identity (Wee, Brooks, 2010). Within digital platforms, avatars are continuously curated and customised, often acting as an extension of the user's self-presentation. As these digital bodies are increasingly shaped by consumer demand, brands and platforms have the opportunity to influence the way individuals represent themselves, thus transforming self-expression into a marketable commodity (Fuchs, 2017; Chandler and Fuchs, 2019). Drawing on the concept of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1981), digital bodies can be seen as a form of simulacrum, virtual representations of bodies that do not merely imitate reality, but overlap with it. In this process, the distinction between virtual and physical bodies becomes increasingly fluid, which would seem, at least in part, to be driven by the capitalist logic of continuous consumption. Unlike fashion and physical bodies, where materiality limits consumption, the digital counterpart is a continuous and constantly evolving process that invites users and consumers to constantly update themselves. In the context of digital capitalism, this encourages a new kind of aesthetic consumerism, which is less about tangible products and more about cultural productions, virtual experiences and representations. Consumers invest their time and resources in work aimed at developing virtual statuses and identities, which are increasingly significant within digital and social spaces. The value, both economic and imaginative, of digital bodies extends beyond the avatars themselves, as these digital representations contribute to the broader virtual ecosystems and economies of gaming platforms, social media and virtual reality spaces, where fashion items often have significant social and economic value (Kozinets, 2015), and even extend to catwalks, fashion shows, physical retail outlets. By connecting theories of digital capitalism to the topic of digital bodies, we can better understand the economic, social and political implications of digital avatars and virtual fashion. This framework helps to situate digital bodies not only as aesthetic objects, but also as part of broader systems of consumption, data extraction and labour within the digital economy. The analysis in question lends itself to potential future developments, which could be profitable, in particular if aimed at exploring the dynamics of cultural hybridisation and the fusion of practices in different social and geographical contexts, crucial for understanding some of the mechanisms at play in this phenomenon also through a reflective observation coming from a non-Western cultural context. Visual analysis by its very nature presents biases (Wall et al.,

2018), including socio-cultural ones. In particular, this reflection applies when dealing with a level of interpretive analysis (Bresciani, Eppler, 2015). Another promising avenue for future research could stem from the users of these platforms, in particular from the ways in which gender, the political instances related to it, rights and ideologies manifest themselves within these dematerialised spaces, increasingly the places of choice for identity, political and consumerist expression (Kucuk, 2016).

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