(Meta)morphosis
The giant "bug" in the fashion system

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Abstract

Molti marchi di moda hanno sperimentato varie incursioni nel mondo dei videogiochi. Un fenomeno interessante, proprio di diverse piattaforme, data la possibilità di personalizzare gli avatar, è la produzione, da parte degli utenti, di outfit personalizzati. Esistono profili in cui questi abiti digitali vengono ri-condivisi, ri-mediati, elaborati, soprattutto su Instagram. Un altro segnale di questa "fertilizzazione incrociata" si trova nelle sfilate di moda ospitate negli ambienti digitali. Utenti e brand sviluppano competenze e pratiche rielaborando gli strumenti delle piattaforme di gioco, ma ancor più i marchi stessi rimediano le proprie produzioni, in un circolo di creazione di immagini che diventa una coproduzione. I paradigmi di consumo/produzione alla base degli oggetti di moda sembrano uscire dalle traiettorie tradizionalmente seguite e studiate. Quali sono i driver del consumo di moda in questo nuovo contesto? Le risposte tradizionalmente fornite dalla sociologia della moda rimangono strumenti validi per interpretare il fenomeno? Per cercare di rispondere a queste domande, si è deciso di adottare un approccio metodologico misto: una netnografia e un'etnografia visuale di queste produzioni mediali potrebbero mirare a ricostruire un immaginario visivo di questo fenomeno, iniziando a fornire alcuni elementi di riflessione, rispetto a contesti mediali sotto molti aspetti affini a un "metaverso".

Many fashion brands have experimented with forays into the world of videogames. An interesting phenomenon of several platforms, given the possibility of personalizing avatars, is the production, by users, of personalized outfits. There are profiles where these digital dresses are re-shared, re-mediated, processed, especially on Instagram. Another signal of this "cross-fertilization" can be found in the fashion shows hosted in digital enviroments. Both users and brands develop skills and practices by reworking the tools of the game platform, but even more, brands themselves remediate their own productions, in a circle of imagery creation that becomes a coproduction. The paradigms of consumption/production behind the fashion objects seem to emerge from the trajectories traditionally followed and studied. What are the drivers of fashion consumption in this new context? Are the traditional answers provided by the sociology of fashion valid tools for interpreting the phenomenon? To try to answer these questions, it was decided to adopt a mixed methodological approach: a netnography and a visual ethnography of these media productions could aim to reconstruct a visual imaginary of this phenomenon, starting to provide some elements for reflection, with regard to media contexts similar to that of a "metaverse".

Parole chiave/Key Words

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of fashion is a classic object of study in the social sciences, which has been dealt with extensively (Rocamora, Smelik 2016), since the very beginnings of the discipline itself. Fashion is a cultural industry, capable of regulating the relationship between the material and immaterial contents of its products and of speaking to its publics, which in turn are changing, soliciting their desires, and proposing models of behavior (Mora 2009). Fashion, by its very nature, influences and is influenced by society; a society in constant acceleration that is progressively more and more fragmented and unpredictable.

One of the consequences of this acceleration is the increasing demand for products; to meet the pace at which consumer tastes and preferences change, fashion has distorted its traditional rhythms (Crane 2007), modified its communication channels, and explored new forms of production and sales. Fast fashion is one of the most striking examples of this acceleration: low-cost fashion has been able to spread to previously excluded social strata and market segments, "democratizing" itself (Lipovetsky 1989), but as is also widely known from common sense discourse, there is no shortage of side effects. The fashion industry is one of the most polluting in the world (Khurana, Ricchetti 2016), and the "fast" model has played a crucial role in exacerbating the problem. Many voices have been raised in favors of more sustainable fashion, an increasingly common adjective, but also an increasingly opaque one that can be interpreted in many different ways. But sustainability in fashion is difficult to achieve due to the complexity of the textile supply chain, both in terms of the production of tangible goods and intangible content (Mora et al. 2014).

Among the intangible contents that require more sustainable development models is certainly also the sector's communication, which has profoundly changed in the current media environment. Fashion has always had a communicative component, "we dress for others, not for ourselves" (Crane 2007); these "others" are increasingly interconnected publics (boyd 2010), because fashion, like many other phenomena, has also become mediatized (Rocamora 2013; Rocamora 2017). Social networks have been, and increasingly continue to be, a crucial part of this process: users can produce, rework and disseminate content, becoming in turn producers, no longer just consumers, triggering for the first time bottom-up communicative dynamics, engaging in discourse with mainstream authorities in the field, questioning the unidirectionality of communicative dynamics (Ritzer 2010; Strähle, Grünewald 2017). In addition, the looming

realization of a possible metaverse, increasingly concrete, raises further questions, possibilities and, clearly, challenges and threats to the industry, producers, and consumers.

New paradigms of consumption and production made possible by digital technologies have been affecting the fashion industry for several years, with a further acceleration following and in response to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The pandemic situation has brought major changes; fashion is going through a new phase (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2021; McMaster et al. 2020), not only in communication, but also in the production of goods and imagery (Hansen-Hansen, 2020), using new digital technologies to create and disseminate products. This phenomenon, stimulated by the presence of audiences "literate" in digital codes and languages, is increasingly relevant (Noris et al. 2021), although a clear map has not yet been drawn.

Digitization and fashion are phenomena that have always been closely linked; today, the fashion universe is involved in increasingly sudden changes that affect, as already mentioned, not only communication, but also the dynamics of perception, representation and self-representation, not only of clothing objects, but also of the body. If this phenomenon has been studied above all by considering the dynamics of influence, from celebrity culture to the role of influencers (Nannini 2020; Muniesa, Giménez 2020; Pedroni 2021), passing more recently to virtual influencers (Arsenyan, Mirowska 2021; Mortara, Roberti 2022), today talking about fashion and digital also implies considering increasingly widespread production and consumption practices (Teunissen, Bertola 2018) and, therefore, new modes of representation and self-representation (Mora, Pedroni 2017).

However, the topic of digital fashion does not only encompass cases where the fashion supply chain has exploited digital to empower itself, to become more efficient, to improve (e-commerce, virtual fitting rooms (Yang Shuai, Xing 2019) advertising, etc.): increasingly, digital fashion encompasses phenomena of production, use and consumption of fashion garments in digital contexts, where the materiality of the fashion product has been joined, or entirely replaced, by the "non-cosality'" (Han 2022) of the digital.

Among the many directions taken by this evolution, one in particular stands out as particularly pioneering and frontier: video games. The video game world has become a field in which the fashion phenomenon has been able to experiment with some of the potential of new digital contexts (Shivers 2020): many collaborations between fashion brands and video game industries have flourished and multiplied. The world of video games has its own rules,

its own imagery of reference, its own languages, but one of the peculiarities of this world is the "other" physicality it allows. The entry of fashion into this field, with its rules, imagery and aesthetics, raises many questions and considerations, in this "interstitial" space and time, halfway between two increasingly less separable worlds.

The video game universe has a very rich literature, which is part of a very long history of field studies (Gee 2006; Beil et al. 2018). Imaginaries, rules, genre dynamics, specific languages are present in this subculture (Malisi, Suharsono, Setiawan 2017); in recent times, the phenomenon of esports (multiplayer video games, played competitively and professionally) has exploded, also thanks to social networks such as Twitch and live streaming (Sjoblom, Hamari 2017; Schwartz 2017).

Fashion, in its now rather long history, has long had to deal with the problem of being labeled a "frivolous" phenomenon, a field (and, it must be said, an area of research) long left out of the rank of serious matters. In this respect, a similar fate has befallen video games, which to this day, perhaps more than fashion, are still regarded, in the common-sense consciousness and beyond, as a divertissement, a no-brainer pastime. If we go back to the pioneering and, in many respects revolutionary, monographic work that Simmel did on fashion [1895] (Simmel 2015), "frivolity" is one of the characteristics that have distinguished it from its origins. Simmel, linked the aspect of frivolity to the female condition, made of isolation from the public scene, relegated to a society within society, second-class. In this sense, fashion turned out to be a form of pleasurable leisure, albeit linked to the search for a social identity. Likewise, video game activity was practiced by individuals represented, or self-represented, as a subculture, unique in its languages, images and rules, in search of a social identity within both evolving virtual societies (Gee 2006), and a society tout court. The massive spread of video games during the pandemic, however, contributed over time to changing the common opinion about gaming, broadening the interest from the market and the audience of gamers. In public discourse, until very recent years, and despite the spread of highly lucrative gaming-related professions and markets, the industry has never shaken off various prejudices: video games are themselves considered a "frivolous" thing, childish.

Common ground between fashion and the digital environment has been partly addressed in the literature related to marketing and communication (Noris et al. 2021), with a focus on collaborations between major fashion brands and video game entertainment giants. The phenomenon of digital fashion shows carried out online or within "other" media contexts,

has also been the subject of in-depth studies (Rocamora 2017). Today, the existence of an ante litteram "digital fashion", of digital clothes and accessories, usable and purchasable directly on the platform, designed to be worn by avatars in specific media contexts, is an increasingly concrete reality that presents itself as challenging in many respects.

In recent years, various fashion brands have experimented with forays into the world of gaming, a subculture peculiar for imagery, rules, genre dynamics, languages (Woo 2015). The cases in which this intermingling has taken place are numerous, from the more dated, such as the SIMS (Johnson 2016), one of the longest-running video game titles in this respect, within which there are numerous collaborations with fashion brands of various kinds, from the fast fashion of H&M, to the cosmetics of MAC, to the more glossy brands, including Diesel, Moschino and Gucci. Other instances of well-known video games that have collaborated with likewise high-profile fashion brands are increasingly numerous, especially in recent years: League of Legends, spearheaded by Riot Games, and its collaboration with Louis Vuitton, both digital and, at a later stage, physical, dating back to 2019 (Järvinen 2023); Roblox with Gucci, which has even had a dedicated space within the video game's media infrastructure now since 2021; Fortnite and Balenciaga, which again in 2021 has created a digital collection for the video game characters, until 2023, which has seen numerous collaborations of this nature, including one between Razer, the famous gaming and hardware brand with Dolce & Gabbana. In short, the video game industry and fashion seem to be increasingly intertwined, but among all these experiences, one in particular, dating back to the past, attracts particular attention, both for the historical moment in which it exploded (the pandemic period) and for some of its peculiar characteristics: Animal Crossing.

Animal Crossing, especially in the "New Horizons" edition (2020), is a gaming platform developed by Nintendo for Switch, a "hybrid" game console designed to be enjoyed both on the go and in static mode, connected to a screen. The game is a life simulator (in some respects similar to the experience experienced by the social network Second Life) (Amati, McNeil 2012) where users move and act in a media context with customized avatars. Among the many dynamics present in the video game, two in particular deserve attention:

first, a relevant phenomenon, given the possibility of customizing avatars, is the production by users, but also by digital artists, of customized outfits, often taking inspiration from or emulating iconic collections of major designers. There are profiles where these digital outfits

are re-shared, re-mediated, processed, giving rise to dedicated profiles, especially on Instagram. The platform in question is notoriously the terrain of choice for influencers and all the practices they engage in; it is a place where consumers are transformed, become producers, "prosumers" (Ahluwalia, Miller 2014), breaking the traditionally top-down circle of brand communication (Pedroni 2021).

Second, another sign of cross-fertilization between fashion and digital can be traced in the fashion shows hosted in the medial environment: *Animal Crossing* has hosted fashion shows by various fashion houses (Valentino, Gcds, and Marc Jacobs to name a few), which have created, ad hoc, digital clothes and accessories, usable and purchasable directly on the platform, designed to be worn by avatars in the relevant medial context. These clothes, these skins (Reay, Wanick 2023), commissioned from artists and digital professionals, can be either ex novo creations or reproductions of pre-existing collections.

The paradigms of consumption, production and the very creativity behind fashion objects seem to break out of traditionally followed and studied trajectories, following new and unpredictable directions and exploiting tools hitherto alien to the fashion supply chain and its narratives. One of the objectives of the present study is to explore this new reality: what are the drivers to fashion consumption in this new context? Are the traditional answers provided by the sociology of fashion valid tools for reading the phenomenon? How are products perceived, their artistic value? What role do skills and creativity play in the reproduction/creation of fashion objects with these digital tools? What are the innovations and threats to the creative and production chain?

The fashion supply chain, material and artistic, is engaged in a strong change; the possibilities are many (sustainability, customization, etc.), and many are the threats (artistic value of the fashion product, professionalization of creatives, etc.). The present work could help to reconstruct the creativity and the visual imagery of this fashion co-production and consumption in a media context, a hypothetical "metaverse".

The very concept of the metaverse, which has only recently entered the language of common sense, is something that fashion has dealt with in the past only in fantasy and science fiction imagination (Alcantara, Michalack 2023). Fashion, as already mentioned, since its origins has been inextricably linked with the rise of consumer society, and has followed its changes, sometimes permitting us to understand them, sometimes anticipating some of their

dynamics. The test faced by the analytical tools developed by this thriving stream of studies is even more challenging and interesting by now finding themselves engaged in this post-society, where the very materiality of objects, one of the cornerstones of fashion as such, is a post-materiality, completely re-discussed and re-mediated. The literature offered by fashion sociology and fashion studies for years has focused on this intertwining, between digital and fashion, but only recently, and to a rather small extent, has it begun to explore digital fashion as such. For a long time, studies have focused on possible collaborations and synergies between these two worlds, but not on their hybridization, their intermingling, and the present work, among its various intents, tries to get as close as possible to this new dimension. This theater is a challenge for many fields of study, both theoretical and conceptual, but for the sociology of fashion it could be a revolutionary possibility, capable of laying the groundwork for new methodological ideas.

This research aims to explore this sphere, which moves between on and offline and makes even these distinctions obsolete and of little significance on a hermeneutic level, seeking an approach that is as holistic as possible.

2. Animal Crossing: New Horizons. A brief description

Animal Crossing is a popular life simulation video game series created by Nintendo. The series debuted in 2001 with the release of *Animal Crossing* for Nintendo 64 in Japan. Since then, several games in the series have been released on various Nintendo consoles, including Game-Cube, Nintendo DS, Wii, Nintendo 3DS, Wii U and Nintendo Switch. The game that is the subject of this article, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was one of the most successful titles and one of the most played video games in the saga (Benti, Stadtmann 2022). The gameplay of *Animal Crossing* revolves around the player character, who moves to a new city inhabited by anthropomorphic animals. The game takes place in real time, following the same clock and calendar as the real world. This real-time aspect is an important feature of the series, as it influences the events, seasons and activities of the game. Among the key elements of the *Animal Crossing* series are certain "collecting" activities, such as fishing and collecting fossils, but above all, especially in more recent editions, the social dimension of the game, which emerged prominently during the pandemic period. A further phenomenon related to the pandemic period was also the change in the typical users of the game, noting a marked increase in the average age of

players, who began to use the platform as a form of escapism, as a kind of synthetic society in response to isolation (Comerford 2021; Pearce et al. 2022). Within this life simulator, the relational dimension has become crucial, as has that of consumption, including aesthetic or fashion, along with peculiar dynamics of class distinction (Rao, Xie 2023). The reason that brought attention to the platform, apart from the aforementioned possibility of bottom-up production of fashion objects and accessories, was also the 'social' nature of the consumption of these goods, the simulated world of *Animal Crossing* being characterised not only by interaction with machine-controlled characters, but also with other real users (Lazzeretti, Gatti 2023).

3. Methodology

In order to address a field such as this, which moves between online and offline, making even these distinctions obsolete and insignificant on the hermeneutic level, we have chosen to use two techniques of inquiry: visual ethnography and digital ethnography (or netnography) (Kozinets 2015; Morais et al. 2020). The choice of these approaches, in addition to coping with certain intrinsic characteristics of the object of study, is oriented by the desire to be as faithful as possible to the very nature of what we want to investigate: this new form of consumption and production transcends the sensoriality to which we are accustomed, concentrating and coagulating preponderantly on the visual component, taken to the extreme (Pink 2007, 2008; Rose 2016).

Approaching a theater as boundless as digital and social media is a daunting task for the social sciences; extra caution and attention is required, which is not always sufficient. To find our way through this magnum sea of data and images, we chose to start with an Instagram profile, "Animalcrossingfashionarchive", a repository of content produced by digital artist Kara Chung, a digital artist specialized in the creation of digital clothes that boasts collaborations with major fashion houses and major players in the fashion industry (just to name one, Vogue). Starting with the followers of this profile, they proceeded to sample users who use Instagram for the same purpose (re-sharing outfits produced on *Animal Crossing*), until semantic saturation was reached, that is, until sampling followers of followers stopped obtaining new samples.

Once the dataset was constructed, we proceeded with a graphic content analysis, a visual ethnography, with a twofold purpose:

- "defining" in meaningful clusters the images, with a focus on both those inspired by or copied from real existing objects and those that are genuinely new, constructed from the creativity and imagination of users;

- obtain information inherent to stylistic and aesthetic choices and find recurrences/dissonances from mainstream fashion imagery.

The approach is intended to be a mixed one, with the intention of being as faithful as possible to the peculiarities of the field of study, video games and fashion, both in their current form devoted strongly to visual and, of course, digital dimensions. The dichotomy in question, visual and digital, is not limited only to this dimension; in fact, as mentioned above, the object of research straddles two different materialities (Han 2022), between two worlds that are increasingly intertwined in paths that are difficult to decipher.

4. Data observation

From the visual data collection carried out, the phenomenon that emerges most clearly is that users' productions, these digital outfits, respond predominantly to an imitative dynamic. Despite the fact that the platform enables creative practices that are totally free from the limits inherent in practical skills or mere materiality, users prefer, and prefer in the majority, emulative productions of real fashion products.

It would seem, therefore, that we are witnessing a paradigm shift: fashion, in the materiality to which we have always been accustomed, is linked to ostentatious dimensions, class differentiation, social status, as well as issues of self-representation, identification, self-expression. In this specific context, economic status can no longer have the same value, as these digital objects have no quantifiable economic cost. Apparently, a shift to another paradigm would seem to be taking place within this community of avid fans, where the preponderant status in fashion consumption is

Fig. 01. Photogram from the Instagram profile, Animal Crossing digital outfit #07 (2023)

of a cultural nature, intertwined with a baggage of abilities and skills in the game, an interweaving of competences from both universes of meanings in question.
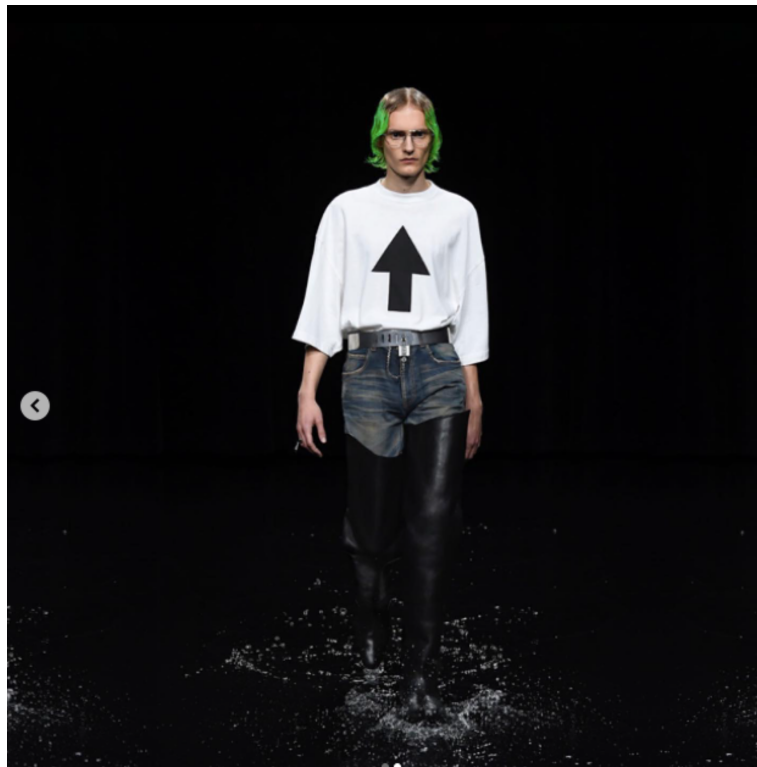

Fig. 02. Photograms from the Instagram profile #07, real life version (2023)

The images in this paper show some examples from the sampled images collected that are particularly effective in describing the phenomenon described: Fig. 01 and Fig. 02 (like all the alters) come from the profile of follower Kara Chung, used as a gateway in the sampling (the data has been anonymised for reasons of research ethics), and represent just a few of the many images that respond to this same logic. This phenomenon, with various nuances and typicality, recurs in many cases, as in the following example (Figg. 3-4).

Fig. 03. Photogram from the Instagram profile #087, Animal Crossing digital outfit (2023)
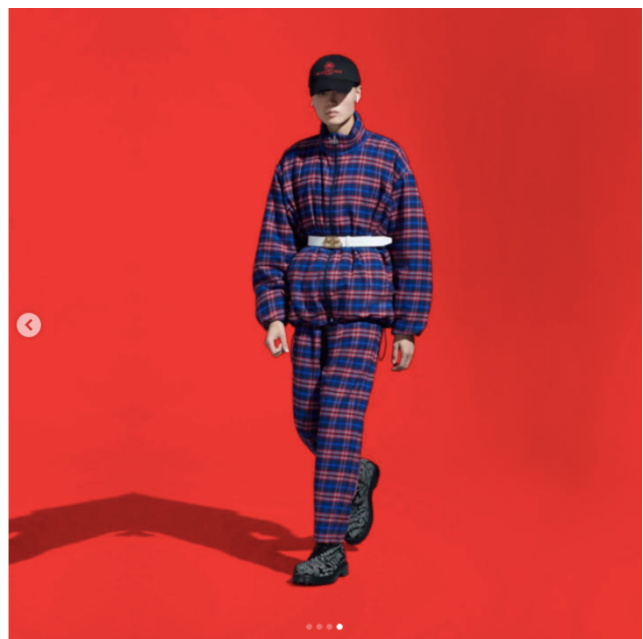

Fig. 04. Photogram from the Instagram profile #087, real life version (2023)

As is rather obvious, it is self-evident that the users in question tried to emulate products of a famous brand (in the cases in question, shown in Fig. 01, Fig.02, Fig. 03 and Fig. 04, Balenciaga), in the first of the two cases trying to emulate, according to the peculiar aesthetics of *Animal Crossing*, even the physical characteristics of the model who wore the original version of the garment.

Drawing insights from this research, it is worth noting that the results, while significant, cannot be considered fully representative due to the constantly evolving and unrestricted nature of the data on the platform under scrutiny (Figg. 5-6).

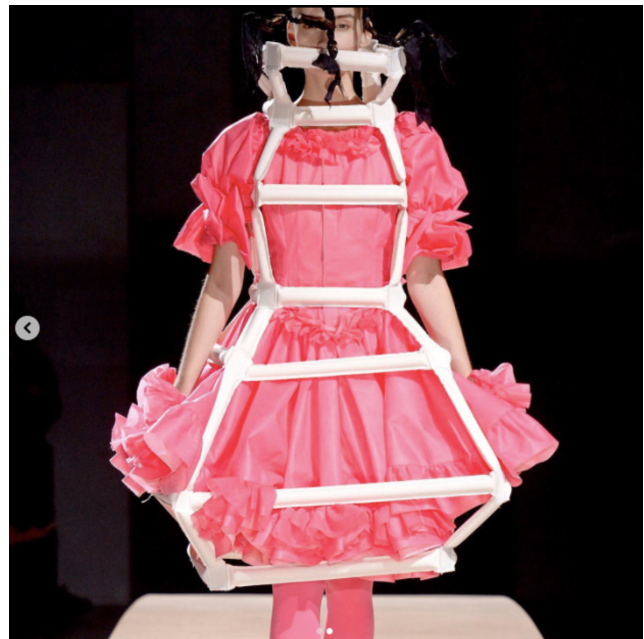**Fig. 05. Photogram from the Instagram profile #012, Animal Crossing digital outfit (2023)**

Fig. 06. Photogram from the Instagram profile #012, real life version (2023)

In spite of *Animal Crossing*'s characteristic aesthetic codes, which do not allow for the sexualisation of bodies (sometimes they are not even fully anthropomorphic), the physical attributes of models and gender are often replicated within these fan-based productions.

In this particular context, it would seem, in conclusion, that the dimension of fashion consumption, while under-going transformations in its economic and physical aspects, remains an activity accessible to a restricted elite with specific cognitive and cultural backgrounds, putting economic capital in the background, at least in a direct way.

Therefore, it appears that the fashion item in question is changing and increasingly taking on a cultural significance for a subset of highly socialized users who ingeniously utilize the gaming platform's potential to give life to clothing and carve out spaces that are only accessible to

those who are able to comprehend entirely their cultural significance. By re-mediating these contents on other social sharing platforms that also encourage this kind of consumption (due to their social dimension), they effectively build a bridge between the virtual and physical worlds and bring traditional drivers of fashion consumption, primarily of an elitist nature, into the digital context. In the end, the democratization potential seen in digital fashion appears to be mostly dormant, as though it has been supplanted by more powerful forces that are flexible enough to adapt to new platforms. Although these tools provide users with access to high-end fashion products that they would not normally have, they also bring with them a shift in the mechanisms of elitism, exclusion, and in-group out-group dynamics from traditional physical, economic, and material boundaries to ones that are primarily based in cultural differences.

Conclusions

From the results observed from this research, which, it should be specified, cannot be said to be representative given the changing and boundless nature of the data on the platform in question, one practice emerges extremely conspicuously: the vast majority of productions of this nature, of these "objects-non-objects" of digital fashion are emulations of fashion collections (especially high fashion). Despite the fact that *Animal Crossing*'s aesthetic codes do not include sexualized bodies or bodies meeting stereotypes of beauty typical of mainstream fashion, the physical features of models are also often reproduced on the platform. Under these conditions then, the dimension of fashion consumption, while changing in many of the aspects related to the economic and, indeed, bodily dimensions, remains a practice accessible only to a reduced élite with a specific cognitive and cultural background. It would indeed seem to see the dimension of the fashion object as a cultural object becoming preeminent in this type of use, with a niche of very socialized users in this field coming together, creatively using the possibilities brought into play by the game platform not only to create the objects, but also to carve out spaces for sharing them, both within the game and outside, by precisely re-mediating this content on other social sharing platforms. The democratizing potential of digital fashion would seem, once again, to remain latent; the phenomenon enables the most diverse users to access high-fashion products, but the elitist mechanism of exclusion, of in-group and out-group formation, is released from traditional material, physical and economic limitations, to become in turn a barrier of a primarily cultural nature. It would appear to be a

multifaceted phenomenon, where various instances and dynamics are layered, where apparently some real needs are transported to another dimension (Benti, Stadtmann, 2021), in a different form of sociality that increasingly overlaps and intertwines with the physical one.

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Articolo sottoposto a double-blind peer-review