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# My avatar, fashion and me

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## Abstract

- **Objective**

Based on the study of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH), our study aims to understand the relationship between the player, their avatar and fashion. It intends to answer two main questions: What are the specificities of the player's projection mechanism towards their avatar in this video game? What is the role of fashion in this mechanism?

- **Methodology**

With an understanding approach, our qualitative methodology is based on two main sources: participant observation and a survey of the ACNH gaming community.

- **Results**

As a sandbox game, ACNH is characterised by the opportunity for the players to create clothes and, potentially, share them with the online community. Chosen according to the situation, the avatar's look seems to be crucial in the identification process. Players choose a style of clothing that corresponds to their actual, dreamed or fantasised look.

- **Managerial implications**

Our study underlines the interest for brands to seize the opportunities offered by the ACNH gameplay and offers recommendations to them about product placement.

- **Originality**

While many video games have become fashion showcases, the issues associated with the avatar's look are little explored in the marketing literature. It is on the basis of the specificities related to the creation and sharing of designs in the ACNH video game that we propose to better understand the issues associated with fashion.

- **Keywords:** *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, video games, avatar, fashion, brand, product placement.

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*In my Animal Crossing, I'm going for the total leopard look.<sup>1</sup>*

Since its release in March 2020, the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) has been a huge global success, in part due to good timing. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, ACNH has provided a virtual feel-good space for many gamers who are subject to the restrictions inherent in the health crisis (Johannes *et al.*, 2021; Zhu, 2021). By offering the opportunity to build an idyllic island and hang out with friends online, ACNH provided a valuable outlet. With a gameplay that leaves considerable autonomy to the player to decide on the goals they wish to achieve, ACNH contributes to (re)finding a sense of control in a messy world (Comerford, 2020).

ACNH is a sandbox game with tools that allow players to be creative. In particular, they can create clothes and accessories that can be worn by their avatar. The creations can be shared for free with the community of players on the game's interface, and are distributed *via* social networks. In this spirit, some players have taken up ACNH to create clothes inspired by well-known brands, from streetwear to luxury brands and fast fashion. As a result, several brands have used ACNH as a platform to promote their designs (Gibson, 2021).

If in the real world fashion is an important element in the construction of identity and social life, virtual worlds are no exception. It is particularly through the choice of clothes and accessories that the player can shape the image of their avatar. Following the example of *Animal Crossing*, several video games have thus become fashion showcases. Paradoxically, unless the gameplay is based on fashion, the issues associated with the avatar's look are little explored by the marketing literature. It is with this and the specif-

icities of design creation and sharing in the ACNH video game in mind that we propose to study the relationship between the player, their avatar and fashion. Echoing this problematic, our study aims to answer the following questions: What are the specificities of the player's projection mechanism towards their avatar in the ACNH video game? What is the role of fashion in this mechanism?

In order to answer these questions, our article is structured as follows: in the first part, we put the avatar into perspective as an extension, projection or even experimentation of the real self. It is then a question of apprehending the place and the stakes associated with digital fashion. In the second part, the methodology of our study is put into perspective. We explain the specificities of ACNH and pay particular attention to the possibilities of personalising the appearance and look of the avatar. The third part explores the intricacies of the player/avatar relationship and the interest of players in fashion. The last part analyses the main results of the study and makes recommendations for brands.

## **From digital avatar to virtual fashion**

### **The avatar: landmark and identity mirror**

In many video games, the player's identity is represented by a character called an avatar. Etymologically, the term avatar (from Sanskrit *avatāra*) is part of the Hindu religion (Garnier and Poncin, 2013) and represents the incarnation of a deity in human or animal form. More precisely, the avatar echoes the incarnation during his descent to earth of the deity Vishnu in different profiles including Matsya the fish or even Narasimha the lion-man. In video games, Soriano (2016, p.74) states that the avatar refers to "the concept of transformation and embodiment of the player into a virtual object". In the digital universe, avatars are virtual characters

<sup>1/</sup> Excerpt from advertising for the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

of varying degrees of elaboration or realism that the user chooses to represent him or herself graphically. The avatar is a form of self-representation in a virtual identity whose form evolves (Yee and Bailenson, 2007).

The literature emphasises the primary role of the player in the choice, design and customisation of their avatar (Kafai *et al.*, 2010). Even more so in online games, players often have the freedom and flexibility to create and customise avatars to present themselves according to their preferences (Li *et al.*, 2020). How do these customisation mechanisms possibly play a role in the player's projection towards their avatar? The choices inherent in virtual representation are fraught with implications, including, according to Turkle (2005), a choice as simple as that of an online name. According to Ducheneaut *et al.* (2009), the personalisation of avatars, via the choice of a hairstyle or hair colour for example, constitutes a mechanism by which the player can construct their personal identity. Conscious or not, the determination of the avatar is thus a way for the player to express who s/he is. As Garnier and Poncin (2013, p.103) point out, “identifying with one's avatar as an extension of oneself or as oneself is thus the logical and concrete consequence of the avatar personalisation process”. Several studies emphasise that the multiplication of avatar personalisation options reinforces the identification process (Lim, 2006; Bailey *et al.*, 2009). However, if users identify with an avatar, the avatar's salient features can also become part of the user's self-concept during the game (Klimmt *et al.*, 2007). Thus, when a player designs an avatar in their own image, it is not only possible to observe a process of identification with the avatar but even more so the projection of the self-perception onto the avatar (Bailey *et al.*, 2009). The capacity to build an avatar in one's own image would therefore influence the mental representation that the user makes of him/herself (Bailey *et al.*, 2009). As shown in the study by Trepte and Reinecke (2010), identification with

the avatar is positively correlated with the pleasure felt by the player. This relationship is impacted by the video-game universe: it is stronger for non-competitive games than for competitive games. As social games are more marked by a concern for appearance, the look of the avatar plays an important role.

The representation of the avatar provides a set of cues in a virtual world that allow it to be perceived by others (Kafai *et al.*, 2010). In multi-player games, users choose them according to the roles they plan to play. Avatar personalisation is thus a way of communicating status and abilities to others (Gee, 2003). In terms of avatar appearance, while users can opt to create an avatar in their own image, they can also explore extensions of themselves that are different or even radically opposed to who they are (Taylor, 2006). In this sense, video games offer their players the possibility of adopting a difference by changing their identity or gender (Kafai *et al.*, 2010). In doing so, they allow for the exploration of other forms of virtual self. Boellstorff's (2008) research on the video game *Second Life* demonstrates this: while many players choose to generate an avatar in their own image, others choose to create characters that are radically different from themselves. Thus, the malleable character of avatars allows their users to make them evolve according to the contexts or social situations online (Sung *et al.*, 2011). The plurality of identities that can be taken on online allows for a form of “distributed self” (Turkle, 1995). As the author states, “one can create multiple avatars in online communities and play with relationships, quite literally using one's “second (or third, or fourth, or fifth) self” (Turkle, 2005, p.12). Echoing Turkle's (1995) work, Hooi and Cho (2013) thus point out that, just as in real life, people live multiple virtual lives through their avatars. Yet, according to the authors, “these virtual lives may be vastly different – not only in outward representations of appearance but also attitude, manner and behavior

– from one another and from real life” (Hooi and Cho, 2013, p.277). While the same avatar can be reshaped over time, some characteristics might be stable. In *Second Life*, research by Bardzell *et al.* (2010) shows that players rarely change the gender, race and species of their avatar. According to the authors, these results suggest that “Second Life residents do not consider body types and skin as changeable in the same way they consider clothes and accessories to be changeable” (Bardzell *et al.*, 2010, p.602). The authors consider it reasonable to assume that despite the technical ease of such modifications, “users carry physical world mental models of the immutability of gender, race, and species into virtual worlds” (Bardzell *et al.*, 2010, p.602).

As a dynamic object, the design of the avatar affects the social behaviour of individuals in online environments. Yee and Bailenson (2007) refer to this phenomenon as the Protean effect.<sup>2</sup> In an experiment in which players were given stereotypical Klu Klux Klan avatars *versus* doctor avatars, Peña *et al.* (2009) showed that the former induced more aggression from players. Similar results were observed by the authors according to the colour (white or black) of the cape worn by the avatar; the second colour induced more aggressive attitudes. As Georges (2012, p.35) summarises, whether or not the player chooses the characteristics, the appearance of the avatar “calls forth stereotypes that in turn modify its use”. Beyond physical characteristics, representation within a virtual world is achieved through the choice of clothing and accessories. Fashion could thus play a key role in the player’s projection mechanism towards their avatar.

### Virtualisation of fashion

Magazines, catwalks and of course shops are the privileged places where fashion is displayed. However, for several years now, and

probably even more so since the Covid-19 health crisis struck, fashion has been going digital and investing in new spaces, including video games. Avatars, as virtual models, wear clothes that are sources of information to better understand their role and the context in which they move. According to Liao (2011), by providing a bodily experience for the avatar, clothing influences the way in which identity is formed. She notes that in most situations, the virtual body, like the physical body, needs clothes. Just as clothes are important for constructing culture and identity in the physical world, virtual clothes are equally important in cyberspace for similar reasons (Liao, 2011). Therefore, gamers wish “to express their identity and aesthetic sensibilities through their characters” (Kim *et al.*, 2012, p.84). According to the latter authors, gamers then make their characters fashionable and stylish. Most gamers thus tend to devote much time and money (real or virtual) to enhancing their character or showing other users that they are attractive or unique. Typically, in relation to the simulation of the television series *Gossip Girl* in the *Second Life* game world, Stein (2009, p.120) states that fashion is the “central point” of the player communities and thus plays a “central role” in the experience.

Fashion is one of the most important aspects for players to express their own personality (Kim, 2006). Research by Kim *et al.* (2012) shows that players prefer characters that visually match the roles they play. In addition, players prefer characters that match the professions they practise and the communities they belong to (Tang *et al.* 2010). Clothing can play an important role in the embodiment of a profession or community. Kim *et al.* (2012) suggest that more research needs to be done on the issues associated with character fashion. From a managerial point of view, video game publishers have a vested interest in better understanding why and how fashion affects game satisfaction (Kim *et al.*, 2012).

2/ In Greek mythology, the sea deity Proteus has the power to metamorphose.

In relation to the video game *Fortnite*, Li *et al.* (2020) note that many of the fashion items and accessories with which players can adorn their avatars are designed to be purely aesthetic and are therefore not intended to enhance performance. Players may therefore be looking for an aesthetic experience from a wide range of outfits. In addition, the style of dress allows the game to be more realistic (Kim, 2006). It is in this concern for realism that video games integrate brand or product placements. According to Lehu (2011, p.11), product placement refers to “the fact of ‘placing’ or, better still, ‘integrating’ a product or a brand” in a media support, including film, television series or even video games. For advertisers, the use of the latter medium allows them to “reinforce the brand’s positioning and strengthen its image” (Lehu, 2011, p.207). Typically, Balenciaga carried out a placement operation on the video game *Fortnite* in 2021. Inspired by real items from the haute couture house’s catalogue, several outfits (described as *skins*) and accessories were offered to players. However, the presence of fashion in video games is not necessarily the result of brand initiatives. Like *Roblox*, several games allow their users to generate content themselves. Hackl (2021) points out that the User-Generated Content (UGC) function of *Roblox* allows certain users to let their imagination run free to create virtual fashion items that they can sell to other players. The author then puts into perspective the potential of exploring the metaverse for fashion brands. The ACNH game seems to be a perfect field of analysis in this respect, in relation to the creative tool it offers.

## Research design and presentation of the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

### Outline of a qualitative methodology with a comprehensive aim

Based on a qualitative methodology, our study aims to understand the relationship between

the player, their avatar and fashion through the single case study *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH). The design of our research is thus intended to provide an answer to the following questions: What are the specificities of the player’s projection mechanism towards their avatar in the video game ACNH? What is the role of fashion in this mechanism?

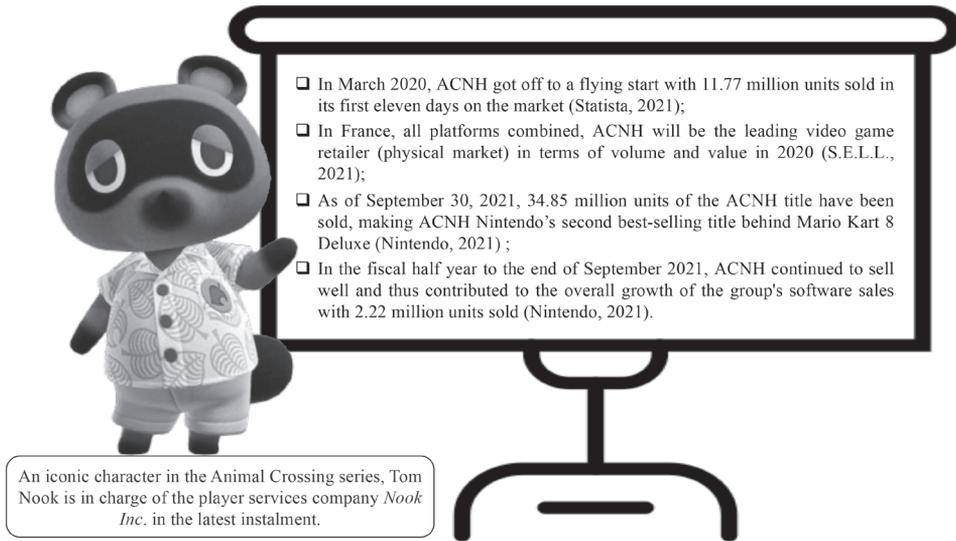
The choice of ACNH is justified by the characteristics of the game itself. A life simulation game published by Nintendo on 20 March 2020,<sup>3</sup> it has been a great commercial success (Figure 1). ACNH is a non-competitive game that emphasises social relationships, and is unique in that it falls into the category of so-called *sandbox games*.<sup>4</sup> This is a type of game that allows players to construct their own trajectory without having to follow a strict linear story (Ocio and Brugos, 2009). With tools to evolve content, sandbox games are enriched by the creativity of communities of players.

ACNH’s open-ended *gameplay* gives the player a sense of control in a world where many things are not or no longer under control (Comerford, 2020). According to Comerford (2020), the combination of game features supports the construction of the player’s sense of identity and provides stability. In times of health crisis lockdown, ACNH may thus have replaced some complex face-to-face interactions and offered stability and routine through a simulacrum of real life, even if it is exaggerated and limited in scope (Comerford, 2020; Zhu, 2021). At the beginning of the game, an avatar lands next to a paradise island which s/he can develop at their own pace. The game offers opportu-

3/ The ACNH video game was released a few days after the Covid 19 outbreak was defined as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation. Its release coincided with an international wave of containment.

4/ In addition to ACNH, video games in the sandbox category include *Minecraft*, *Roblox* and *Grand Theft Auto*.

Figure 1: A commercial performance



nities for socialisation: on the one hand, the avatar is able to interact with other inhabitants, non-player characters (NPCs) represented by anthropomorphic animals; on the other hand, the *gameplay* allows him/her to receive or be received by the avatars of other players. Simulating a real-time process, the game follows the rhythm of the days, seasons and events that punctuate a year.

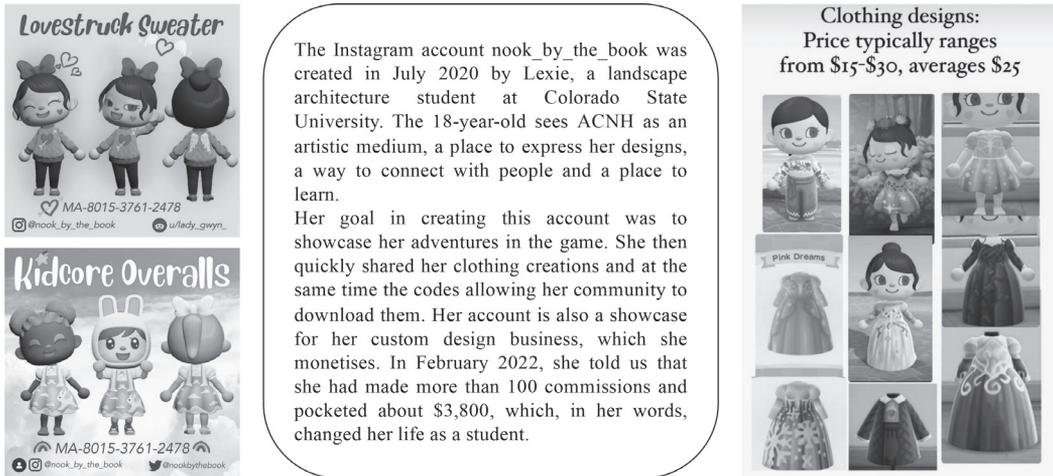
The specificities of the ACNH video game, especially in terms of the creativity enjoyed by users in constructing the clothing identity of their avatar, make it a particularly interesting case. The ACNH case study was therefore mobilised as a research methodology to describe and analyse a complex phenomenon in its contemporary context (Yin, 2003). We favoured a comprehensive approach based on two main sources of access to reality: participant observation and online survey.

Our study was first of all naturally built around a form of participant observation aimed at integrating the codes and workings of ACNH. In order to better understand the dynamics and subtleties of ACNH, from October 2020 onwards, we joined communities of players on the social networks Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In connection with the subject

of our research, we naturally paid particular attention to initiatives related to fashion. We therefore regularly monitored accounts dedicated to fashion. It is particularly on the social network Instagram that several content creators share their designs. Lexie, a fashion designer for ACNH who created the account *nook\_by\_the\_book* (Figure 2), agreed to answer our questions. The aim was to understand the challenges and drivers of her online activity.

In order to explore the attitudes and behaviour of players on different aspects of the game, we mobilised the survey technique. By combining closed and open-ended questions, this method makes it possible to obtain fruitful data and to bring out unexpected trends and opinions. Because of their richness, the *verbatim* from the open-ended questions can support the researcher's intuitions. We administered an online survey through Google Forms on the Facebook social network in November 2020. The aim was to target French-speaking communities of ACNH players. Articulated around several themes, part of the dataset was dedicated to the player/avatar/fashion relationship. Respondents were free to express their an-

Figure 2: Lexie and nook\_by\_the\_book



swers to open-ended questions putting into perspective the characteristics of their avatar and the possible link between them as well as their relationship to fashion. While the quantitative aspects were directly analysed via the generation of a real-time descriptive statistical analysis, the analysis of the qualitative data collected was carried out using Nvivo software. We used this tool to organise and analyse the content of our online survey. After downloading the data from Google Forms in Excel format, we imported it into Nvivo. Based on the survey data, respondents were recorded as cases. For the closed questions, they were considered as attributes. The study population had a varied socio-demographic profile and consisted of 551 respondents<sup>5</sup> of whom 95.8% were women. However, at the CEDEC 2020 conference, Hisashi Nogami, head of the Animal Crossing series, indicated that there was an equal proportion of male and female ACNH players. The theme of the survey and the communities to which it was disseminated could be among the factors explaining this over-representation. 54.1% of the survey population is aged between 18 and

24, 34.5% between 25 and 34, 9.4% between 35 and 49, 1.8% between 50 and 64 and only 0.2% are over 65. The majority of respondents (65.1%) started playing in the months of March or April following the release of ACNH.

### Avatar customisation and the place of fashion

From the very first steps of the adventure, the player selects the main characteristics of their avatar via a menu of choices: skin colour, hairstyle, hair colour, shape and colour of the eyes, nose, etc. Some additional options are offered as the game progresses, including new hairstyles and hair colours (Figure 3). Using a design tool, it is also possible to add certain distinctive features to the face: moles, acne, tattoos, etc.

According to Comerford (2020), ACNH's character creation and malleability allow the player to choose their role and, potentially, switch between roles depending on mood and circumstance. While multiple customisation options are available, it is important to note that all avatars are of a standard size and shape and correspond to a *kawaii* universe. A key concept characterising modern Japanese culture (Nittono, 2016), *kawaii* has

5/ In order to be able to associate the *verbatim*s with their sender, we assigned each respondent an identification number from ID001 to ID551. We specified the female ♀ or male ♂ gender of the respondents.

Figure 3: Avatar customisation



its equivalent in English in the term “cute” (“mignon” in French). A form of *kawaii* aesthetic developed as early as the 1970s with companies such as Sanrio at the origin of Hello Kitty (Madge, 1998). Since the mid-1970s, visuals of all sorts of so-called *kawaii* characters have become a guarantee of commercial success and have been reproduced on a variety of products (Madge, 1998). In video games, the *kawaii* aesthetic at the heart of the avatar/player relationship is part of the DNA of cosy, comfortable games and encourages social, creative and expressive play styles (Reay, 2021). Combined with product design, *kawaii* character not only helps consumers form a warm impression of a brand, but also creates attachment to it (Cheng *et al.*, 2020).

In addition to the physical characteristics, the appearance of the avatar can also be modi-

fied through clothes and accessories.<sup>6</sup> There are several ways to develop one’s wardrobe in ACNH. First of all, it is possible to obtain clothes that are directly integrated into the gameplay and whose design is therefore the responsibility of Nintendo. These are non-branded clothes, except for those that echo the Nintendo or Hello Kitty universe. The player then has three options:

- Clothes can be obtained in exchange for virtual money (bells) in the “Able sisters” shop (Figure 4), from a street vendor or at the *Nook Stop* (a form of computer terminal);
- The player can be offered clothes by one of the NPCs on their island or by another player online;

6/ Among the clothes and accessories, we can mention dresses, skirts, trousers, t-shirts, jumpers, shoes, tights, socks, wigs, hats, glasses or even bags.

Figure 4: Fitting of clothes in the “Able sisters” shop



Figure 5: Sharing designs on Instagram



- Using resources found on their island (materials and designs), the player can make certain clothes.

It is also through the creation tool that players can design and possibly share their own designs with others. For example, clothes can be made in pixel art by the players themselves via the custom design tool. At the same time, it is possible to download other players' designs. According to Gibson (2021), the translation of fashion by the community is an extraordinary phenomenon: budding designers<sup>7</sup> or seasoned designers create and possibly share their creations (brand-inspired items or original designs). To illustrate this, Figure 5 shows the posts on the Instagram account Masa-Fuwafuwa. We can see ❶ original creations, ❷ designs inspired by the Chanel brand,<sup>8</sup> or ❸ translations of the “Snow Queen” outfits from the Disney studios.

The phenomenon has become so widespread that many accounts dedicated to fashion have emerged on social networks. Among these accounts, we can mention *Animal Crossing Fashion Archive*, *Nook Street Market* or *Animalcrossfits*. The stylists and design-

7/ Like Lexie (Figure 2), some designers, whom we could call *pro-ams*, monetise their talent with the players by creating outfits that meet their desires.

8/ In the case of Chanel (screenshot 2 in Figure 5), we note the statement: “Let’s enjoy brands you can’t usually buy.”

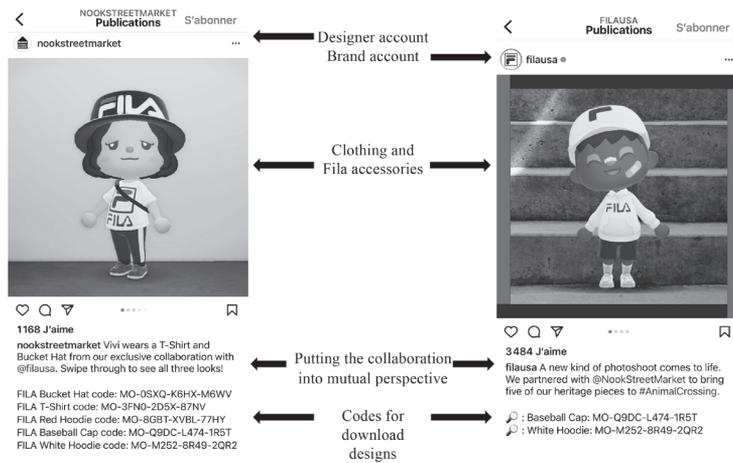
ers behind these accounts collaborate with brands whose creations they reproduce in pixel art for the game. The mechanics are often the same: the brand shares the designs of the clothes on its own social networks – and/or those of its partner who helped it deploy the product placement operation. Putting *Fila*’s October 2020 collaboration with *Nook Street Market* into perspective, Figure 6 illustrates our point. Note that when it comes to the reproduction of real clothes, the visual of the virtual garment is often shared on social networks, followed by that of its real equivalent. Brands can also offer players the opportunity to visit a branded island where the collection will be showcased.

## Characteristics of the avatar and the construction of a digital identity

### Relationship between the player and their avatar

In relation to the profile of the respondents to our survey, 94.9% of the avatars of the people interviewed are female. Only 1.6% of the gamers in the surveyed population indicated that they preferred an avatar of a different gender than their own. The majority of players gave their avatars their own first name (51.2%) or nickname (20.5%). Echoing Turkle (2005), the choice of the avatar’s name seems to have a strong implication. Through

Figure 6: Fila capsule collection for ACNH



this choice, the respondents are keen to embody their character: *“I kept it simple, knowing that I was going to play with my friends, I wanted to be easily recognisable”* (ID449♂). 92.7% of players tell us that they paid attention to the physical characteristics of their avatar. Since the beginning of the game, the majority of players have changed some of their characteristics. The most frequent change is the modification of hair colour or hairstyle (87.3%) and the least frequent is inherent to gender (8.2%). Suggesting that mental models of the physical world impact on the virtual world, these results are in line with Bardzell *et al.*'s (2010) analysis of the game *Second Life*.

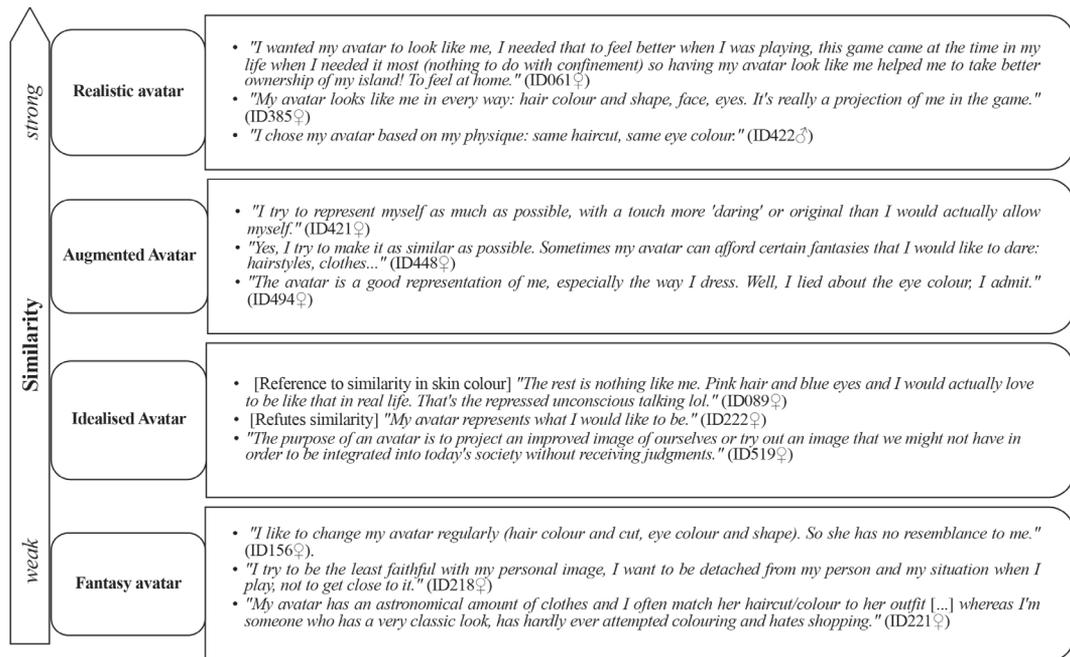
The majority of respondents (71.5%) consider that they have similarities with their avatar. The avatars are thus described by some respondents as *“official look-alikes”* (ID372♀) or even *“carbon copies”* (ID536♀). As a sign of projection, several respondents refer to their avatar in the first person singular. Our analysis is therefore in line with the work of Kafai *et al.* (2010) testifying to the influence of identity and self-image on the choice of avatar characteristics. Among the significant elements of similarities with their avatar, physical aspects are mainly highlighted: eye colour, hair and skin colour or hairstyle.

Varying from one individual to another, players' feeling of similarity to their avatar can be represented on a continuum from a strong expression to a quasi-rejection.<sup>9</sup> Several avatar figures appear: a realistic avatar (faithful projection of the player), an augmented avatar (projection of the player with some different characteristics), an idealised avatar (fantasised version of oneself) and a fantasy avatar (avatar dissimilar to the player). Figure 7, based on the categorisation elements of our Nvivo analysis, puts into perspective several of the *verbatim* illustrating this variety of perceptions.

This range of perceptions echoes the observations of several researchers regarding the personalisation of avatars (Boellstorff, 2008; Kafai *et al.*, 2010). However, we should not conclude from our analysis that the categories are fixed. Some players point out that their avatar can, for various reasons, take on multiple facets: *“Sometimes I make it look like me, sometimes not, it depends on the role I want to play”* (ID498♀). Echoing Turkle (1995, 2005) or Hooi and Cho (2013),

9/ The expression of rejection is relatively paradoxical insofar as the respondents indicating a strong distance between the perception they have of themselves and that of their avatar have mostly attributed their first name or nickname to their avatar whose gender is the same as their own.

Figure 7: Players' sense of similarity to their avatars



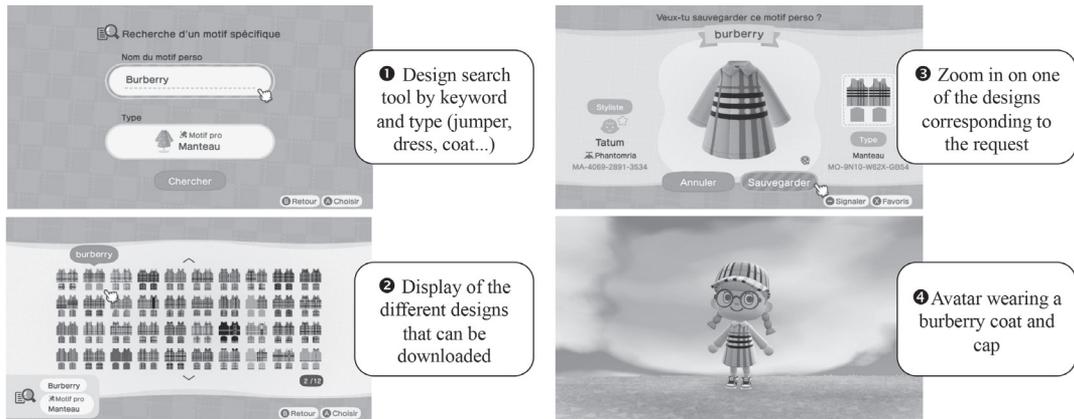
multiplicity is encountered in both real and virtual life. In particular, it is through the clothes worn by the avatar that the player can express a plurality of identities. The question of the relationship between the player, their avatar and fashion is addressed in the following section.

### Player-generated content: towards the luxury of diversity

93.6% of the respondents say they pay attention to their avatar's look. 70% of the population surveyed have more than 100 garments or accessories to personalise their avatar. 50.3% of the respondents say they have already created clothes or accessories for their avatar. Among them, 22.4% have tried to reproduce brands. It is mainly product-brand pairs from the world of sportswear (Adidas jumper, Nike cap...) or luxury (Burberry trench coat, Chanel dress) that respondents say they have translated. It is also worth noting that brands under licence are regularly cited in connection with differ-

ent universes: comics (Marvel), novel series (Harry Potter) or manga (Naruto)... 77.5% of the respondents have already downloaded third-party creations. Due to the complexity and/or time-consuming nature of creating clothes, more players download clothes than create them themselves. Echoing the players' creations, among the clothes or accessories downloaded, users cite reproductions of sportswear brands (Nike, Adidas, Supreme, Fila, etc.) as well as brands belonging to the luxury universe (Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Dior, etc.) or finally licensing brands associated with a specific universe (mangas, gaming, etc.). We observe that brands with a distinctive logo or design are preferred. It is harder to identify certain brands whose logotype or graphic characteristics are not perceptible. Typically, among the designs associated with Louis Vuitton, there are many garments with the monogram. Another emblematic case, the Burberry brand is associated in the vast majority of creations with the famous tartan motif (Figure 8). In a video game, the user cannot appreciate all the sen-

Figure 8: Looking for a Burberry coat



sory dimensions of branded clothing, so only the visual aspects are valued.

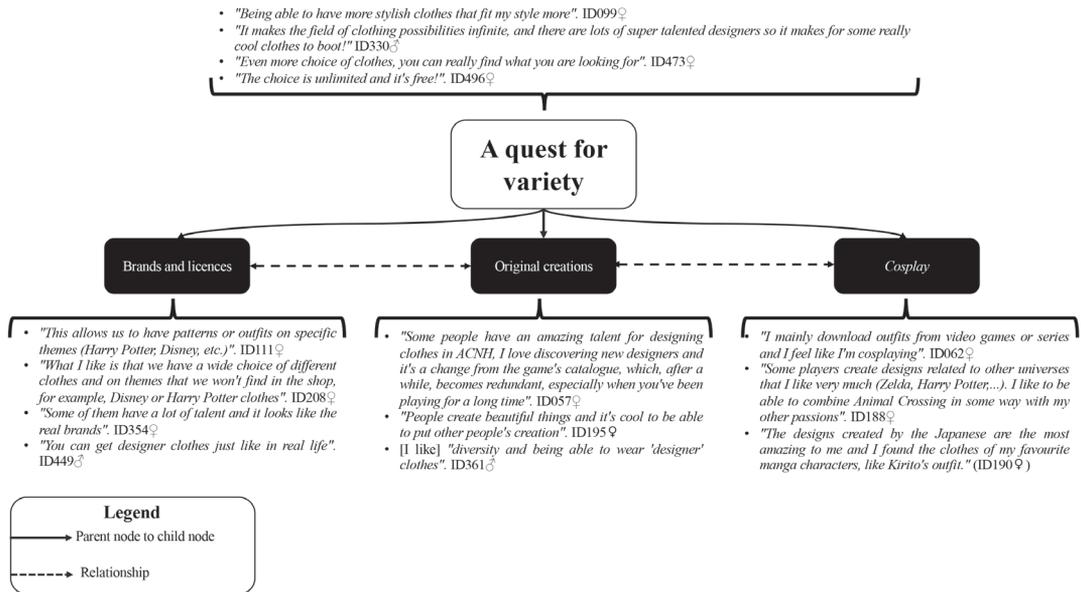
From the point of view of its users, the design tool enables them to express their creativity and create designs that meet their aspirations. Players enjoy being part of a sharing dynamic. Those who uploaded designs appreciated the creativity and talent of members of the online community. Many consider that they would not have been able to create such garments themselves: “[I like] *getting designs that I could not reproduce or just designs that I would not have thought of and that I like*” (R390♀). The creation of some designs can indeed be complex. As Lexie reports in relation to the creation of a dress, trying to create or replicate a specific element, such as ruffles needs to use multiple shades of color in order to get a realistic look. While the basic dress pattern is flat and simple in shape, Lexie explains that she has to “create illusions” to unfold her creative ideas. The complexity of the exercise is also inherent in the creation of necklines using shades that match the avatar’s skin colour. This is all the more tedious and time-consuming as it is necessary to adapt the designs to each of the skin tones in the video game.

When asked what appeals to them about the ability to generate and download content, respondents emphasise their attraction to diver-

sity. The user-generated catalogue thus provides an almost infinite choice. The online search tool allows them to find everything they want by keyword, and players see this as a luxury of variety. They are able to find very specific products online and identify designers who specialise in certain themes. In a cosplay dynamic, some players dress up their avatars as fictional characters. Respondents appreciate the “unique” character of the clothes, which are not catalogued in the range of products offered in the “Able sisters” shop. Typically, this respondent tells us that she likes “*the fact that you can wear clothes with a layered effect, like a jacket over an outfit, but also classic clothes that you wear in real life, but which are not really in the game, the famous ‘ugly jumpers’ of Christmas for example, or even shorter clothes like crop tops, or even skin effect clothes, with marks or tattoos*” (ID487♀).

Perceptual Map 1 provides a synthesis of the assets associated with players’ ability to download content produced by others. The quest for variety (parent code) revolves around the ability to obtain 1) branded or licensed clothing; 2) designer clothing, and 3) to engage in forms of cosplay (child codes).

## Perceptual Map 1: The luxury of variety



## Situational look for chameleon avatar<sup>10</sup>

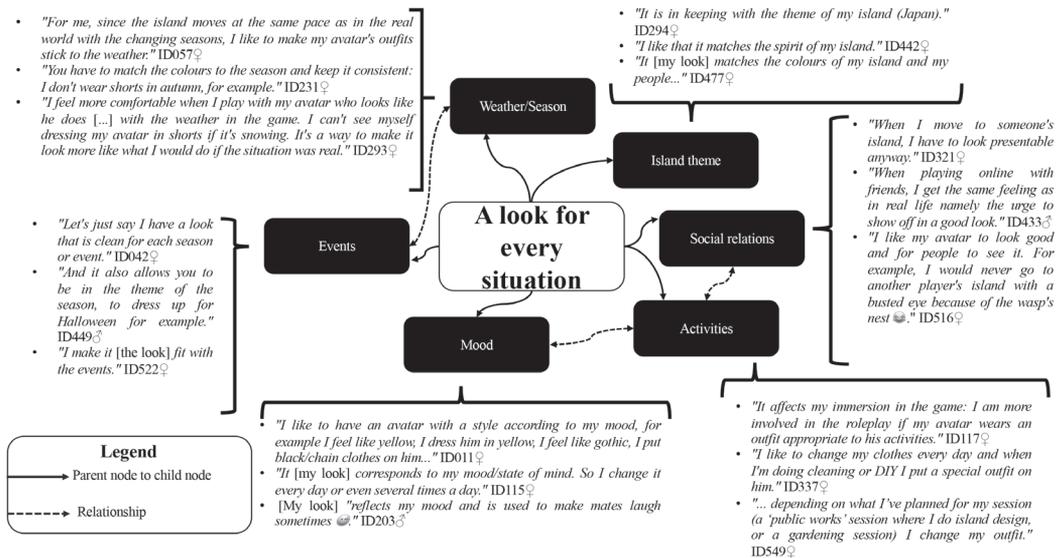
### Issues associated with the choice of clothing

Our analysis shows that the evolution of the avatar's style is inherent to several situational elements (Perceptual Map 2). In general, the choice of the avatar's clothing appears to reflect the personality and mood of the player. In doing so, as in real life, the respondents explain that they regularly change their avatar's outfit. As the ACNH game takes place in real time, many respondents also explain that they adapt their avatar's look according to the seasons and the weather of the game. For example, many players said that they prefer to dress their avatars in coats and hats in winter. In the "Able sisters" shop, one can find clothes and accessories for all seasons. In connection with this seasonality, key events punctuate the game, such as Valentine's Day, Halloween or Christmas.... Here again, en-

couraged by the gameplay, players are keen to adorn their avatar with appropriate items. Some respondents explained that the activity they engage in (fishing, gardening) in the game also influences their choice of clothing and accessories. Since ACNH is a social game, the choice of look is also important in relation to other players and the role context. Finally, some players tell us that they are looking for harmony. They want their avatar's style of dress to echo the style they have given to their island. As Lexie reports, several players have asked her to create a clothing design that reflects the environment they have created on their island. Lexie illustrates this quest for consistency in the following words: "Some people create elaborate islands, full of castles and incredible gardens, and dress like royalty with extravagant gowns. Some people fill their islands with big flowers, sparkles, and tiny houses, and dress their character as a fairy." For example, she explains that she created a wine-coloured dress covered with vines for someone who had turned her island into a vineyard. Lexie considers that a player's personal expression is achieved through what she wears and through the space she

10/ This title is inspired by Dubois's (1996) essential article "Marketing situationnel pour consommateur caméléon" (Situational marketing for the chameleon consumer).

## Perceptual Map 2: Impact of situational factors on the look of the avatar



creates. She adds that these two aspects create a form of “ideal self”.

Echoing Liao (2011), our study highlights the importance of clothing in the virtual space of video games. The case of a student in a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Management illustrates our point. He considers that the look of his avatar allows him to express his own personality: *“As in real life, we want to be well dressed. Sometimes it lets you create funny looks to show your friends. And it also enables you to be in the theme of the season, to dress up for Halloween for example”* (ID449♂). The same respondent explains that he has a Nike sweatshirt in his own wardrobe similar to that of his avatar. According to him: *“It allows you to wear clothes that you wear in real life and also to wear luxury clothes that you would like to have in real life”* (ID449♂). Fashion thus has a prominent place in the player's projection mechanism vis-à-vis their avatar. By “Siamese” effect, 39.4% of the members of the study population tell us that their avatar has clothes or accessories similar to those in their own wardrobe. Product-brand pairs are then cited: Adidas sweatshirt, Zara top, Converse shoes....

The choice of clothing helps to provide the player with a sense of verisimilitude and credibility, the importance of which is emphasised in the work of Tencé *et al.* (2010). The portrait of one of the respondents, a student in “Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sports Activities” and a volunteer firefighter, seems to us characteristic from this point of view. This young woman considers that her avatar represents her, especially in terms of clothing.

The clothes and accessories of her avatar seem to her *“to reinforce her personality”* (ID494♀). Her avatar has some clothes similar to those she owns, including her fireman's outfit and several sports clothes. Our study is thus once again in line with the work of Turkle (1995) or Hooi and Cho (2013): the virtual self can be as varied as the real self. The choice of clothing for avatars seems to us to be highly symbolic in this respect. As an extension of the work of Tang *et al.* (2010), our study shows that many gamers prefer clothes and accessories that correspond to the jobs they do and/or the communities in which they live.

Through the choice of clothing for their avatar, ACNH presents itself as a way for players to explore reality. 52.8% of the respondents say that they would like to own clothes and accessories similar to those owned by their avatar: *“My avatar is currently wearing a plaid coat that I like way too much, I want it”* (ID467♀). On the subject of online downloadable designs, another person says: *“I think some of the dresses the players have created are just gorgeous and I would love to have them in person”* (ID057♀). While several branded garments are mentioned, players are also fond of the non-branded designs shared by players as well as clothes purchased from the “Able sisters” shop and *de facto* associated with some form of ACNH branding. It is interesting to note that while it is at present impossible to obtain branded products in the in-game shop, many players associate some of the clothes or accessories with brands they know in the market. Typically, the so-called work boots in ACNH are associated with the Dr. Martens brand.

While many respondents aspire to have clothes similar to those worn by their avatars, some of them tell us that they are held back. Our content analysis allowed us to identify three main families of obstacles. First of all, even if they like some of the clothes owned by their avatar, several respondents do not plan to wear them in real life: *“I really like the poncho-style jumper in grey, the Chesterfield, or the pretty princess dresses, difficult to wear in everyday life”* (ID386♀). On the subject of shoes identified with the Dr. Martens brand, one respondent tells us, *“I find them too cute in the game and yet I don’t have any in real life and I don’t especially want them even though I think they look very nice on some people”* (ID438♀). Secondly, these are financial barriers that do not allow players to have similar clothes: *“Some coats are unaffordable in real life, a Versace for example is really beyond my means”* (ID112♀). Thus, the unlimited access to a plethora of clothes – a fortiori in the luxury world – allows players

to live their fashion appeal without having to pay a high price. Finally, a last type of brake is inherent in the lack of realism of the avatars and/or the simplified design of the clothes, making it difficult to project. Typically, several respondents do not see themselves in the standardised morphology<sup>11</sup> of their avatar, and consider that their weight/height ratio does not allow them to have similar clothes: *“Being fatter than my avatar, I can’t wear the same things”* (ID286♀).

### Managerial implications

Our study suggests that clothing brands have an interest in taking advantage of the opportunities associated with a presence on ACNH. The game can be seen as a powerful way for brands to engage with the gaming community, both actual and potential customers. In response to the use of ACNH by brands as a marketing tool, Nintendo has provided recommendations in a statement dated 19 November 2020. Brands wishing to invest in the game must respect its classification. As ACNH is suitable for children as young as age three, brands must not offer content that could be considered offensive, discriminatory or vulgar. Brands should also not misleadingly suggest the existence of a partnership with Nintendo. In keeping with the gameplay, it is of course recommended that brands do not obtain financial benefits in connection with the operations conducted. It is thus prohibited to monetise access to a dedicated island or the codes of a clothing design. Finally, it is recommended that ACNH not be used as a platform to direct players to third-party environments, such as a merchant site.

Beyond respect for the recommendations issued by Nintendo, our study invites brands to exploit the dynamics of avatar customisation according to the situation. In harmony with their positioning, it is a question of taking

11/ On ACNH, all avatars have the same morphology.

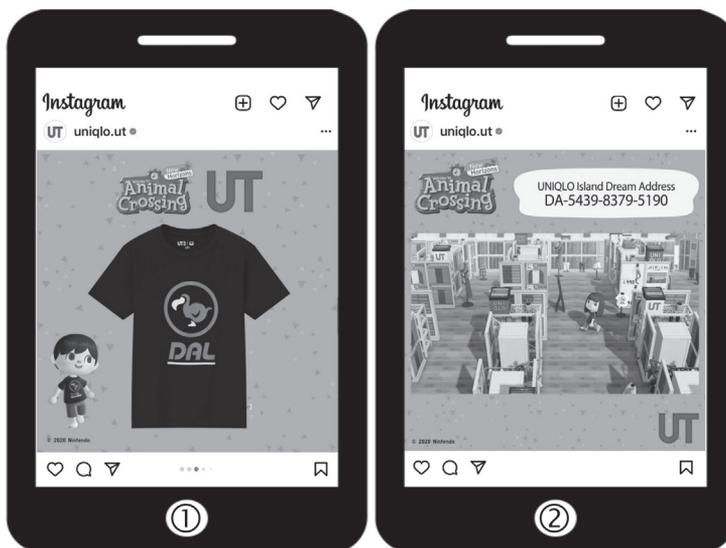
into account the multiplicity of players' desires. In doing so, it is necessary to propose designs that echo the different situations involving a change in clothing (Perceptual Map 2). Since the game's weather corresponds to the rhythm of the seasons, it is natural to propose clothes adapted to this seasonality. In addition to the current collections, brands can also propose emblematic pieces from past collections. In connection with the different activities of the game, a variety of brands in specific fields can put their collections in perspective, from ceremonial wear to sportswear to DIY wear...

When it comes to deploying operations, it is in the best interest of brands to outsource content creation to designers with expertise in video game apparel design. Our study shows that the gaming community recognises the talent of designers who make ACNH their home. In order to ensure wide distribution to the gaming communities, designers with a large community can also be entrusted with the communication surrounding the operations. Depending on the opportunity vis-à-vis the main community, the communication can also be shared on the brand's own networks. In order to accompany the players in

their projection towards the collections, the visuals of the real clothes can, on the social networks, be associated with those of the virtual clothes. Figure 9 illustrates how, in April 2021, the Uniqlo brand put both virtual and real clothes inspired by the *Animal Crossing* series into perspective in its communication. In addition to purchasing the real garment and/or downloading its virtual equivalent<sup>①</sup>, the brand also offered players the opportunity to visit the Uniqlo island<sup>②</sup>.

As gamers and content creators did not wait for brands to take over video games to include them, the legitimacy of brands in video games lies in the quality of the content creation and the enhanced experience. While several brands have taken initiatives in this direction, many are present on the ACNH metaverse despite themselves. Indeed, our observations show that it is most often the players themselves who translate or imagine the clothes they associate with certain brands. If, for various reasons, some brands do not wish to take advantage of the opportunities inherent in their presence on the game, it seems important to us to keep an eye on practices and to identify which designs are associated with their brand. A keyword search on the

Figure 9: Uniqlo X Animal Crossing Spring/Summer Collection



video game allows us to identify the extent of branded designs as easily and quickly as possible (Figure 8). ACNH can therefore be seen as a source of inspiration and even an observatory of market trends.

## Conclusion

Based on the study of the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, our study aimed to understand the issues associated with the relationship between the player, their avatar and fashion. After observing the player's projection mechanism towards their avatar, our study highlighted the importance that players place on their avatar's look. The possibility of creating, sharing and collecting designs represents a form of appropriation and enrichment of the video-game experience. Within the metaverse, merged with their avatar, the player feeds the video game database and thus participates in its value creation system. The fact that users can generate and/or download content makes each experience unique.

As the virtual world of ACNH is a stage where players perform, dress is of major importance, both for the players themselves and for others. The choice of clothing and accessories seems to be crucial in the process of players' identifying with their avatars. Many players choose a style of clothing that matches their actual, dreamed or fantasised look. They like to change their look depending on the situation. Whether or not they aspire in "real life" to wear clothes similar to those of their avatar, there is no doubt that the clothes they choose appeal to them. In doing so, our study highlights the interest for brands of seizing the opportunities offered by the realisation of forms of content marketing. A world is emerging in which metaverses will be places of communication, sharing, work and consumption. Within gamified universes, fashion will play a key role, as it does in "real life". Our study thus invites brands to seize the opportunities associated with these new places of exchange with consumers.

This study has two main limitations. Based on the single case study of the ACNH video game, the results are not intended to be extended to other types of games, such as competition-based games where clothing may be linked to performance. Furthermore, several avatars can be created by the same player on ACNH, but our study only considers the initial avatar. The study of the players' projection mechanisms towards their "second rank" avatars as well as the place and role of fashion for these avatars could provide a valuable complement to our study. Indeed, the observation of ACNH communities suggests that if the first avatar is mostly a fairly faithful incarnation of the player, this is not the case for the following avatars.

This study opens up multiple avenues of extension, four of which are outlined below.

1. First of all, one could observe how brands seize, via product placement operations, the opportunities offered by the personalisation of avatars' looks to foster a relationship with their customers. In a comparative approach, one would aim to study not only the world of video games, including ACNH, *Fortnite* or *Roblox*, but also other virtual worlds. Typically, the identification of the stakes of the partnership of the avatar of the social network Snapchat (*Bitmoji*) with fashion brands such as Ralph Lauren or Nike could constitute a fertile field of observation.
2. By highlighting the integration of brands in video games by the general public, our study questions the contours of intellectual property. Does the player distinguish between "official collections" (initiated by brands) and "counterfeit collections"? What about the impact of these different categories of designs on their experience and relationship with the brand?
3. We might also be interested in the impact of avatar representation (e.g. *kawaii* versus realistic) on brand impression and attachment.

4. Finally, while our observations show that many gamers equip their avatars with clothes that they actually have in their wardrobe, the parallel seems less obvious. Our study thus invites us to understand the impact of the presence of brands in the world of video games on attitudes towards the brand and on purchasing behaviour.

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