

MOTIVATIONS FOR CONSUMING AVATAR-SPECIFIC VIRTUAL ITEMS ON THE ZEPETO GAMING PLATFORM

MOTIVAÇÕES PARA CONSUMIR ITENS VIRTUAIS ESPECÍFICOS DO AVATAR NA PLATAFORMA ZEPETO GAMING

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Resumo. O Metaverso oferece a experiência de espaçamento duplo da vida no mundo real e em ambientes digitais e permite que os usuários tenham uma presença tridimensional imersiva com seus avatares. Devido à popularidade do Metaverso e à presença precoce de gigantes dos videogames nele, itens virtuais especiais para avatares também receberam maior atenção. Zepeto, a maior plataforma da Coreia do Sul e da Ásia com usuários de todo o mundo, incluindo o Irã, é uma das plataformas de jogos do metaverso que colabora estreitamente com os líderes globais da moda. Devido à crescente popularidade dos produtos coreanos, como o K-Pop, entre crianças e adolescentes iranianos, Zepeto se tornou um universo de jogos popular. Este artigo aborda duas questões à luz dessas descobertas. Primeiro, no âmbito da teoria dos valores de consumo, investiga-se a motivação dos utilizadores para consumir itens virtuais especificamente para avatares no Zepeto, seguido de um exame das potenciais repercussões do seu consumo. A população-alvo deste artigo foram os usuários iranianos do Zepeto. Utilizando os métodos de análise temática e amostragem aleatória, foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com 35 usuários iranianos do Zepeto. Os resultados indicam que no jogo Zepeto o consumo se tornou um modo de representação, e os usuários vivenciam o consumo de itens de moda virtuais de diversas marcas durante suas aventuras em mundos virtuais.

Palavras-chave: Metaverso, Zepeto, Jogo, Avatar, Moda, Consumo

Abstract. Metaverse provides the experience of Dual-spacization of life in the real world and digital environments and allows users to have an immersive, three-dimensional presence with their avatars. Due to the popularity of the Metaverse and the early presence of video game giants within it, special virtual items for avatars have also received increased attention. Zepeto, the largest platform in South Korea and Asia with users from all over the world, including Iran, is one of the metaverse game platforms collaborating closely with global fashion leaders. Due to the growing popularity of Korean wave products such as K-Pop among Iranian children and adolescents, Zepeto has become a popular gaming universe. This article addresses two issues in light of these findings. First, within the framework of the consumption values theory, users' motivation to consume virtual items specifically for avatars in Zepeto is investigated, followed by an examination of the potential repercussions of their consumption. The target population for this article was Iranian Zepeto users. Using the methods of thematic analysis and random sampling, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 Iranian Zepeto users. The results indicate that in the Zepeto game, consumption has become a mode of representation, and users experience the consumption of virtual fashion items from various brands during their adventures in virtual worlds.

Keywords: Metaverse, Zepeto, Game, Avatar, Fashion, Consumption

INTRODUCTION

Virtual in-game items for avatars result from the convergence of information and communication technologies and the fashion industry, which has garnered increasing attention due to the popularity of the Metaverse and the early presence of video game giants within it. The production and supply of millions of virtual products by world-renowned brands in the stores of Metaverse virtual game worlds demonstrates the brand owners' efforts to penetrate the virtual markets and the use of technologies such as blockchain or NFT to ensure the scarcity of certain virtual products demonstrates their desire to dominate this emerging market. In order to manage their digital representation in the form of their avatars, the users of virtual game worlds purchase virtual items for the avatar, ranging from clothing to

body parts, from the stores within these worlds and pay money in various forms. In this context, the question arises: what motivates users to purchase virtual items for their avatars on online game platforms? Answering this question and providing a model for it can provide valuable insights for various audiences, including academics, brand owners, and game developers.

On the one hand, "The gaming industry is on the rise and every season, they come up with a new technology that more efficiently swallows us into the fantasy and interactive world of video and computer games" (Shahghasemi, 2020). Numerous reports provide enticing projections of the income growth of virtual game worlds. For instance, the Grayscale company report titled "The Metaverse; Web 3.0 Virtual cloud economies" predicted that "revenue from virtual gaming worlds could increase from \$180 billion in 2020 to \$400 billion in 2025". Also, the Metaverse gaming market report published on the Global Market Estimates (2023), predicts that "The Global Metaverse in Gaming Market is projected to grow from USD 36.81 billion in 2022 to USD 710.21 billion at a CAGR value of 38.2% from 2022 to 2027". Therefore, many developers of these games are attempting to enter the Metaverse to capitalize on this market's opportunities. In these game worlds, brand owners and retailers have discovered a new market for virtual items. It is also estimated that "Gaming is currently a \$180B global industry that derives 75% of its revenue from virtual items — nearly a four-fold increase in market share for this business model over the last decade. By 2025, games and AR/VR experiences in virtual worlds — what I call the Metaverse — will be a \$390B industry and get nearly all of its revenue from virtual items" (Radoff, 2021; Jamalpour & Derabi, 2022).

More than half (51%) of global users of metaverse virtual worlds are under the age of 13 (By Bit Learn, 2023; Kimani, 2013). Therefore, most virtual item consumers in this enormous market are children and adolescents experiencing a new form of consumption. In addition to studying the motivations for the consumption of virtual items in virtual game worlds, it is necessary to identify the consequences of consumption on consumers. This research aims to answer the questions of what motivates users to use avatar-specific virtual items and the potential repercussions of using these items are. The Zepeto gaming platform from the Metaverse has been selected to answer these two questions. This platform was chosen because Zepeto is the largest game metaverse in Asia, with over 300 million users worldwide (Kim, 2022), and has become a popular game metaverse platform very quickly. On the other hand, Zepeto is from South Korea, which provides K-pop and K-pop dance fans with metaverse experiences and has many children and teenage fans in Iran. In addition, Zepeto is creating a thriving fashion ecosystem and forming partnerships with global fashion and entertainment industry leaders (Ameli & Akhavan, 2023). The theory of consumption values is employed to answer the research questions posed in this article, and its conceptual model is extracted. In addition, the effects of virtual item consumption on Iranian users corresponding to the model's components have been analyzed.

A review of the relevant literature in this field reveals that some studies conducted in relation to avatar-specific virtual items on platforms have focused on the motivation for purchasing virtual clothes and have frequently employed theories such as fashion psychology or motivational theories and consumption values, but have not addressed the repercussions of the consumption of these virtual items on the consumer society. For example, a paper titled "The Perceived value of digital fashion product and purchase intention: The mediating role of the flow experience in metaverse platforms" was published in 2023 by Park et al., (2023) which sought to investigate digital fashion products in the context of the metaverse platform and to empirically examine the effect of the metaverse platform characteristics on the purchase intention of digital fashion products based on users' flow experience and perceived product value. Among the metaverse platform's characteristics, telepresence, social interaction, and economic flow had significant effects on users' flow experience, whereas continuity and content creation did not. Also, Sheng authored the 2023 article "The Consumer Behavior Analysis of Virtual Clothes." The theoretical frameworks of fashion psychology, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and motivational and hedonic value theories were used by Sheng. The study identifies nine significant motivations for people to purchase virtual clothing. It summarizes the hedonic, social, and functional value of virtual clothing. In 2021, Khelladi (2021) presented a paper titled "Individuals' motivations to purchase virtual clothes" at the IEEE International Conference on Technology Management, Operations, and Decisions. The paper focuses on the psychological aspects of purchasing NFT virtual clothes. They argue that while autonomy, praise, and communication act as motivators influencing the intention to purchase digital clothing, attention-seeking and reputation act as inhibitors. Another article titled "Virtual fashion and avatar design: a survey of consumers and designers" focuses on avatar design in Second Life and uses a survey to provide an empirical overview of the shopping and content creation behaviours of virtual fashionistas in

Second Life. In the virtual world, the results suggest relationships between technology and culture that give rise to concrete forms of sociality, style, embodiment, and gender. The paper concludes with a discussion of the role of usability in driving the desirability of fashion products, bodies, and even gender performances in virtual environments (Bardzell, 2010). Virtual fashion items have also received attention in marketing, and research has been conducted in this area. For instance, the 2023 article "Brands are calling your AVATAR in Metaverse—A study to explore XR-based gamification marketing activities and consumer-based brand equity in virtual world" evaluates the conceptual model based on cross-cultural data from two emerging countries in Asia and Africa. The study employs a two-stage, hybrid mechanism consisting of PLS-SEM and neural network modelling. The study offers insights into the Metaverse — a new taxonomy of technology — in the context of embodiment, the presence of AVATAR, and interactivity in the virtual world, with the social exchange theory as its foundation. Also, it suggests that practitioners should emphasize brand authenticity when projecting their brand in the Metaverse. (Arya, 2023).

Regarding the Zepeto platform, most research has centered on the reasons for its adoption and use. In a study conducted in South Korea, for instance, the experience of Zepeto users was evaluated based on the variables of Zepeto's usefulness, Zepeto's ease of use, content quality, users' attitude, and behavioral intent (Lee and Ray, 2022). In another study titled "Case Study; Zepeto game as an avatar platform for promoting the Western lifestyle", the user experience of Iranians in Zepeto and the determining factors that affect the desire of Iranian users to play in Zepeto, as well as the cultural challenges of this game, were examined within the framework of the technology acceptance model (Ameli& Akhavan, 2023).

INTRODUCING ZEPETO

The South Korean technology giant Naver Z Corporation launched Zepeto, one of South Korea's Metaverse platforms and the largest Metaverse in Asia. This platform was created in 2018 by the selfie app Snow, a subsidiary of Naver Z (Liao, 2020; Fu, 2021). Zepeto has more than 300 million users (Kim, 2022), of which 80% are teenagers, 70% are girls between the ages of 13 and 24, and 95% are from countries other than South Korea, particularly China and Indonesia. In addition, the content production budget for this Metaverse until 2022 was 100 million dollars (Fu, 2022). No information on the number of active Iranian users on Zepeto or their demographics is available.

Accessories and fashion items, virtual worlds that users can discover, live broadcasts and events are the types of content found on Zepeto. Also, by 2021, this platform had released approximately 1.5 billion virtual fashion items in its in-game store, including clothing, cosmetics, and decorative items from famous brands such as Dior, Gucci, Nike, etc., or related to famous groups such as BLACKPINK or BTS (Fu, 2021). According to a report by Naver Z, "more than 13 million BLACKPINK-related virtual items had been sold on this platform" (Koreabizwire, 2022). In addition, Zepeto partnered with fashion school Istituto Marangoni Miami (IMM) to attract students interested in virtual fashion (Fu, 2021).

THEORY OF CONSUMPTION VALUES

The theory of consumption values is essentially a "marketing theory" that is utilized in studies about the consumption of virtual items and focuses on examining the "motivation for consumers' consumption behavior through consumption values" (Tanrikulu, 2021; Jamalpour & Yaghoobi-Derabi, 2022). Sheth and his colleagues used this theory to explain why consumers choose one product or brand over another in 1991, and they explain that it can be applied to "a full range of product types (consumer non-durables, consumer durables, industrial goods, and services)." According to them, three fundamental propositions are axiomatic to the theory:

- Consumer choice is a function of multiple consumption values.
- Consumption values contribute differentially to any given choice situation.
- Consumption values are independent (Sheth et al., 1991; Shariati et al., 2013).

They consider consumption values to include "functional value, social value, emotional value, epistemic value, and conditional value" that influence the consumer's decision-making process (Sheth et al., 1991). Also mentioned is the concept of perceived value of the product, which refers to the consumer's belief and understanding of how much she will benefit from purchasing a product (Kim, 2008).

Based on Shesh and her colleagues' fundamental model, numerous studies in various fields have been conducted, and it has been gradually modified.

Regarding virtual items and digital artifacts, for instance, Sheng, (2023) conducted a study titled "User acceptance of hedonic digital artifacts: A theory of consumption values perspective"; within the framework of the theory of consumption values, "Visual/musical Appeal value, social value, and playfulness value" have been identified for selecting mobile ringtones. Or according to the findings of the study "Analysis of consumer behavior of virtual clothes", the motivation to purchase virtual clothes is influenced by "hedonic value, social value, and functional value." Below is a summary of the value classification's themes.

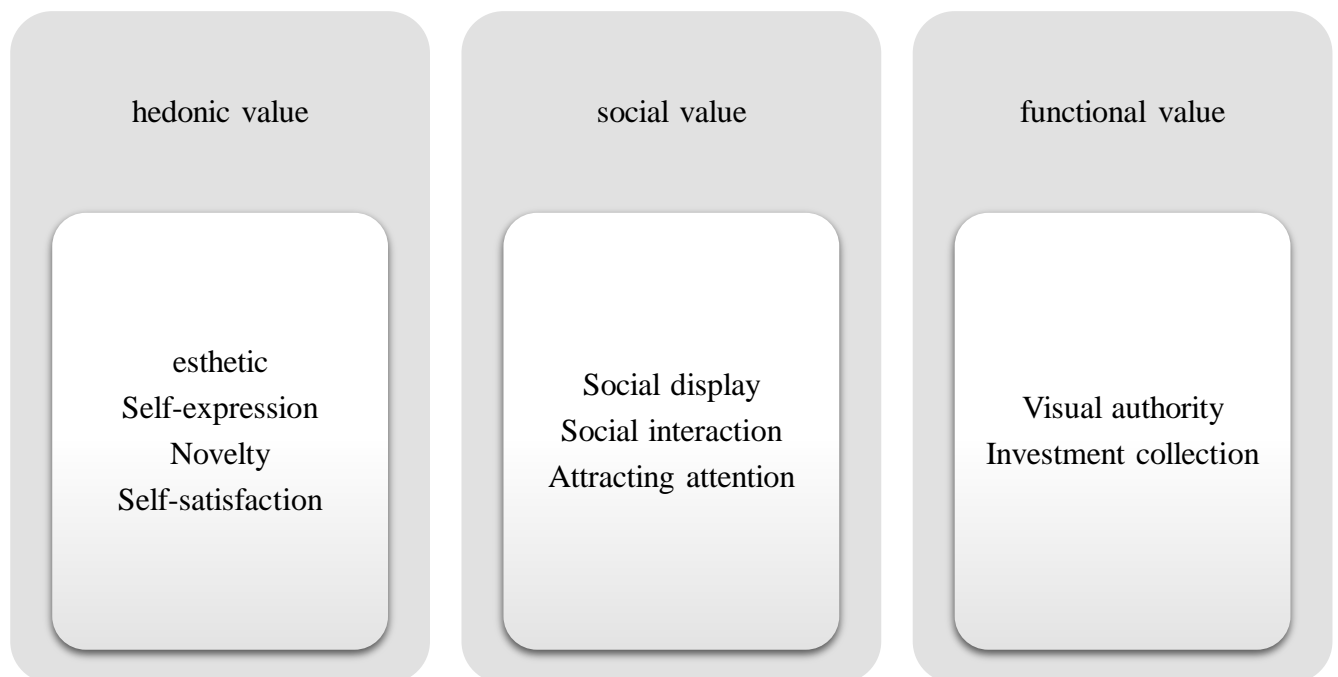


Figure 1. Hedonic, social and functional values (Sheng, 2023)

METHODOLOGY

This article employs in-depth and semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to collect data (Davoudi, 2018). All Iranian Zepeto platform users who play Zepeto at least once per week and modify their avatar items weekly or more frequently were the target community. Also, in this article, a random sampling method was used, and 35 people were interviewed until theoretical saturation was reached; however, the findings of this qualitative study are not intended to be generalized. An effort was made to select samples from both boys and girls, but as stated, 70% of Zepeto users worldwide are female (Fu, 2021), and among Iranian users, few boys were found on Zepeto, and none of them wished to be interviewed. Therefore, the samples for this study were comprised solely of 7- to 14-year-old females. Online text communication was used in the interview because access to the samples was restricted to the direct section of Zepeto or the direct Instagram platform. Also, because the respondents belonged to an age group that had restrictions on how much time they could spend online, the interview questions were asked in multiple sessions, with a maximum of five questions per session, and data collection took a month.

Within the framework of consumption values theory, this research was conducted using theme analysis, which seeks to extract important themes at multiple levels. The main themes and their relationships are depicted in the diagram below.

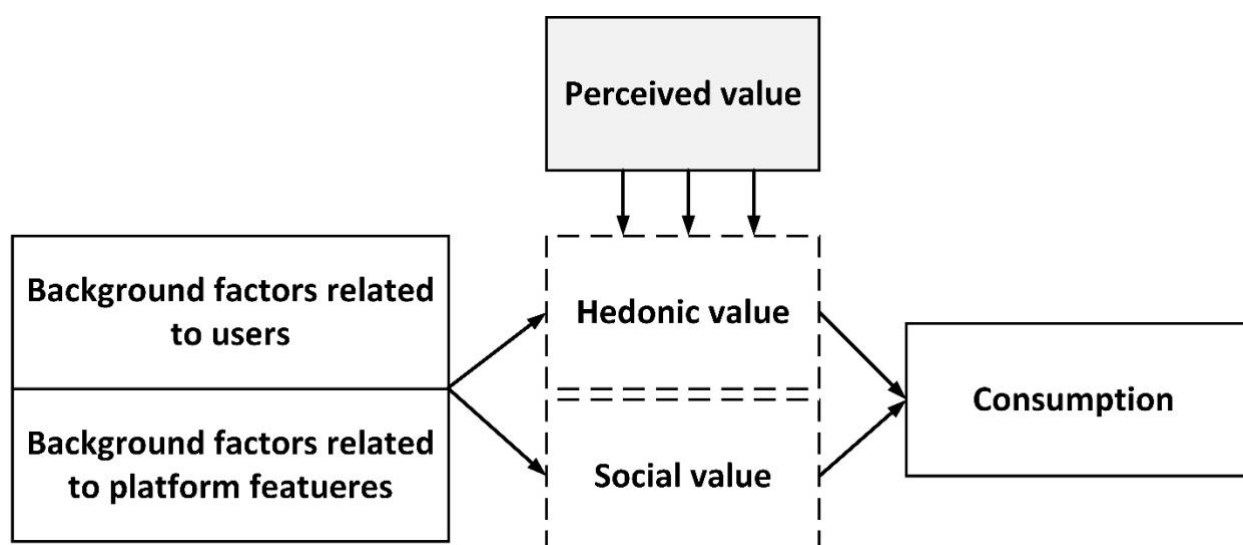


Figure 2. Proposed model to study the motivations for consumption of avatar-specific virtual items on the Zepeto platform

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The themes extracted from interviews with Iranian Zepeto platform users are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Themes extracted from interviews with Iranian Zepeto users.

Main themes	Subtopics
Background factors related to users	Availability Self-perception: 1 - As a regular gamer (someone who is active in Zepeto at least once per week for more than 30 minutes); 2- As an enthusiast (someone who, on average, spends at least 30 minutes per day on Zepeto and alters his clothes or avatar's appearance at least once per week); 3- As a game addict (someone who, on average, spends at least one hour per day on Zepeto and alters their clothes or avatar's appearance daily).
Background factors related to platform features	Nature of in-game virtual items Earn money in the game
Perceived hedonic value	Selectivity Visual attractiveness Immerse in a fantasy world The pleasure of shopping Discover other aspects of being Being up-to-date
Perceived social value	To have self-respect Reconstruction of social status Social representation of group belonging Expression of gratitude and friendship

Background factors related to users

In this study, some respondents said they have a personal mobile phone and have installed the Zepeto game. In contrast, another group said they do not have a personal mobile phone and play the game on their parents' phones in a limited and supervised manner. In addition, some respondents who said they played Zepeto on their mobile phones considered themselves enthusiasts, spending more than a half-hour in the game nearly every day of the week and altering their avatar's clothing or skin at least once per week. Several respondents also described themselves as game addicts, stating that they spend more than an hour per day on Zepeto and alter their clothes or avatar's appearance almost daily.

Girl, 12 years old: "I play Zepeto for 2-3 hours every day and I change my avatar's clothes every day and the appeal of this game is because of the different clothes in the store that we can buy for our avatar."

Background factors related to platform features

The virtual items in the Zepeto game are from various international brands or belong to famous groups and Korean idols, which are presented in the game's store, and users must pay in-game currency (Zem), diamonds, or even real money to acquire them.

Girl, 12 years old: "Zepeto volume is high and we need internet to map and play. But because it doesn't need VPN and there are beautiful clothes in the store, I like it".

Girl, 11 years old: "Many of Zepeto's famous brands and people's clothes are expensive and if someone wants to look like them, they have to buy diamonds outside the game with real money to be able to buy new and fashionable clothes inside the game. And only children with rich families can do this".

In addition, the results of this study indicate that visiting Zepeto appears to have become a daily routine for most sample users. The system of earning money in the game and receiving coins and diamonds, which it provides to users daily, contributes to this daily habit and the game's attractiveness and fun. In part of Zepeto, receiving coins throughout the day is contingent upon viewing advertisements at specific time intervals, requiring the user to visit Zepeto multiple times per day at different hours to receive coins. Users become accustomed to visiting Zepeto due to this system.

Girl, 8 years old: "In order to be able to buy my favorite clothes for my avatar, I have to see an advertisement, and for this reason, I come to Zepeto three or four times a day at different times so that I can collect enough money."

Perceived hedonic value

One of the benefits of using virtual items for avatars is "selectivity," and users are free to alter their avatar's appearance at any time. All respondents to this study cited the freedom to select and alter their avatar's attire and appearance as an attractive feature. In addition, some respondents stated that their freedom is restricted to the options available in the game's store and that the clothing that suits their taste and opinion according to their native context is unavailable in these stores.

Girl, 13 years old: "The fact that I can buy any clothes I like for my avatar, or make my hair and face the way I want, makes me feel very good".

Girl, 9 years old: "Clothes that look like my real clothes are not in Zepeto and I have to choose from the same things that are in the store section."

"Visual attractiveness" of avatar-specific virtual items is another factor that affects the consumption of avatar-specific virtual items, and users use them to have a beautiful avatar, as making the avatar more attractive is important to users.

Girl, 8 years old: "In Zepeto, I can change the body and different parts of my avatar's face at any time and make the shape of any famous and beautiful avatar. I wish I could really change my face whenever I wanted".

The respondents of this study identified "immersion in a fantasy world" as another factor that determines enjoyment, which refers to living in a dream through consumption.

Girl, 10 years old: "When I'm in Zepeto, it's like I'm a different person in another place, I'm having a lot of fun and it's like I'm in a beautiful cartoon world".

"The pleasure of shopping" is another factor influencing the consumption of avatar-specific virtual items. All respondents to this research expressed satisfaction that they can purchase anything they desire, whenever they desire, in Zepeto.

Girl, 8 years old: "In Zepeto, I can buy a lot of clothes and other things, or mark anything I like to buy later when I can earn more money".

"Discover other aspects of being" is an experience that provides users with new imaginative possibilities and brings them pleasure. According to Colin Campbell (2004, as cited by Lehdonvirta, 2009), "Consumption is not a means of constructing an identity, but a means of discovering an identity," when users are in the virtual store, they are exposed to various goods. On the other hand, the user can design each part of his body and clothing independently. As a result, they can engage in exploratory consumption, experiment with different ways of arrangement, and realize new design possibilities that they might not have been able to imagine otherwise.

Girl, 13 years old: "In Zepeto, I can make my avatar in such a way that I can become an older girl wearing brands like the rich girls of my classmates, and be my friend's fashion model, and others will imitate me".

In Zepeto, users can experience "being up-to-date" and on-trend fashion-wise. In Zepeto's in-game store, new items are consistently added to the store's new section, and fashion items are added to different sections, giving users the satisfaction of being current by consuming these new items. Alternatively, some Zepeto users stated that they only care about consuming fashion items, regardless of whether they are female or male, and that avatars with transgender appearances are more ambiguous and appealing to them.

Girl, 11 years old: "I like to buy whatever is fashionable in Zepeto for my avatar and always be on trend".

Girl, 12 years old: "I just want to buy fashion clothes for my avatar and I don't care if it's a girl or a boy".

Perceived social value

One of the motivations influencing the consumption of avatar-specific virtual items in Zepeto is "having self-respect" through displaying consumption achievements.

Girl, 13 years old: "I only play on Zepeto with people who have an avatar that has very expensive clothes and looks, because it shows that they are a professional and not an ordinary user".

Some users of this platform engage in the "reconstruction of social status" in the Zepeto game universe. By consuming virtual fashion, updating their avatar, and utilizing other capabilities of this platform, such as holding live events and interacting with others, Zepeto players establish their place in the Zepeto community and society.

Girl, 12 years old: "Among my friends who play in Zepeto, I am above all of them. Both my avatar's clothes and my avatar's appearance are always new, and I know how to map more than them, and I know all the groups".

"Social representation of group" is another factor influencing the consumption of virtual items on Zepeto. Image platforms such as Zepeto allow users to become community or group members, and a community has formed around this image. In Zepeto, some stores sell virtual items organized into subgroups, and users use fashion items from that subgroup to demonstrate their membership. Fashion consumption is a means of announcing group membership and setting individuals apart from others. For instance, BLACKPINK fan groups demonstrate their support by purchasing and consuming the group's fashion items and viewing the group's fashion shows.

Girl, 11 years old: "I make my avatar in such a way that, for example, it shows that I like anime very much or that I like the clothes of the Black Pink group very much and I go to groups or Zepeto worlds that are fans of them".

In Zepeto, "expressions of gratitude and friendship" typically involve gifting virtual fashion items. Gifting is typically done on behalf of the platform, celebrities to attract and retain followers and popularity, friends or to express a desire to be friends, or users may request gifts from other users. Some respondents to this study indicated that they give gifts to their friends and may even post about the gifts they receive on social media platforms such as Instagram to demonstrate gratitude and happiness. However, they also stated that giving someone a gift demonstrates their strength in the game, experience, and ability to earn money. Additionally, they claimed that users who have many followers and are a source of imitation always give gifts to others. Gifting is a form of communication, a sign of friendship, and an indication of your position within the game.

Girl, 13 years old: "When someone gives me a gift in Zepeto, I think that he is a good and kind friend, and he must be very good at playing and rich enough to give me a gift".

DISCUSSION

According to the findings, the use of avatar-specific virtual items has the following effects on children who play Zepeto:

Adolescence of childhood

As stated, 80 percent of Zepeto users are teenagers, and 70 percent are female. All of the female respondents in this study were between the ages of 7 and 14 years old, and they used virtual fashion in this game, citing the use of virtual items for avatars as part of the game's appeal. This age group, between childhood and adolescence, has been referred to as "tweens" since the 1940s in the American consumer society, and this demographic has become one of the clothing industry's primary targets. This new age

group is defined by the fact that children start caring about their appearance at a young age, begin dressing and grooming themselves like teenagers, and engage in adult leisure activities such as a variety of media products such as computer games, which leads to early maturity and adolescence in children (Hjavar, 2013).

Playing in Zepeto as a new bourgeois activity

According to this study's respondents, the Zepeto game has an appropriate file size (74.29 MB), facilitating its selection and installation on a mobile device. On the other hand, high-speed internet is required because this game is played online. Also, purchasing fashion items from well-known brands or popular Korean idols in Zepeto requires a large number of diamonds, which most users cannot obtain in-game; therefore, they purchase diamonds with real money and use them to purchase expensive items in the game. This platform allows users to play with attractive, up-to-date avatars and spend money in the real world.

Zepeto as a virtual store of fashion items to a game platform

Instead of a gaming platform, Zepeto can be viewed as a virtual fashion store. Zepeto is defined as a game metaverse platform. Still, rather than users coming there to play, they come to Zepeto to consume virtual fashion items, and according to some respondents, its primary appeal relative to other platforms is its appealing fashion store. This game serves as a sort of introductory cultural textbook, teaching children how to dress and shop as teenagers.

The illusion of personal choice freedom and the reality of being trapped by fashion consumption

Alongside the freedom of users to select virtual items, it is impossible to ignore the fact that they are trapped in Zepeto, in the consumption of fashion, and forced to select from predetermined options. As some of the respondents to this study also mentioned, they must choose from the items in this game's virtual store and are limited in their ability to create avatars that reflect their actual appearance and clothing.

On the other hand, this restriction is not limited to the consumption of fashion items; instead, there is a new pressure among users to conform to the in-game rules, i.e. fashion consumption and the fear of being left behind. Therefore, a form of illusion of freedom of choice and pressure to be fashionable works against users' preferences.

More body manipulation to enhance the aesthetic value of avatars and dismembered bodies

In Zepeto, a form of additional manipulation of the body, as well as fragmentation of the body and attention to the beauty of each piece, are considered for their visual appeal. According to some respondents of this study, the ability to customize different aspects of their avatar in Zepeto is an attractive feature, and it has become increasingly important to make them more attractive in addition to updating them. The user's visualization in Zepeto takes the form of an avatar, an object whose entire body is segmented and adjustable, and each segment can be adjusted independently. Therefore, the most beautiful avatar is more objectified and embellished, and the user constantly manipulates himself to have a more beautiful avatar, making the issue of manipulating the appearance significant for the user.

Consumption-based immersion, identification with the fantasy world, and living the dream

In this fictional universe, users experience identification. "Identification is a temporary change in the user's perception of himself" (Klimmt et al., 2009, as cited in Looy et al., 2012: 202). In fact, "it is a mental process that a person perceives himself as It creates a character and understands itself based on the characteristics of that character" (Konijn and Hoorn, 2005, cited in Looy et al., 2012: 200). This method of identification is related to self-discrepancy theory, which refers to the distinction between "real self" (similar identification) and "one's ideal self" (aspirational identification). People strive for "harmony and balance between their real and ideal selves." The avatar is implicitly regarded as the user's "self-concept" and embodied presence. According to this study's respondents, they can experience different identities by selecting different looks and clothing styles and become overwhelmed by their fake identities, the source of identification. Fantasy identification is one of the most potent motivators of games and one of the determining factors of enjoyment, and these games are comparable to a "safe and private laboratory for children" (Looy et al., 2012).

Spend money (real or in-game currency) on virtual goods and cultivate a new generation of devoted customers

As a number of respondents mentioned, one of the perks of playing in Zepeto is the ability to shop and amass a closet full of clothing from various brands. Purchasing and spending money (real/in-game currency) for virtual goods can foster a new generation of brand-loyal consumers. In Zepeto, vendors encourage immature minds incapable of recognizing the true value of goods to earn money through various means and spend it on purchasing illogical items. Fashion companies are training a new generation of "loyal consumers" with the environment of this game (Lehdonvirta, 2009).

Transsexualization of virtual fashion product consumption: According to some respondents of this study, the choice of clothing and appearance for the avatar is made regardless of gender and based solely on Zepeto's fashion trends. Based on this, it is possible to assert that a type of transgenderization of the consumption of virtual fashion goods, as well as the removal of gender from fashion items and their mixing, has occurred and that multiple interpretations are possible. This ambiguity and mystery, as well as the possibility of diverse interpretations of gender identity, allow users to experience identity diversity. Within these games, new femininity and masculinity boundaries are created.

Personhood and being acknowledged by displaying consumer accomplishments

Axel Hjavard, (2013) has distinguished three distinct types of recognition: 1) "love," which is strong emotional ties between people in the private sphere that gives a person's self-confidence; 2) Respect, which is the confirmation of a person's moral responsibility by others in the public domain, which gives a person a sense of self-respect, and 3) esteem which is the recognition of one's achievements as a member of a group. In Zepeto, possessing diamonds, Zems, and more expensive and newer virtual items is regarded as an accomplishment, and displaying these consumer achievements is a source of respect and recognition for the user. Furthermore, achievement is reduced to material achievement. Some respondents to this study have also mentioned this issue, stating that the more expensive an avatar's clothes and appearance, the more professional the user is, and they prefer to play with such an individual.

Purchasing a position in the game universe: In Zepeto, a user's avatar reflects his social standing in the game world. As some respondents also mentioned in this game, avatars are popular and have the most followers. They are viewed as a source of imitation of fashion consumption by users with the most expensive and recent clothing and body. However, the ability to purchase the most expensive and newest clothes for the avatar requires spending money. Most of these items can be purchased with in-game diamonds, which are extremely difficult to obtain. Anyone who purchases diamonds in this game with real money can purchase these items. Therefore, the ability to purchase diamonds with real money is a measure of a user's social status, and virtual fashion items are indicators that allow users to establish a new social position in the world of games. Users of this age learn that they can obtain a new position in the game with money and without exerting effort. In reality, a high position in the Zepeto achievement hierarchy does not necessarily indicate that the user has a great deal of game experience, and the user is aware that they can increase their position, acceptability, and credibility in the game by spending money.

Strengthening the culture of fandom

It is evident that the consumption of virtual fashion items occurs within the culture of fandom and favouring virtual celebrities. In discussions about consumer society, commodity consumption became a cultural issue in the late 1950s (when workers achieved relative prosperity and could purchase and consume goods to meet their needs and out of desire). In addition, in the 1970s, the issue of how subcultures produce meaning through the use of goods was recognized. In recent decades, researchers have focused on the study of commodity consumption and popular culture (Storey, 2003). Numerous sub-celebrities in Zepeto serve as a source of imitation for consuming fashion items. Pioneer users in this game are their followers and imitators, and secondly, they become a source of imitation of fashion consumption for other players. Sub-celebrities on Zepeto consume the newest and most expensive fashion items, have the habit of giving gifts and going live, etc., and are known for their generosity.

CONCLUSION

Cyberspace is a media environment where instead of audiences it relies on the role of *users*, as active participants who determine what and how news, ideas, beliefs and goods are consumed (Sabbar & Matheson, 2019). In the Iranian context this is where the challenges of the massive flow of fake news

(Sabzali et al., 2022), a new celebrity economy (Sarfi et al., 2021), effective or ineffective social activism (Zohouri et al., 2020) and trust and media credibility have been discussed (Sabbar & Hyun, 2016). In this study, the Zepeto platform was used to investigate the consumption pattern of virtual items for avatars. Within its framework, the factors influencing the consumption of these items and their effects on the consumer group were examined. As stated, in the American capitalist society, tweens have been defined as a distinct consumer group since the 1940s. Particularly, the introduction of Mattel's Barbie doll can be viewed as a turning point in the adolescentization of children, which has brought a new lifestyle and consumption pattern emphasizing sexual expression. After that, numerous studies were conducted with this new definition of childhood, and the capitalist system gradually developed a powerful theoretical apparatus for it, as well as this approach in other nations. Instead of emphasizing the child's need to learn and adapt to the demands of the adult world and social norms and conformity, the child is viewed as a whole and active human being in this new approach. It is believed that they should act in accordance with their own needs and consume as they please (Hjavard, 2013). The crucial point, however, is that this definition of childhood is based on the American consumer society, which does not permit children to remain children; instead, they become "premature adults" and face difficulties and lack the social and emotional maturity to deal with them. During their adventure in this virtual world, users of the Zepeto game consume virtual fashion items from various brands, and practicing fashion becomes one of the game's functions.

Furthermore, in American society, beginning in the second half of the 20th century, as a result of the sexual freedom revolution and other events, "displaying" the body as a public matter was considered, and this movement paved the way through the image, and the image then dominated society. Also, in the liberal system's theoretical framework, it was proposed that man has an inner body and an outer body and that the inner body is experienced as a subject. In contrast, the outer body is an object of public concern. Consumption-related commoditization and demonstrative characteristics characterize it. As a result of such an approach, the body becomes the bearer of market values, the body is the criterion for social acceptance, and consumption becomes a means of self-expression, taste expression, and a mode of representation. Such an approach to the body is perpetually reproduced to secure the material benefits of the capitalist system. Every part of the avatar's body can be altered, and the consumption of expensive new fashion items determines the avatar's worth.

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