Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36515

Playing the Myth: How Gamified Digital Fashion Turns Luxury Brands into Cultural Symbols

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Abstract. Why do luxury houses, whose value depends on keeping people out, keep building games that let everyone in? This paper looks at a decade of fashion brands entering game and virtual worlds, from Burberry's casual mini-games to a Gucci handbag on Roblox that briefly cost more than the real one. Consumer research on digital fashion explains why players want virtual garments, but says little about what brands gain. This paper takes the brand side. Reading well-documented cases through self-determination theory, cultural branding, and the circuit of culture, we argue that the strongest brands are doing more than advertising: they are turning their emblems into cultural symbols. The conversion runs through four cumulative levels, from attention and experience to ritual and owned assets, each deepening psychological need satisfaction rather than mere exposure, and it stalls when a brand misreads the host culture, as the controversies that engulfed two Honor of Kings collaborations show. The framework explains why mechanically sound launches can still fail without cultural fit, and offers brands a staged model for earning symbolic value in game worlds.

Keywords: digital fashion, gamification, luxury branding, cultural branding, self-determination theory

1. Introduction

Fashion has always been played as much as worn, but over the past decade play has become literal business. Gucci sold a virtual handbag on Roblox that resellers briefly priced above its physical counterpart [1]. Louis Vuitton built the travelling trunk for the League of Legends World Championship trophy and later released its own adventure game [2, 3]. Burberry asked players to bounce a monogrammed deer up a leaderboard [4]. These moves made front pages in the fashion and gaming press alike, yet scholarship has had little to say about what they are actually for.

The puzzle is real. Luxury value supposedly rests on scarcity and distance; games are abundant and open to everyone. Reading these initiatives as advertising does not explain their form. Brands are not buying banners in games; they are building rituals around their logos, from limited drops to championship ceremonies, and some of these rituals end with a virtual object worth more than the physical bag it copies. Our claim is that what luxury brands seek in play is symbolic: to convert the brand itself into a cultural symbol, an emblem carrying shared meaning inside a community, rather than a short burst of attention.

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The commercial context explains the timing. Luxury is pivoting from product to culture business: sixteen hard-luxury houses staged museum-grade exhibitions in China in early 2026, including Rolex's centenary Oyster Story at Shanghai's West Bund Dome [5], while high-net-worth consumers plan to raise experience spending by 12% and cut material consumption by 10% [6]. Games are the digital wing of that pivot.

The demand side is already well documented. Digital fashion, meaning garments made for digital environments rather than for the body, draws consumers through visual appeal, customisability and the chance to render identities that physical clothing cannot [7, 8], and work on Chinese gaming communities shows how platform dynamics shape that engagement [9]. What is missing is the brand side: how firms should design play so that this demand hardens into lasting symbolic and economic value. This paper takes up that question, comparing widely reported brand initiatives and condensing what they show into a four-level framework with testable propositions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Digital fashion and consumer demand

Digital fashion covers garments and accessories that exist in games, on avatars and in augmented reality rather than in cloth. It helps to keep the category distinct from NFT fashion, where the point is blockchain-certified ownership rather than aesthetic experience; a game skin can be digital fashion without being an NFT, and conflating the two muddies what consumers actually pay for [10]. Surveys find that buyers value virtual garments for how they look, how far they can be customised and how freely they allow identity experiment [7, 8]. Notice what these drivers share: they are properties of symbols, not utilities. A virtual jacket keeps no one warm; all of its value is expressive and social, which is why it can carry a brand's meaning and why treating it as a novelty banner undersells it.

2.2. Play, brand experience and cultural branding

Two further literatures complete the frame. Gamification research, usually read through self-determination theory, shows that experiences satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness produce intrinsic motivation and downstream loyalty [11], and studies of fashion brands' gaming collaborations tie immersive play to brand coolness and brand equity [12]. Brand-experience research adds that brands are built through encounters people sense, feel and do rather than through messages alone [13], while narrative theory explains why stories persuade: absorption lowers counter-arguing and invites identification [14, 15]. Cultural branding pushes furthest, arguing that iconic brands acquire meaning collectively, through myth and ritual, often before the firm itself understands what happened [16]. Games are among the most ritualised spaces in contemporary culture, and the possessions won there increasingly count as extensions of self [17, 18], meaning cycling constantly between collective ceremonies and personal objects [19]. The circuit of culture names the loop such transfers travel — representation, production, consumption, identity and regulation [20] — so the brand-side question is where in the loop play intervenes. Whether that transfer works depends on culture: designs rooted in one heritage read differently to insiders and outsiders [21], a point the failed cases make painfully concrete.

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3. Methodology

This is a conceptual paper in the theory-synthesis mode [22]. We combine the three streams above and discipline the result against comparative mini-cases: initiatives by Burberry, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Dior, Balenciaga and Nike's RTFKT, chosen for documentation quality, plus two Honor of Kings collaborations that met public backlash and serve as boundary cases. Multiple-case logic supports analytic rather than statistical generalisation [23]. Public reporting cannot supply internal KPIs, so we claim no effect sizes; the cases fix the contours of the phenomenon, and the framework organises them into propositions.

3.1. Case analysis: luxury fashion brands in game and virtual worlds

Read side by side, the cases sort themselves into four depths of engagement (Table 1). At the shallowest sits attention: Burberry's B Bounce and Gucci Arcade are casual games buying reach and dwell time that a lookbook never could [4, 24]. A step deeper are full experience worlds. Balenciaga showed its Autumn/Winter 2021 collection as Afterworld, a playable journey through a branded future, then moved into Fortnite with skins and an in-game hub [25, 26]: here the game is the collection. Deeper still, brands enter the existing ceremonies of play. Louis Vuitton placed its craft ritual inside an esports championship watched by tens of millions [2], then retold its founding myth as an adventure game seeded with Beeple relics [3], while Dior wrapped its house myths in an interactive tarot ritual. A ritual is returned to, together. The deepest cases end in possessions. Gucci's Roblox Dionysus briefly resold above the physical bag [1], and RTFKT's Clone X avatars traded as identity markers at scale [27].

The failures teach as much as the successes. Burberry and Bulgari both announced skins for Honor of Kings, China's largest mobile game, and both were engulfed in controversy within days. Burberry's 2021 collaboration dissolved after the game's operator cut ties during the Xinjiang cotton controversy [28]; Bulgari's 2023 unveiling triggered boycott calls within a day over a Taiwan listing on its website [29]. Mechanically both were sound. What broke was cultural fit: the brands' outside actions had violated the host community's expectations, and the community withdrew their licence. Symbolic conversion is granted by players rather than bought by brands.

3.2. A four-level framework: from attention to asset

Figure 1 arranges these depths into four cumulative levels. Attention buys reach. Experience lets players explore the brand's mythology first-hand. Ritual makes the emblem part of a community's recurring ceremonies. Asset begins when scarce, story-laden virtual objects are owned, displayed and traded as extensions of self [18]. The engine is need satisfaction: autonomy grows from playing to exploring to owning, competence from challenge and mastery, relatedness once participation signals belonging [11]. In circuit terms, attention and experience work on representation, ritual installs the emblem in collective identity, assets complete consumption, and cultural fit regulates the loop [20]. We propose: P1. Gamified brand encounters raise engagement through autonomy, competence and relatedness satisfaction, relative to non-playful exposure. P2. Narrative, world-level play builds stronger brand-self connection than mechanic-level play, through transportation and identification [14, 15]. P3. Symbolic meaning accrues only when play is ritualised rather than one-off [16]. P4. Asset value emerges only where scarcity and story are jointly present [1]. P5. Cultural fit between brand narrative and host culture moderates the passage to ritual and asset levels, and misalignment can revoke the licence entirely [28, 29, 21].

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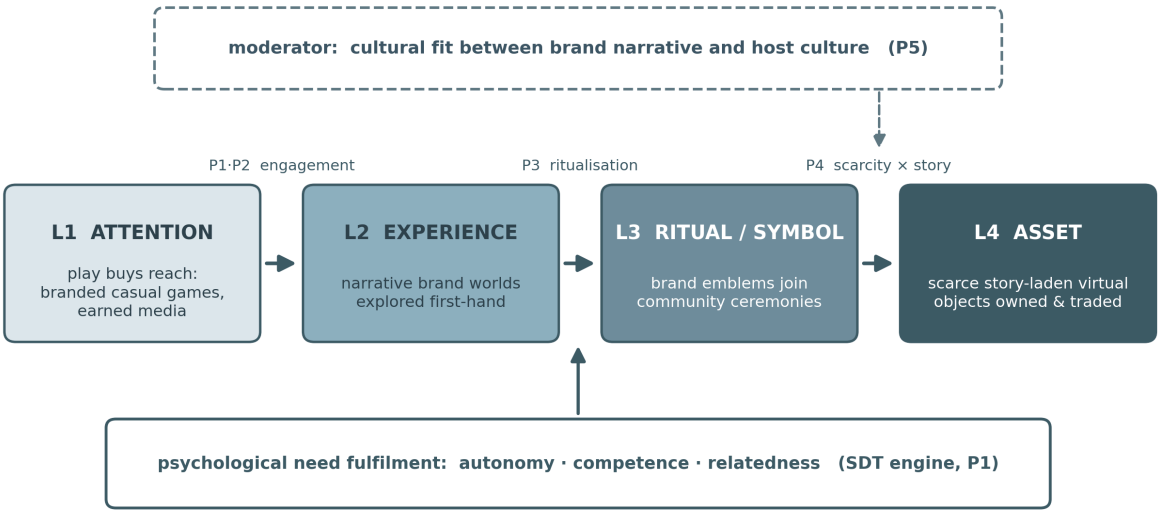

Figure 1. The four-level framework from attention to asset, powered by psychological need fulfilment and moderated by cultural fit

Table 1. Cases across the four levels of gamified digital fashion engagement

Case	Primary level	Mechanism and outcome
Burberry B Bounce (2019)	L1 Attention	Casual leaderboard play converts reach into earned media and sharing
Gucci Arcade (2019)	L1 Attention	In-app retro mini-games extend dwell time inside the brand's own channel
Balenciaga Afterworld; Balenciaga × Fortnite (2020–21)	L2 Experience	Playable collection world; narrative exploration of brand mythology
Louis Vuitton × League of Legends (2019)	L3 Ritual / Symbol	Trophy trunk and prestige skins inside an esports championship ceremony
Louis: The Game; Dior Tarot (2021)	L3 Ritual / Symbol	Founding myths retold as collectible relic hunts and divination rituals
Gucci Dionysus on Roblox (2021)	L4 Asset	Scarce virtual icon briefly resold above the physical bag's retail price
RTFKT × Takashi Murakami Clone X (2021)	L4 Asset	Artist-myth avatars traded as identity possessions at scale
Burberry × Honor of Kings (2021)	Failure at L3	Cultural-fit violation; collaboration dissolved before launch
Bulgari × Honor of Kings (2023)	Failure at L3	Community backlash; skin cancelled within days

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4. Discussion

For brands, the framework warns against two symmetrical mistakes. One is treating games as media space: a reskinned casual game buys attention, but attention without experience or ritual decays fast. The other is treating virtual goods as merchandise, minting scarcity without story, whereas the asset-level successes fused an icon or an artist myth with limited supply [1, 27]. Because the moderator is cultural, a global play strategy is really a set of local symbolic strategies; the same skin that delights one community can read as outside misalignment in another [21]. The propositions are testable with tools fashion research already uses: experiments contrasting mechanic- and narrative-level play on established SDT scales, social listening paired with surveys across ritual cycles [10], and backlash events as natural experiments. Luxury's turn to the culture business [5, 6] raises the stakes: the levels mark where a house stands in the culture economy, not only in games.

5. Conclusion

What, then, are luxury brands doing in games? The strongest are not buying attention; they are converting play into cultural symbolism, climbing from attention through experience into ritual and, at the limit, into owned and traded assets. The climb is powered by psychological need satisfaction and gated by cultural fit, which is why the mechanics that crowned Louis Vuitton's trophy trunk also killed two skins on Honor of Kings. Researchers get propositions linking gamification mechanics to brand symbolism; brands get a design logic: build worlds, join rituals, mint story-laden scarcity, and respect the host culture's terms. As digital fashion matures, the winners will be the houses that treat play not as media but as myth-making.

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