Fashioning identity online:
How online avatars are fundamentally shifting the relation between fashion and the performance of identity

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Abstract

Fashion has always played a central role in shaping and transforming how gender and identity are performed. This paper discusses how the internet, or precisely the online avatar, is now shifting the relationship between fashion and the performance of gender identity. It begins by looking at the history of how gender is performed through fashion. Then, drawing upon performance theory from Erving Goffman, J.L. Austin and Judith Butler, the paper articulates how the relation between fashion and gender identity occurs.

The paper then discusses Amber Case’s ideas about the cyborg and our second selves online. The online avatar is explained and special attention is paid to two particularly famous avatars that are now on the social media platform Instagram, their relationship with both fashion and identity and how their virtual existence is influencing the physical world around us. Gender bending in the gaming environment is considered to be hinting at a future where people can completely control their own identities, regardless of their physical bodies and online avatars might then be the very thing that can emancipate a person’s performance of identity from their bodies, in ways that can have impact on the real world.
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**Introduction**

Fashion has already played a central role in shaping and transforming how gender is performed as an identity. It is a relation that has been both celebrated and highly criticized. Fashion has been both blamed for body-shaming women and equally celebrated for providing a platform for the emancipation and freedom of expression for women. It has played a critical role in giving visibility and expression to queer identities, but equally critiqued for its promotion of heteronormative values. Fashion and the performance of gender identity are central to each other and always have been, but the relationship has shifted and expanded over time. This paper will pay attention to the relation between the two and specifically consider how the internet and more precisely the emergence of the online avatar on social media is potentially fundamentally shifting the relation between fashion and the performance of gender identity.

This paper begins by looking historically at the relation between fashion and gender. Then, drawing upon performance theory, from Erving Goffman, J. L. Austin and Judith Butler, the paper tries to articulate how this relation between fashion and gender identity happens. With this as a foundation, the paper then turns its attention onto the world of fashion and online avatars and proposes that the internet and the emergence of these avatars has the potential to fundamentally shift the relation between fashion and identity. In this thesis, I will draw upon the ideas of Amber Case and her understanding of our online second selves. I will explain the virtual avatar, as well as paying special attention to two particularly famous ones that are now on the social media platform Instagram. By naming and reflecting upon the implication of a number of examples, I will explain how these virtual characters are now having a real impact on the physical world. Taking into account how the fashion industry has been endlessly critiqued, and often for good reason, and equally how it has been celebrated for its capacity to empower, I find it hopeful to speculate on, and argue for, the positive possibilities of the future of fashion in relation to technology.
1. Fashion shapes identity

Fashion has always had a relationship with identity formation. However, this relationship can be understood in many ways. In a postmodern consumer society there is an enormous pressure for individuals to define themselves in society and how people do that could be one of the ways we could explain the term identity.

The term fashion shouldn’t be confused with clothing, however, even though the two are very much connected. Clothes are definitely a very important part of fashion, especially because of their intimate relationship with our bodies, but fashion is about more than that.¹

In her book, *Adorned in Dreams*, Elizabeth Wilson discusses how identities can be expressed through fashion, by tracing the cultural and social history of fashion. She proposes that fashion is the visual communication we present to the world through our bodies. It is about the extensions of the body we choose, the clothing, the accessories and so on, and it is about the way we manipulate our bodies. It is our mental expression through our physical selves. This means that fashion is so much more than the clothes we wear. Wilson communicates this lucidly in the following way:

> The earliest forms of ‘clothing’ seem to have been adornments such as body painting, ornaments, scarifications (scarring), tattooing, masks and often constricting neck and waist bands. Many of these deformed, reformed or otherwise modified the body.²

From the very beginning, humans across cultures have been expressing identities through fashion, and each fashion has been loaded with meaning. The meaning has of course been different throughout history, depending on where in the world one would be situated, and at what point in time, but fashion has always played a role in how bodies perform identity.

In pre-industrial societies the majority of people could not easily afford new clothing, they were simply too expensive. Everything was either hand-made or produced on a small scale. Every single piece of clothing or accessories took an enormous amount of labor and time, so fashion was primarily for the rich at the time. The way people dressed mostly distinguished rich from poor, so the only identity people were expressing through their

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clothes at this period was their social status, but equally the genders of male and female were marked through their clothing and accessories.3

The Industrial Revolution began in Britain in the 18th century. It was the transition to new manufacturing processes and textiles were the dominant industry at the time. The world moved away from craftsmanship and towards mass production.4 As a result, clothing had become cheaper and more accessible to the lower classes, and since fashion was now more readily available to all classes, the identities expressed were less about social structure, and more about gender.

It wasn’t until the eighteenth century that gender difference started to be far more of a central influence on the way people dressed and fashion became an instrument in a heightened consciousness of gendered individuality. In the early 1800s, functional simplicity became trendy for men. It started with the Great Masculine Renunciation, which is a historical phenomenon in which men abandoned all pretension to beauty. Men rejected the desire to be beautiful, and elaborately dressed and it was the beginning of the three-piece suit which was considered more practical than aesthetical. The advancement of aesthetic fashion was left almost entirely to women who were left alone continuing to use dress as a form of display.5

At the same time the women’s role in society was being narrowed and dress was becoming more exaggerated in distinguishing gender. For women, fashion had elements of social control that was widely adopted. Clothing for women at this point became so physically restricted and impractical that they made the simplest tasks overly difficult.

In the nineteenth century, the appearance of the bourgeois woman was an artistic production. To achieve status, women needed to express uniqueness and stand out while also following what was fashionable at the time. Women worked so hard on their appearance that it became more and more associated with identity. It was the beginning of the idea of the formation of “self”. It was not only a shift in fashion, but also in identity in general.6

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4 Morris Tanenbaum and William K. Holstein, “Mass production”, Britannica, November 15, 2018, britannica.com/technology/mass-production#ref68154
Dress reform was a movement in the middle of the Victorian era, where reformers proposed and designed more comfortable and practical clothing for women. Dress reformists were mostly middle class women involved in the first wave of feminism. They were influential in persuading women to adopt to simplified garments for athletic activities.

Trousers were one of the basic garments exclusive to men. It was not only socially unacceptable for women to wear trousers, it was also forbidden by law in many regions. Many women at the time were frustrated by how restrictive their caged dresses were, and how impossible it was to do things wearing them. One of these women was Elizabeth Smith Miller, who felt she needed to change the acceptable outfit. Miller became one of the first women in the United States to wear a type of trousers, under a knee-length skirt, that would eventually be called bloomers. Wearing bloomers became a feminist act, even though outside the movement, bloomers didn’t become everyday wear like Miller and other feminists had hoped. The fight started again when the French designer Paul Poiret put a pair of pants on the market. They were more feminine than the bloomers so they were both functional and flattering. In 1917, a woman wearing pants first appeared on the cover of Vogue magazine. Then, during World War II in the 1940s, women had to fill men’s positions in the workplace, where they then needed to wear pants for safety reasons. This trend faded away again after the war ended. But the final and lasting change came in the early 1970s with the second wave feminism. Fashion began to cross gender lines and unisex fashion became more common practiced.⁷

In the twentieth century, society had become more tolerable towards gender ambiguity and sexuality. Today we cannot read the strict roles of class, age, and gender as we could before, even though they are still there. Modern fashion plays a lot with the distinction between masculinity and femininity and has become even more obsessed with identities now that they are more fragmented. Fashion has become an unavoidable part of identity of the self and even those who refuse to play the game of fashion need to pick something to wear, extension, adornment, which then represent a reaction against fashion, which is a political opinion that they are now expressing with their appearance.

Since fashion is so loaded with meaning it has throughout history purposely been used to send a message in a form of social rebellion.

Mainstream fashion is mostly about constructing the social self, regardless of all the other possibilities and meanings. It is about self-presentation and performance on a daily basis, and it is about belonging to a group but still being unique within that group.8

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, fashion has become self-aware. Fashion is now not only involved in shaping identities but is also reflecting upon itself and analyzing its own role. This particular movement in fashion is called “critical fashion”. Critical fashion is a branch of the fashion industry that proposes a new space in criticism and cultural practice.9 Critical fashion ask questions and makes us think and it ignores the need to create products for mass consumption. Practitioners still work with the dress, but in a symbolic way, in order to critically address certain problems or concerns.10 One example of critical fashion might be the book Fashioning Identity by Maria Mackinney-Valentin. In her text, she introduces the idea that fashion can also be about the state of undress and relates the rise of the gender fluidity to the growing effort to promote positive body image. Analysing Lena Dunham and the TV show Girls, where Dunham has pushed the perceptions of the female body ideals, and Dove’s self-esteem-driven campaign “Real Beauty”, Mackinney-Valentin proposes that beauty standards are often gender specific and the body image movement is about embracing yourself as you are.11 She proposes that the body is fashioned even in a state of undress and therefore holds potential on its own for status representation. The suggestion is that while the fashion industry provides the majority of the tools for fashioning identity in the form of clothing and accessories, there are also forces that circumvent this system by operating with the body as not something to be dressed or shaped but as the tool itself.12

Equally as significant, in this proposition of Mackinney-Valentin, is the placing of the body as the site of negotiation for fashion and identity. Whether it is about dressing or undressing this body, it is the body through fashion’s history with identity that is consistently being renegotiated, performed and presented.

10 Lara Torres, “Fashion in the Expanded Field: Strategies for Critical Fashion Practices”, (London: University of the Arts), http://researchportal.port.ac.uk/portal/files/10298530/Fashion_in_the_expanded_field.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3imhs0PsjriWw2ITFwd9gCUkJJGKIn7U6EnrVNF1OsVtRGQqzC14rJyYg
Another example of a designer working within the context of critical fashion that challenges the notion of the centrality of the body in fashion and identity, is Gareth Pugh, who is mentioned in the book *Critical Fashion Practice* by Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas. Pugh is interested in speculations about the body and humanity itself. With his clothes, he reinvents the body from the outside, while ignoring what is on the inside. Pugh is also inspired by transhumanism and post-humanism, and his work invites us to think about the limits of the body and the limits of identity. “With humanism, Pinocchio wanted to become a boy, with transhumanism and post-humanism, the boy wants to become Pinocchio.”¹³ According to Gareth Pugh, post-humanism is about understanding ourselves in relation to gender and sexuality and it is about our relationship with the nonhuman and the technological.¹⁴

As such, Pugh and his work within the field of critical fashion points us towards the central thrust of this thesis, namely that while the relation between fashion and gender identity has always been negotiated at the level of extensions to the body – the introduction of new technologies in fashion might point us towards a post-human reality where the body – and extensions to that body – might not be the site of negotiation for the performance of identity any longer.

At its heart, as is illustrated in both examples, critical fashion is about the questioning and communication of ideas through the medium of fashion, unlike traditional fashion design that is about developing a product for the mass market. Sometimes these two can merge, but equally critical fashion can stand on its own. Critical fashion is also about questioning assumptions about what fashion really means, and within that in certain moments, critical fashion is about what identity is and how it takes place. When thinking about the online avatars, this paper approaches them with this double lens. Online avatars are both forms that take a space in the industry and have real world impacts on the fashion industry and market, as well as forms that purposely invite criticality.

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2. Performing identity

Before launching into the future and imagining a world where the body is left behind, perhaps it is helpful to consider a bit further how identity is negotiated through the body.

Sociologist Erving Goffman wrote a book in 1959 called *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. In the book, Goffman uses the vocabulary of theater to explain face-to-face social interactions and identity performance. According to Goffman, social interactions are like theater, where each person is an actor on stage, playing a specific role. Goffman says that in the social interaction, there is the “front stage”, just like in theater, where people are more aware of their audience and expectations of their roles and there is also a “backstage”, where the individual can relax and the role of their identity doesn’t need to be portrayed. Performance is the term he refers to, to explain the activity and behavior of the individual in front of a specific audience. Through behavior and doing, the individual performs their identity to others. The actor may or may not be aware of their performance, but the audience is constantly attributing meaning to it and the actor.

A part of the presentation is appearance. The appearance is portrayed with dress and props, or in other words fashion. Through fashion, the body is dressed in its social identity like gender, status, age and so on.

With this Erving Goffman tries to articulate how identities are formed and how they become a reality. His theory is very helpful towards understanding the relation between fashion, the body and identity, but also somewhat problematic. In Goffman’s model, there is a front and a backstage, where the body enters and exits the theatricality of identity. As such, Goffman implies that once a person is backstage, they become the more real version of themselves. The body is undressed and as such is becomes closer to the truth.15

Philosopher of language, J. L. Austin was the first one to define “performativity” as the capacity of speech and communication to act. Judith Butler, a philosopher and gender theorist agrees with Goffman that identity is socially constructed through performative actions, and building on the ideas of Austin, she argues that it is through speech and nonverbal communication that identities are formed. However she challenges Goffman’s ideas by saying that there is no backstage and we are always performing the self(s). According to her, there can also be multiple selves, and no self is more real than another.

In her book, Butler challenges assumptions about the union that is often made between sex and gender, and rather argues that sex is biological, and gender is culturally constructed. For Butler, gender is culturally constructed, which governs the materialization of bodies, but is subject to change.\(^1\) Since then, performance theory and gender studies have played an important part in understanding fashion as a cultural performance of a sexual and cultural identity, in framing the body as a complex site of negotiation for fashion to navigate in its engagements with gender identity and in identity more broadly. Far from the body being as a blank canvas, the body and its extensions both enhance but equally trouble each other. If, for example, someone’s body does not ally with their own sense of identity, such as someone with a female body that does not identify as a woman, or to think about Butler’s notion of multiple all equally real selves, it is possible that my biological body aligns with some of my identities, but troubles others. Where the extension of a body might be aligned with the person’s performance of identity, the body may become a potential disturbance. Thus, the appeal of technologies that can take us from our bodies entirely.\(^2\)

In the light of Butler’s work, we can now understand better the performance practices and how they have impacted fashion in general and particularly the catwalk performance of fashion. An example of a critical fashion designer who is influenced by Butler is Rick Owens. Owens plays a lot with gender and not only in his garments but also how he showcases them. As an example, in his 2014 Spring/Summer collection show “Vicious,” where he used largely mixed-race, plus-sized models. The models marched, stomped and beat their chests and they were scowling and grimacing the music that sounded like the combination of club techno and tribal drum. Another example would be in “Cyclopes”, his Spring/Summer 2016 collection for women, where models carried one another down the runway, strapped upside down on each other’s bodies as if they were backpacks. This collection was about sisterhood or women supporting other women, where the straps were used to symbolize the female bond.\(^3\)

Crucially though, for the purposes of this paper, what Butler’s ideas raise that are of primary importance is the notion that the biological body is to be somewhat mistrusted when it comes to the question of gender performance, with fashion as an ally that can adorn and extend that body towards desired identities.

\(^{2}\) Ibid.
3. Online avatars

Online avatars might be the very thing that can emancipate a person’s performance of identity from their bodies, in ways that can have real world consequences.

Amber Case is an American anthropologist who studies the interaction between humans and technology. In her work, she defines cyborgs as simply a human who interacts with technology, and therefore declares that we are all cyborgs, meaning that we all use technology as extensions of ourselves. According to Case, the technology can be a physical or mental extensions and not necessarily implanted for us to be cyborgs. In her Ted talk, titled “We Are All Cyborgs Now”, she introduces the idea of the second self. She argues that these days we now have two selves: one digital and one physical. She says we constantly need to maintain this second self that is always connected to others and that we must present ourselves in digital life in a similar way that we would in our analogue lives. She talks about how we need to think about the way we present ourselves online as we do in our physical lives and also need to maintain the image we want to portray. What she is talking about is of course when we share our personal lives on social media, but we filter it and portray only what we want others to see, and therefore control the way others see us. What is perhaps most interesting here is how broad and playful this spectrum of construction of one’s second self can be. Of course, many of us use the online space to create a heightened version of our real-world selves, but others are doing what they can to live out whole other identities.19

Social media is a form of electronic communication, like websites for social networking or applications. Users can create personal profiles and share their lives and thoughts on these platforms, and connect to one another.

Instagram is a photo and video sharing social media service, which launched in October 2010, founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. To begin with, regular people would use the application as they did other social media, and post spontaneous pictures of their everyday lives for their friends and families. Posts can be private, but they can also be public, which means that anyone can find them, like them and even follow the person that posted.

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19 Amber Case, "We are all cyborgs now " (lecture, TEDWomen 2012, December, 2010), http://ted.com/talks/amber_case_we_are_all_cyborgs_now
With a designed and interesting feed or a good Instagram strategy, regular people can then gain an enormous amount of followers and have so called social media fame.

When the users of Instagram have established credibility and audience, they can then become “Instagram Influencers”. Influencers get sent free goods and money from companies who want to promote their product. The companies associated with Influencers are mostly fashion brands, and therefore Instagram has become fashion’s favorite social media platform. Since a lot of work normally goes into such posts, they are not really a representation of real life any more, but more like a staged version of reality, mixed with advertisement. The atmosphere on Instagram makes it the perfect environment to play with, in terms of reality and virtual reality.

Virtual worlds have been used since the mid-1980, primarily for social networking. They are computed-generated environments, where people can interact with one another. In the virtual worlds people generally adopt an “avatar” which is the graphical representation of the user. Some of the most popular virtual worlds are in fact gaming environments, such as EVE Online and World of Warcraft, but there is also Second Life, which is primarily for social networking, rather than a game. As an avatar, you can explore the world, meet other avatars, participate in activities, shop and do most things you can do in the real world. Second Life also has its own virtual currency, which can be exchanged with a real world currency. With a virtual body the user has to create their own online identity, and can therefore either merge it with their real physical selves, or separate it. These arenas are rich with a culture of gender bending, where users swap genders in online games using avatars. Socio-cultural norms from the offline world are transferred and cultivated in the online world, specifically in the gaming environments. The connection between the notion of a digital self and the socio-cultural norms in the gaming environments illustrate a paradox between sexism and gender performance. Most people prefer their avatars to be the same as their corporeal gender identity, but there are still many cases where people reverse it in the online sphere.

Often, when women choose to become men in these situation, it is not because they identify as men, but because they experience harassment or trolling as women. Some gamers also do this just for fun, in order to experience the world as the opposite gender. Gender bending is not only for the gaming environment, but also other virtual worlds.

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People who live their lives as men in the real world, for example, could be living out the identity of a woman, or gender non-conformer, in the online virtual space. By using an avatar, people can completely control their own identities, regardless of their physical bodies. These possibilities are being harnessed across all online contexts and people are constructing multiple entirely other versions of themselves.  

Virtual celebrities have been around for years, first emerging in the late 1990s with the virtual band Gorillaz, whose visual identity consisted of four animated characters. Finally, over a decade later, the fashion industry woke up to the opportunity, when Louis Vuitton’s Marc Jacobs designed tour costumes for the virtual avatar Hatsune Miku, which is a Japanese singer who performs onstage as an animated projection hologram. In his paper, “Examining the Rise of Hatsune Miku: The First International Virtual Icon”, Linh K. Le discusses what she represents both for the fans and for academia, and what the power of globalization and social media has to do with her fame. He says:

However, in looking at those cases, what we have seen is how real life events facilitate actions in social media. On the other hand, Hatsune Miku provides a case study for the exact opposite: how an event/ persona created by social media inspires actions in real life.  

This is perhaps crucial to paying attention to the significance of what is emerging. The real world is not immune to these events taking place in the virtual space. The real world is being implicated and somewhat transformed by these virtual realities.

A more recent example of virtual avatars have been emerging on Instagram lately. Miquela Sousa, or @lilmiquela on Instagram, is a 19-year-old, Brazilian/Spanish influencer with 1.5 million Instagram followers. Although she is in fact computer generated, she prefers to be looked at as an individual. Miquela is heavily involved in real life’s social causes like Black Lives Matter, and she also supports an organization called Black Girls Code, which encourages technology training for girls.

Miquela is an Influencer, so her feed has a lot of “outfit-of-the-day” posts, where she wears brands like Chanel, Proenza Schouler, Supreme, Vetements and Vans. In February 2018, she officially collaborated with Prada for Milan Fashion Week by posting gifs of herself at

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the Milan show venue wearing their latest collection. This tells us that it doesn’t really matter to brands if the Influencer is computer-generated, especially if the avatar has as much influence on its following as a “real” person. Miquela seems to be influencing real people according to the amount of followers she has, and all the engagement on her posts although some of the comments on her posts indicate some confusion from fans, whether she is real or not. Damian Fowler interviewed Miquela for BBC where she was asked what she thought of “virtual celebrities”, and her answer was:

I think most of the celebrities in popular culture are virtual! It’s been disheartening to watch misinformation and memes warp our democracy, but I think that speaks to the power of “virtual”. Eventually “virtual” shapes our reality and I think that’s why I’m so passionate about using virtual spaces like Instagram to push for positive change.

Real life Instagram Influencers and social media personalities like the Kardashians, alter their bodies and edit images of themselves so much that the virtual Avatars just naturally blend in. The average user also uses applications and filters and other technology to alter their appearance for Instagram, so there is no wonder we can’t see the difference, especially since they have started to occupy spaces that we think of as reserved for real-life people. So now we not only have real world identities, trying to portray themselves as a fantasy, but we also have virtual identities trying to break through to reality. The line between the real and the virtual is blurrier than ever.

Shudu gram, another big digital influencer, created by British former photographer Cameron-James Wilson is also worth critical attention. Shudu is the world first digital supermodel and is ‘signed’ to The Digitalis, the world’s first all-digital modelling agency. To begin with, Wilson did not inform his audience about Shudu being exclusively virtual. The images are so realistic that people honestly thought she was real. As a photographer, Wilson has worked in fashion for a decade, photoshopping real people to look less real, so he knew exactly what to do, to make his computer generated avatar look real. “Nothing really represents reality” Wilson said.

Shudu posted her first picture on Instagram only one year ago and now has 150k followers.

She quickly gained followers when Fenty Beauty, the make-up brand owned by Rihanna, posted an image of Shudu wearing its orange shade of lipstick.

The fact that Shudu is created by a twenty-eight-year-old white man has sparked controversy from the very beginning. Some people expressed their dislike because a digital version of a black model was being used instead of an actual woman while others praised him for promoting black beauty.25

Olivier Rousteing, the creative director of Balmain, hired Shudu as a model and teamed up with Wilson to create two Balmain-exclusive digital supermodels as a virtual army for Balmain’s Pre-Fall 2018 campaign. With the virtual army, he is trying to represent different beauty, shapes, ages, and genders. “This is the beginning of what it will mean to present diversity in the world.”, he says when speaking to Refinery29 about the inspiration behind the campaign.26 Miquela and Shudu are without a question the most famous avatars on Instagram right now, but they are not the only ones. In an interview with Cosmopolitan, Wilson discusses the future of CGI modeling. He sees that not only as a character creation but also a future avenue for real-life models. Models could have their whole body scanned, and then uploaded as virtual avatars, that look exactly like them. They could then book multiple gigs at a time, or just book a gig and not show up physically.27 Social media is conventionally thought of as representation of reality, while virtual worlds are thought of as fantasy. Shudu and Miquela are blurring these distinctions by communicating identities as avatars, through the language of fashion in a cyberspace typically reserved for real people.

4. Blurred realities in fashion

All of this has huge implications for not only fashion, but reality itself. As this paper has discussed, fashion has always been about performing identities through using extensions that negotiate with a biological body. But when identity is no longer needing to negotiate with a body that is biologically assigned the potential for constructing multiple selves,

becomes exponential. The virtual body is a technological body and can therefore much more easily be manipulated and perfected, and has been discussed in this paper fashion (body extensions and manipulations) are playing a big part in this. How a person is born in the physical world has no meaning in the virtual world, which also makes it a safe space for people to explore their identity with fashion as a toolbox for that.

As many of us live ever increasing amounts of our lives and interactions with others in online virtual spaces these second selves, become first selves. And as this paper has discussed, this is not without real world consequences. Marginalized identities can choose how they are perceived by others and create their own identities online, in turn giving them real world visibility, voice and power. A number of studies have been done on the subject of Internet use and social well-being and the results have been both negative and positive. Internet use has been linked with depression and loneliness, but when the internet use included participation in social communities it has been linked to better self-esteem and well-being. When a person has a positive experience using the virtual world, expressing their identity, it has been shown to carry over into their physical lives. Physical and virtual lives are frequently thought of as two unconnected places, but due to the permeability, it should perhaps be thought of as one life that exists along a continuum.

In the virtual world, how the body is dressed or undressed matters, just like the physical world. Therefore virtual clothes are equally important in the formation of identity in cyberspace, as it is in the physical world.

In the virtual worlds, biological sex has no functionality. With the use of an avatar, the gender can be chosen and manipulated. If there is no avatar, gender is assumed and applied through pronouns. People feminize or masculinize themselves, or present themselves as androgynous to suit their own ideas about their gender identity. This means that the audience have no way of knowing if the person behind the screen is in anyway similar to

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how they portray themselves. The virtual world makes gender less substantive than it has been before and shows it for the immaterial socially constructed concept that it is.31

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to situate the emergence of the online avatar within the context of fashion and specifically its relation to the performance of identity, and in particular gender identities. Drawing a line from the 17th century to the 21st century, I have argued that the relation between fashion and identity is central to understanding fashion, as well central to understanding how identity is shaped, transformed and performed.

I discussed the ideas of Goffman in order to better understand the presentation of the self, and to further his ideas, Judith Butler, who has had a big influence on feminism and queer theory, as well as fashion design and performance theory. When Butler argues that gender is performed and culturally constructed, she also argues that identity is not only about the physical body. Although, fashion has throughout history been about the body, the way we dress and adorn the body and the way we modify it. Avatars could be thought of as our virtual bodies, and since fashion plays such an important role in the formation of identities, therefore I think that virtual fashion is very important for the construction of online identities.

The physical body can be a restriction for some to express the identities they identify with. In the online sphere, identities are freed from the limits of biology, and people can choose to become whoever they wish to become. On the down side, our sexism and heteronormative values seemed to have transferred into the gaming environment, considering how common it is for women to obscure their gender, in order to escape trolling and harassment.

Despite that, this could be positive for the model industry, which is known for its unrealistic beauty standards and poor treatment of their models. Both will it be possible to digitize real models and create more affordable campaigns while also minimizing the carbon footprint, and specially make virtual models depending on the designers need. The virtual model becomes a part of the creation and is therefore clearly a fantasy, and making

that distinction is very important for women all over the world who deal with a negative body image.

The creators of the two famous avatars on Instagram I mentioned, Shudu and Miquela, seem to be very occupied with social causes, Miquela is involved in two such causes, and the creator of Shudu, says she is there to promote diversity. Yet they are wearing expensive designers, and promoting a luxurious lifestyle, thus their entire existence is already being commodified. It is yet to be determent, whether these expressions will be powerful enough to win the day.


Case, Amber. "We are all cyborgs now." Lecture at TEDWomen, December, 2010. http://ted.com/talks/amber_case_we_are_all_cyborgs_now.


