

## Fashion design responses to the increasing digitalisation of human interactions and objects

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In this internet age of increasingly new technologies, connections between individuals are made conveniently possible through online social media platforms. This tool allows a powerful form of instant communication between people, defying the bounds of geographic location and time. The convenience and accessible nature of these online spaces replace reliance on physical methods of communication such as letter writing. Subsequently, our relationships with not only other people but also material objects, including fashion are constantly pushed towards digitalisation. It is within these online spaces where personal views of others and ourselves differ from the material world; where reality can be tailored and presented to the public by its users. These platforms act as a respite against death anxiety with the power to transcend its users beyond their inevitable physical death and decay, existing on by their online persona. As more of our interactions with objects and people continue to transition into the digital atmosphere through e-commerce and social media platforms, conversations analysing these implications are vital. Particularly, in this current climate of a global pandemic and mandatory lockdowns, our online consumption has surged, changing the way we interact on the internet. Speculative Fashion Design acknowledges these rapid changes by proposing new ways of consuming online culture. Through utilising digital technology and trends to their advantage, these digital platforms may reduce the need for materiality and further cement our existence into the online realm.

It is important to first acknowledge the way death anxiety plays into everyday life to analyse how it is transformed in the digital realm and reflected into Speculative Fashion Design. One of the earliest discussions surrounding death anxiety appeared in the works of theorist Sigmund Freud's *Reflections of War and Death* (1928). Freud understood death anxiety as not the fear of death itself, maintaining it impossible for our unconscious to recognise its death as it, itself has not faced death and is merely a spectator when

attempting to do so. Rather, Freud saw these fears as reflections of unresolved traumas from childhood (Freud 1928). Drawing from Freud's theory, Anthropologist Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* (1973) further proposes that to manage these existential anxieties, people form and live within elaborate world perspectives that transcend them beyond their mortality. Noting the role that death anxiety plays within the foundations of all culture, Becker states,

... by building an edifice that reflect human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay (Becker 1973, p. 5).

By denying the finality of death, these anxieties are arguably suppressed and easier to manage. However, the dilemma of the human body and its inevitability to age and perish continue to dictate our behaviour in life. *Terror Management Theory* (2000), developed from the theories of Becker's *Denial of Death* (1973) by psychologists, Tom Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenberg and Sheldon Solomon provides an understanding of these behaviours. The theory analyses the relationship between the biological nature of the human body and the mind, seeing the body and soul as separate entities. TMT suggests when people are reminded of their mortality, they cope by furthering their need for

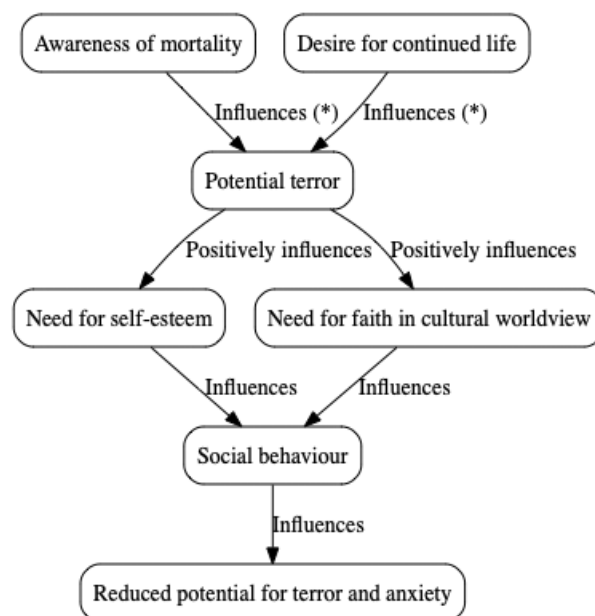


Figure 1: *Terror Management Theory Illustration* by Theory Database, n.d., online image.

structure by embedding themselves into meaningful culture (Goldenberg et al.2000). Yet our bodies are still left with a fate of decay and the unavoidable circumstance of death. Becker (1973, p. 70) reflects on this notion, stating ‘We are gods with anuses’. Because of this, it is inevitable to want to strip oneself from any signs of bodily attributes that remind us of our mortality. Described as the ‘Body Beautiful’, Goldenberg et al. (2000) theorises that in transforming our body physically to meet cultural standards of beauty, we objectify ourselves as a way to remove ourselves from our mortality.

The fear of death is common, and the anxieties associated with death itself are a normal experience. However, as more of our interactions with other people and material objects shift towards online platforms, the experiences of death anxiety are also transformed (Gibson 2019). With deceased users predicted to soon outnumber the living (Öhman & Watson 2019), it immensely reflects how intertwined we are with the digital realm. As online consumption continues to rise, especially with the current Covid-19 pandemic, where mandatory city lockdowns across the globe forced people to rely heavily on digital platforms (Koeze & Popper 2020), it is important to understand the significance digitalisation have on our views of ourselves, people, and physical objects, including fashion.

The digital realm offers a unique opportunity to invent oneself, where the solution to the body problem presented in Terror Management Theory can be altered to the desire of the individual. Using digital applications such as Facetune, individuals can modify their online appearance, making it easier to conform to cultural beauty standards if they choose to. These behaviours have been so ingrained in the online culture that social media platforms such as Instagram and Snap Chat have integrated filters into their camera interface (Solon 2018). As online personas are separate from the physical body we can choose to reveal or conceal aspects of ourselves. By presenting a curated feed on these social applications, we can alter our reality and exist as an idealised version of ourselves, separated from the truthful realities of our physical self. More so, we can outlive our physical

bodies through the digital remains that are left behind by our online personas. Dr Margaret Gibson, an academic researcher specialising in mourning, grief, and representations of death, explores the complexities and implications of death in online communities, focusing on the virtual avatar social platform, Second Life. Gibson (2019) notes a repetitive pattern of the ‘avatar aesthetic’ where most users present themselves as youthful with exaggerated plastic-surgery-like proportions. The ‘Body Beautiful’ in TMT becomes even more intensified on these platforms compared to more mainstream social media. The avatars are truly stripped from their ‘creatureliness’ and are objects of perceived beauty. They do not age, eat, excrete, or suffer afflictions as the physical body does, they are age and death-defying bodies (Gibson 2019). The appearance of each avatar is custom designed by its user, giving the individual complete autonomy on how they present themselves. Although the appearances of the avatars are one aspect of this virtual world, fashion plays a larger role. Compared to fashion in the material world, where the accessibility to fashion is influenced by factors including money, location, status, and self-esteem, the barriers are significantly reduced on the digital platform. Second life has presented a new platform for people to participate in fashion. By having a marketplace with an in-game economy, users can purchase these digital clothing for their avatar and engage with non-tangible fashion. Its players can contribute to this market by uploading and selling or

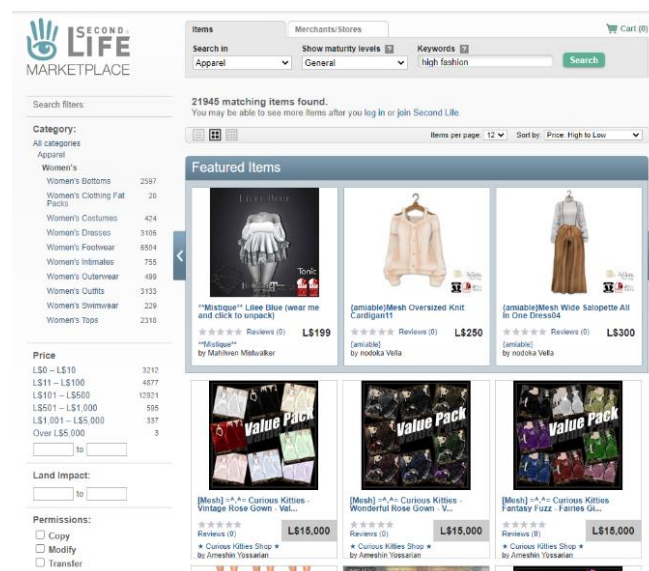


Figure 2: Screenshot of the Second Life marketplace by Second Life, n.d., online image.

trading their fashion-designed garments using Linden Dollars, a digital currency developed by the company that can be bought and exchanged back with \$USD (Scott 2019). Although digital fashion and material fashion are separate entities of each other, with one observed through a screen and the other physically worn, digital garments also reflect the culture and trends that exist in the physical world. With various Second Life fashion blogs existing on the internet such as Miaa Rebane’s website where she posts editorial-like shoots of her avatars in replica designer garments

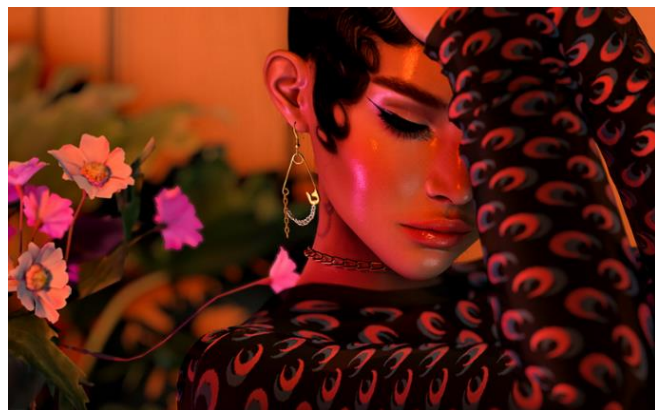


Figure 3: *Think of me when the sky is pink* by Miaa Rebane, 2021, online image.

as shown in Figure 3 (Rebane 2021), it creates new possibilities for material brands to branch out and utilise digital platforms to their advantage.

Through using Speculative Fashion Design practices, where the reimagination of traditional approaches to



Figure 5: *Love lust dress on a model* by Nina Doll, n.d., photograph.



Figure 4: *Love lust dress* by Nina Doll, n.d., online image

dress are used a tool to question the cultural and ethical implications of new technology, well-established brands and independent designers respond by creating digital fashion garments. Using advancing 3D modelling software to design their garments and employing a blockchain-based trading system using Non-fungible Tokens, customers are provided with unique identification codes with their purchase. This gives the customer a digital product that cannot be replicated, essentially a certificate of



Figure 6: *Gucci Virtual 25 Sneaker* by Wanna x Gucci, 2021, online image.

authenticity from the seller (Rathod & Barot 2021). As the market for these products continues to grow, analog fashion brands rush to collaborate with 3D designers to enter the digital industry. Gucci Virtual 25 is a virtual sneaker created from the Wanna x Gucci collaboration and is the first digital-only product available for purchase from Gucci. Designed by the brand’s creative director using augmented reality technology from tech company, Wanna, customers can virtually try on the sneaker through their app. With the shoe priced at \$11.99 USD targeting Gen Z, it creates an accessible entry to the inflated material sneaker market (Nanda 2021). To wear the digital sneaker involves the similar process of using a face filter with a smartphone camera. The virtual shoe appears in real-time through the screen of the phone when the camera is focused on the user’s feet allowing the wearer to adjust the positioning and lighting simultaneously (Hahn 2021). Although established fashion companies begin to introduce digital products within their brand, leading the way into the virtual fashion industry are innovative digital fashion houses, Dress X and The Fabricant. Specialising in creating digital-only garments, these brands have cemented the legitimacy

of virtual fashion by establishing a business that works exclusively in the digital environment. Rather than using AR technology, both companies employ the use of digital tailoring, using images uploaded by their client. These digital companies continue to push the boundaries of the traditional fashion industry, with The Fabricant selling the first digital haute couture dress this year, as shown in Figure 7 (Rathod & Barot 2021). By introducing digital fashion as an alternative to material garments, it changes the way people experience, interact and understand fashion. Fashion becomes more accessible, affordable and can be utilised to alter the way we present ourselves in the online environment.



Figure 7: *Iridescence Dress from The Fabricant* by Julien Boudet, 2021, photograph.

As more of our interactions with other people and objects are transitioning into the digital space, the perceptions we hold of traditional fashion change from the material world. Whereas material objects and our physical bodies are subject to eventual death and decay, the internet allows us to cement our existence in these digital platforms. These technologies alter the traditional discourses surrounding death as the relationship between the dead and living shift with the changes the internet era brings. It is within these platforms where one can seemingly exist forever. Our dependence on online consumption is complex, and digital fashion designers respond by creating new ways to interact within these spaces. Through accessing fashion on online platforms via digital garments, individuals are able to personalise their online persona to their liking, reducing the need for material objects. Although unlikely that physical objects can be entirely replaced, these digital materials further advance the rising amalgamation of virtual

and physical life.

## List of Figures

1 Theory Database, n.d., *Terror Management Theory Illustration*, online image, Theory Database, viewed 28 April 2021, <<https://theory-database.appspot.com/theory/75>>.

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