

SOFTWARE AND TECHNOLOGY

Is direct-to-avatar' the next DTC for fashion?

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Sharky B is Burberry's first NFT. Image credit: Burberry

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Although the metaverse is still being defined and relevant business opportunities are still being quantified, many luxury fashion labels have already started using metaverse technologies.

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During a session at the *Vogue Business* and Google virtual summit "**The Way Forward**" on Nov. 10, technology experts discussed how brands are already finding success in the metaverse by engaging with online communities. Curiosity in the metaverse is growing exponentially, as brands such as Burberry and Gucci begin experimenting in the arena.

"I think there's a natural baseline appetite for newness [such as the metaverse], but I think what that practically comes down to, the opportunities, is really trying to explain the connection points with the brand stories that we're trying to tell," said Rachel Waller, global vice president of channel innovation at Burberry, London.

"These spaces can allow us to tell those stories and reach new communities who we might not reach otherwise," she said. "We'll just tell the stories in ways that we could never tell them in some of our more traditional canvases."

The conversation was moderated by Maghan McDowell, senior innovation editor at *Vogue Business*.

What is the metaverse?

While the metaverse is still a work in progress, it should be considered the next phase of how society interacts with technology following the Internet Age.

According to Cathy Hackl, chief metaverse officer and CEO at Futures Intelligence Group, the metaverse involves people, places and things connecting in a digital environment.

This encompasses technologies beyond virtual reality a common misconception including, but not limited to, smartphones, blockchain and augmented reality.

For fashion brands, they should consider how they should evolve for "Web 3.0," as physical and digital lifestyles converge. Already, 80 percent of luxury purchases are "digitally influenced" according to McKinsey & Co.

Online platforms such as Roblox, where users can participate in countless shared social experiences, will grow in

their influence and prominence.

In May, Italian fashion label Gucci partnered with the online gaming platform for an interactive virtual exhibit celebrating Gucci Garden Archetypes.

The virtual Gucci Garden space on Roblox replicated the physical, multimedia experience that recently debuted in Florence. Users can explore the immersive space through avatars as well as purchase exclusive, limited-edition avatar items ([see story](#)).

"[Gucci's] brand values are really about self-expression and community and co-creation, and that's the same with Roblox," said Christina Wootton, vice president of brand partnerships at Roblox.

"So when we started talking about our community, and how everybody expresses themselves through visual fashion and their avatars and their creations, we just really felt like it was such a true partnership."

Burberry's Ms. Waller agreed that authenticity is crucial as luxury houses experiment with partnerships in the metaverse.

In August, Burberry introduced a limited-edition, limited-quantity Blanko that can be purchased, upgraded and sold within the Blankos Block Party marketplace.

Burberry's Blanko is a shark named Sharky B, inspired by the brand's Animal Kingdom code. His body is printed with Burberry's oceanic-themed TB Summer Monogram.

Sharky B was not the only NFT included in this launch. Burberry will also introduce in-game NFT accessories, such as a jetpack, armbands and pool shoes that players can use with any of their Blankos ([see story](#)).

"With the [online] communities, with brands, the technology businesses, this is really the moment for us to learn and listen as much as we can, which is a slightly different role for fashion brands in a cultural conversation," Ms. Waller said. "I think that's exciting, and I also think we need to be really thoughtful."

Reaching consumers

The metaverse has opportunities beyond community and brand building, however.

More brands are hiring for roles involving metaverse work, with Facebook even rebranding its parent company as Meta to reflect its new focus ([see story](#)).

Fashion brands such as Gucci and Burberry, as well as Balmain and Ralph Lauren, are also leaning into selling digital goods.

NFT can be traced back to blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies. As affluents become more comfortable with digital currencies, investing in unique online collectibles may be the next step for luxury buyers ([see story](#)).

"I'm really interested in seeing also how the non-fungible token and digital asset side progresses, and how does the legacy luxury brand partner with an up-and-coming IP?" Ms. Hackl said.

"I think it's important for people to kind of start to wrap their heads around the concept of direct-to-avatar, the next direct-to-consumer, and if so, how are you planning to show up in this space?"