

Digital Wonderland in Web3: Utopian Visions and New Activism within the Gucci Community

Marta Sron

University of the Arts London, Fashion Business School

Maxi Heitmayer

University of the Arts London, Fashion Business School

The fashion industry adapts to the emergence of web3 and the Metaverse, causing uncertainty in brand-consumer interactions. In the face of limited literature, a qualitative netnographic approach was adopted to explore the unique dynamics of the Gucci brand community on Discord, a fashion brand web3 community over three weeks. Results indicate a shift from traditional online brand communities, showing a new, community relationship dynamics. A dual function emerges where members relate to the brand's identity while simultaneously valuing community dynamics. As a result, these communities become hubs of mutual support with a unique collective identity intertwined with the brand's personality. The Gucci community emerges as a digital utopia reflecting aspirations for a better future, where members engage in Community Integrated Brand Engagement (CIBE), creatively interacting with the brand through the community's social structure. This research emphasises the potential of web 3 brand communities, providing insights for stakeholders in the fashion industry and web3 developers.

Keywords: Brand Community, Brand Engagement, Gucci, Discord, Utopia, User-Generated Content, Netnography

INTRODUCTION

The recent evolution of web3 promises a decentralised digital world (metaverse) heralding greater data ownership and transparency, and empowering individuals as active contributors. The fashion industry, having change at the very core of its DNA (Easey, 2009), recognises the potential of emerging technologies to influence consumer behaviour (Amed & Berg, 2022) and to attract young, digitally-savvy customers (Amed et al., 2019), which is evidenced by heavy investment in the space. With the metaverse projected to evolve into a trillion-dollar market (Bobier et al., 2022; Moy & Gadgil, 2022), brands are prioritizing discussions around its potential. Web3 technologies are reshaping the way narratives unfold, emphasizing a growing trend of collaboration (e.g. Moncler with game Fortnite), which results in formation of specific digital communities. Discord is one of these “web3 friendly” platforms and Gucci has begun operations there.

Community, as defined in community psychology, involves a sense of belonging and attachment to a dependable group (Sarason, 1974). McMillan & Chavis (1986) identify four core elements: Membership, Influence, Needs Fulfilment, and Emotional Connection. These elements encompass feeling part of the group, reciprocal impact of group dynamics, meeting diverse needs, and fostering a sense of belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996). Community identity is reinforced through symbols and mutual acceptance, facilitating personal growth and connection (Perkins & Long, 2002). Communities, thus, serve as vital support networks, shaping identities and facilitating mutual development. Community psychology further emphasizes the importance of envisioning a better future for the group (Watts et al., 2003), which aligns with principles of utopianism and serves as catalyst for societal transformation Levitas (2013) and inspiring progress (Bloch & Adorno, 1988).

While we are still far from the anticipated future scale of this digital revolution, the associated process of business transformation is entering a novel stage (Meeker, 2019), and fashion brands develop innovative ways to acquire and retain customers, with early indications suggesting that traditional marketing methods are facing significant challenges in web3 environments (Langer, 2022). This study therefore aims to provide a first, in-depth description of web3 communities centred around a (fashion) brand to guide fashion brands on community development in the web3 space. This study focuses on the following research questions:

1. How do web3 brand communities work? What are the activities and behaviours exhibited by community members?
2. How do digital communities form within web3 spaces? What characterises and distinguishes them?
3. What are the psychological implications for users of digital communities and how do these influence the relationships to (fashion) brands?

METHODS

The study employed a non-participative netnographic approach for three weeks, allowing unintrusive observation of digital communities (Kozinets, 2002, 2006, 2022). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Arts London. The Gucci web3 community was chosen for its large membership (53066 participants at the time of data gathering) and high engagement levels. The dataset consists of approximately 12,000 text and visual entry inputs, each accompanied by its corresponding reactions and comments. Microsoft OneNote served as a Digital Journal to organize data types extracted from the Discord chat, following Baetens (2013) on the importance of images in communication. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of Netnographic data identified 3 themes with 2 to 5 subthemes, respectively (see fig. 1). The themes are: *Collective Identity*, *Value Co-Creation* and *Utopia*. All the quotes from community members have been anonymised. In this short paper, only highlights of the findings are presented.

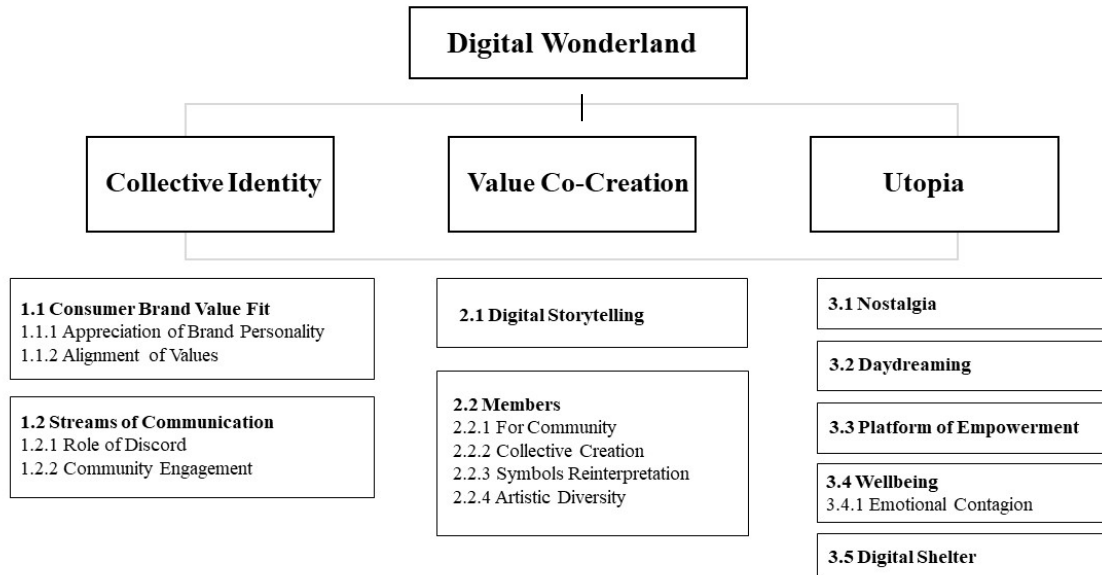


Figure 1: Overview of Themes and Subthemes

1 Collective Identity

1.1 Consumer-Brand Value Fit

1.1.1 Appreciation of Brand Personality

Members actively discussed the brand's personality attributes, emphasising nouns like "creativity", "luxury", "commitment to quality" and placing special emphasis on innovation. Their sentiments were captured in quotes such as "What a time to be alive, history in the making," and "Gucci is pushin", highlighting their appreciation for Gucci's innovative spirit and excitement "I am so happy", "Lego Gucci."

1.1.2 Alignment of Values

Members frequently described Gucci's brand values that align with their own. Comments such as "My favourite aspect of Gucci is their commitment to equality and sustainability" and "Gucci is dope" exemplify this sentiment.

1.2 Streams of Communication

1.2.1 Role of Discord

What sets the Gucci community apart from conventional brand engagement strategies is its utilisation of Discord as a communication medium. Discord does not recommend content algorithmically and encourages a more diverse range of expressions like curated memes, videos, special emojis and stickers than traditional social media. Members chat freely on Discord, where conversations flow naturally due to a transparent format, often with multiple discussions happening at once.

1.2.2 Community Engagement

The Gucci Discord is a place where members engage in a wide array of conversations about fashion and the Gucci brand, but also casual topics like food recommendations.

Furthermore, the community fosters an environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing personal matters like career changes and the challenges of daily life.

Additionally, the community regularly highlights that they are part of the group by using collective pronouns (“we”, “us”): *"What an amazing community we have"*, *"We are Gucci family"*, *"The community matters to us!"*. Moreover, members refer to themselves as *"Gucci Gang"* and proudly proclaim their association as part of the *"Gucci family"*.

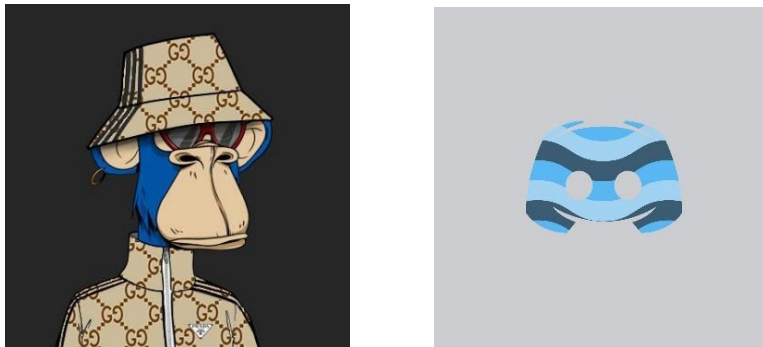


Figure 2: Profile pictures on Discord showing affiliation to the brand.

2 Value Co-Creation

2.1.1 Digital Storytelling

Gucci introduces digital innovations to the community through links to immersive experiences on platforms like Roblox. These mini Gucci-themed worlds allow members to explore the brand's storytelling in a unique digital dimension, often using avatars for navigation (see fig. 3).

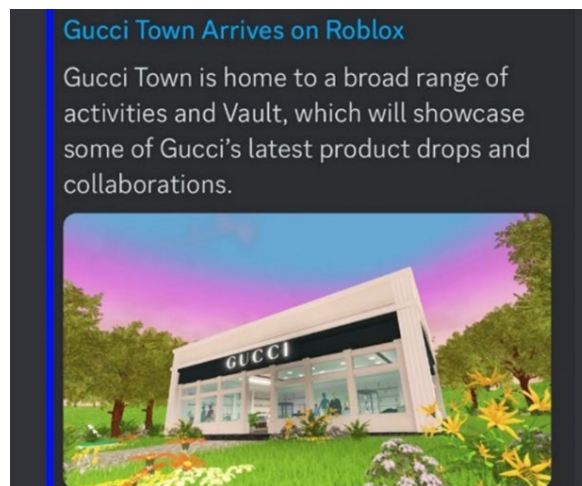


Figure 3: Digital GG World.

2.2 Members

Community members spontaneously create diverse forms of art inspired by Gucci symbols and products, including images, animations, videos, and music, aiming to enrich the collective experience and identity beyond mere brand celebration.

2.2.1 For Community

"From community for community." One of the examples is the collaborative effort of members who created Gucci stickers, designed to be used as reactions by all members

during their chat interactions (see fig. 4). This exemplifies their dedication to enhancing the community's shared experience with collective enjoyment of creativity.

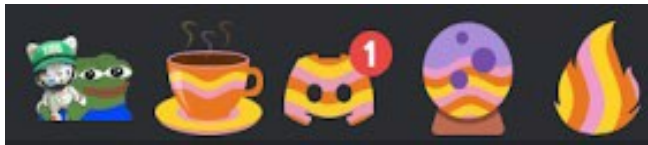


Figure 4: Example of members' reactions stickers.

2.2.2 Collective Creation

The interpretation of brand storytelling is usually subjective, whereas the Gucci Discord community is creating their own collective symbols to communicate with each other. Members collectively create their own symbols and interpretations of brand storytelling, enriching the narrative and fostering a dynamic collaborative art space, as illustrated by the transformation of real Gucci Fashion show models into NFT characters shared in the chat (see fig. 5).



Figure 5: Collective art creation process

2.2.3 Symbols Reinterpretation

Members create in various artistic styles while the source material being reinterpreted remains the same. An example is the revival of the "Gucci Ghost" concept. Members discussed Trevor Andrew, who transformed Gucci bedsheets into a Halloween costume, leading to a collaboration with Gucci. These conversations sparked fan artworks, showing how narratives can evolve.

2.2.4 Artistic Diversity

The Gucci Discord Community provides a secure platform to engage in the creation of art

centred around Gucci, allowing members to incorporate symbols without legal concerns. However, it is worth noting that art creation within the community attracts all members and is not only the domain of artists. Even individuals who openly acknowledge that they are not artists actively participate in this creative trend, highlighting that the motivation for engaging in these creative activities extends beyond traditional artistic recognition (see fig. 6).

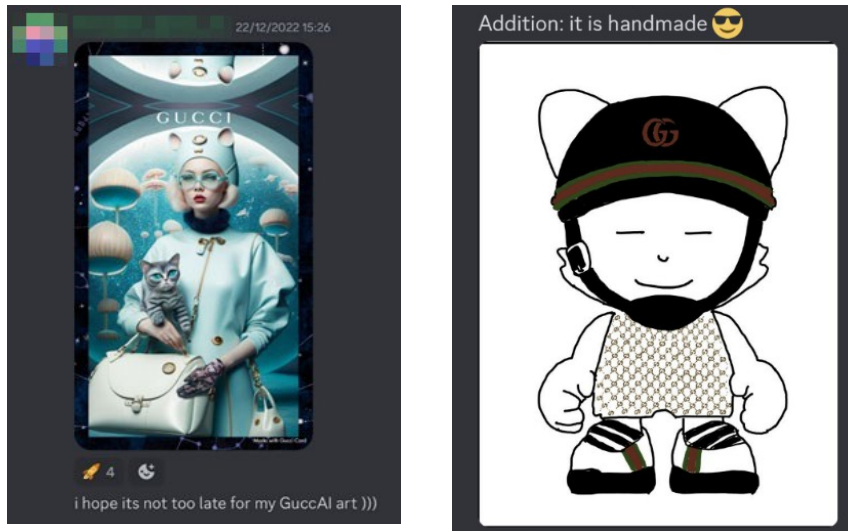


Figure 6: Examples of various art types created by community.

3 Utopia

3.1 Nostalgia

Within the GG Discord community, members often share stories of their youthful dreams and interests. For instance, they might share childhood aspirations for their dream jobs, reminiscing about the cartoons or shows that ignited their passions. One member might say, "I wanted to become an archaeologist when I was around 8," while another fondly recalls, "That cartoon got me into dinosaurs; I watched it a lot as a kid". These discussions serve as powerful reminders of youthful enthusiasm: "I had a feeling of time travel."

3.2 Daydreaming

Members of the GG Discord community collectively engage in daydreaming. A recurring theme in daydreaming revolves around fashion, serving as a primary catalyst for imaginative discussions. Members often express their desires in the form of aspirations, such as: "To attend this show physically..." or "Must be beautiful in person", and in the form of shared sentiments: "I love floating through space with all of you". Members also frequently envision a future where they can acquire outfits for their avatars in the metaverse, symbolising their forward-looking and technologically driven daydreams "Imagine buying all the outfits for the avatar in the metaverse".

3.3 Platform of Empowerment

Members of the GG Discord community consistently offer strong support to one another, particularly when sharing their creative work. They respond with positive comments, emojis, and words of encouragement, creating a nurturing environment: "I love it", "This art blows my mind".

3.4 Wellbeing

There are numerous indicators that the Gucci community is making members feel good about themselves: *"Thank you Gucci fam you make me happy"*, *"That makes me very happy knowing my work is being enjoyed"*. Many individuals reported feeling deeply affected by the creative narratives and stories shared within the community. This emotional connection was often expressed through words such as *"inspired"* and *"moved,"* implying that the community's collective creativity evokes deep emotional responses among its members.

3.4.1 Emotional Contagion

Members of the GG Discord community exhibit emotional contagion, where one member's expression of joy or amusement triggers a ripple effect of positive emotions among others, which is illustrated for example by similar emoji reactions like faces crying with laughter and hearts, which showcases the community's strong emotional connection and shared sense of positivity.

3.5 Digital Shelter

Members frequently engage in comparing their real-life experiences to their interactions within the GG Discord community (see fig. 7). This practice often highlights a perception that the community offers a sense of fulfilment and relief to its members: *"Chatting here is a good break for me, work is crazy" and "Feels good"*, *"Whenever you come here you feel Gucci"*, *"I feel that I am finally in a right place"*. Community fills a role of digital shelter: *"Thank you, I can express myself freely here"*, *"I am getting bullied in real life" and "Here, people understand me and my passion for Gucci"*. This highlights the vital role of this community as a shelter, offering acceptance and understanding that may be lacking in the offline lives.

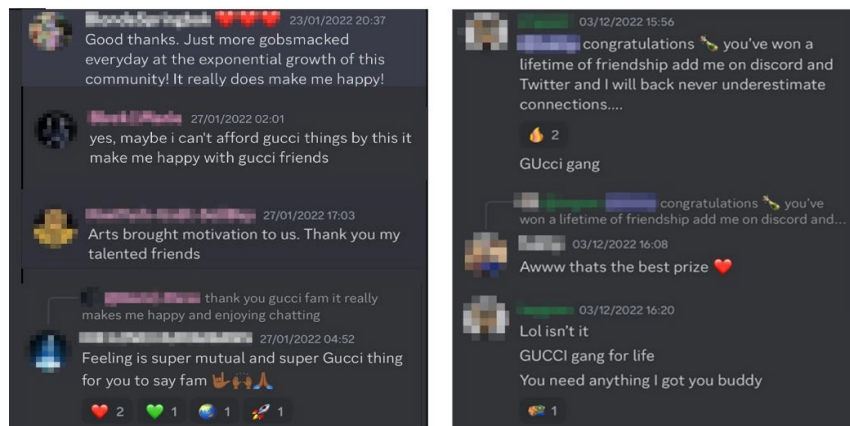


Figure 7: Example of mutual support in GG community

DISCUSSION

The current study employed a qualitative netnographic research approach to explore the complexities and nuances of digital communities, particularly focusing on the Gucci Discord community. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the research questions focused on (1) understanding the structure and function of Web3 digital communities, (2) characterising these communities distinctiveness (3) investigating the psychological implications of being part of such digital communities, and (4) examining the specific activities and behaviours exhibited by community members. The thematic analysis of netnographic data has uncovered deep insights into members of the Gucci Discord as well as the community's dynamics.

Understanding the Gucci Community

The Gucci Discord community differs from traditional online communities, as members are drawn together by both, appreciation of the brand personality (Mills et al., 2022) and their personal values alignment with Gucci's (Kristof, 1996; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), constructing a coherent social identity (Heider, 1958). However, contrary to previous studies indicating information or entertainment seeking as reasons to join online communities (Brown et al., 2007; Hartman & Arnould, 2015), this did not appear as the primary driving force. Instead, the Gucci community is deeply invested in the brand and its values, leading to strong engagement not just with Gucci but also with fellow members who express and share those values. This engagement goes beyond the "what" of Gucci, including its products, design, and history, to focus on the "who" – the like-minded members and their shared experiences and values. It is a digital shelter where members express themselves without fear of skepticism or bullying. Membership in the Gucci community fosters diverse psychological associations, forging a collective community identity, in line with Social Identity Theory. Members derive a strong sense of belonging from their association (Day, 2011; Tajfel, 1978), which is illustrated by the profile pictures that members choose for example (Lee & Ottati, 1995; Simon & Pettigrew, 1990; see fig. 2). This way of digitally engaging with the brand is characteristic of web3 with its decentralised and user-centric ethos.

Community Integrated Brand Engagement

Surprisingly, Gucci community members engage in spontaneous creative processes which they share on the Discord chat. They produce various types of art, in diverse formats. They individually or collectively reinterpret Gucci brand symbols, both visual and abstract, ranging from logos to intangible aspects of brand identity like stories, thereby adding new meaning to brand narratives and creating value for the brand and community. This is in line with research on communities establishing territory by symbols (Perkins & Long, 2002). Art creation is not encouraged by a brand, but occurs in an organic way, which is unique in comparison to co-creation when there is a reward system for member input (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Mathwick et al., 2008; Wasko and Faraj, 2000). There is also no indication that Gucci utilises or commercially exploits this art in any way, nor does it offer compensation or recognition to members. This spontaneous collective creativity represents a novel approach to both brand engagement and interaction within the digital community, between members.

The creation of art serves a dual purpose: Firstly, it celebrates the Gucci brand, enhancing brand engagement; secondly, it stimulates interactions among members. These interactions cultivate mutual support and engagement, strengthening group cohesion (Cai, 2023). The Gucci community's dynamic thus evolves beyond traditional brand engagement methods. We propose the term Community Integrated Brand Engagement (CIBE) for contexts where members interact with a brand through the social structure of the community in a creative way. Here, the community comes together not merely as passive consumers of content, but as proactive members collectively celebrating a brand in a new way. This collective celebration not only fosters a deep connection with the brand but also shapes a community identity centred around it.

Implications

The interconnected dynamics of this novel way of brand engagement, where members collectively express themselves creatively, forge a collective identity, and underscore the significance of the community, appears to be a disruptive phenomenon and has been

organically witnessed within the Gucci Discord community. There is no scientific evidence of such engagement patterns in other online communities, suggesting that this collective creative approach might be a defining trait of web3 communities. It is therefore crucial to determine in future research if this dual-layered creative engagement is common in web3 communities, especially fashion-focused ones, or unique to Gucci's community.

"We are the Gucci family": Belonging and Engagement

As expected, engagement within the Gucci Discord community meets fundamental psychological needs for belonging and interpersonal connection. Deep bonds in the community align with McMillan & Chavis's (1986) principles of community, offering a safe digital space for mutual support and empowerment. It surpasses mere brand enthusiasm. Therefore, key psychological implications of community participation relate to the community engagement, bonds and collective artistic involvement corresponding with CIBE. McAlexander et al. (2002) emphasise the deep connections that can arise from shared experiences around a brand. Within the Gucci community, this connection is manifested not merely through dialogues but as an active immersion in shared digital experiences. Furthermore, within the Gucci community, the longing for belonging manifests uniquely: Apart from conversations, members co-live experiences in the digital realm, collectively watch fashion shows, and most importantly engage in collective creativity. These practices indicate that while belonging is an intrinsic motivation, it is deeply intertwined with unique social rituals and shared experiences in this community. Drawing upon the insights from Allen et al. (2021), who posit that traditional definitions of belonging are largely confined to interpersonal contacts, the Gucci community offers a distinctive counterpoint. The community's culture, underpinned by the Gucci brand, significantly influences perceptions of belonging. It is not just about interpersonal relationships; it is also about a collective identity shaped by shared cultural and locational attachments creating a harmonious blend of collective and brand identity. The Gucci Discord community thus emerges as a paradigmatic representation of how modern digital communities seek not only social interactions, but an active, meaningful role in the brand's storytelling. Being part of the brand's community with an art creation element that shapes the brand's narrative gives members a sense of significance, as they are active contributors to the brand's evolving story. Additionally, while traditional definitions of belonging revolve around interpersonal contacts, the Gucci community offers a unique blend of personal interactions and shared brand affinity in an innovative web3 space (Allen et al., 2021). This distinctive nature can make members feel they are part of something novel and ground-breaking, likely adding to their sense of mattering. It also puts to evidence that individuals derive significant psychological well-being from feeling valued and significant in social contexts in web3 communities, which can serve as buffers against depressive symptoms and anxiety (Dixon et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2012).

Wellbeing and Artistic Engagement

The literature illustrates numerous psychological advantages of engaging with art. Artistic pursuits have been associated with cognitive resilience, emotional balance, and reduced stress, whether they involve invention, distribution, or merely passive admiration (Gillam, 2018; Huotilainen et al., 2018). Therefore, co-creative processes and shared appreciation of art in Gucci community elevate both individual and collective well-being and enhance self-esteem (Hogg & Mullin, 1999). This sense of well-being results in deeper emotional attachment to the brand (Grzekowiak & Sirgy, 2007; Ren, 2012), which in turn fosters brand loyalty (Safeer et al., 2023).

New Utopia in the context of web3 communities

The Gucci community is an example of a modern community rooted in web3 and surprisingly, carries signs of utopianism. The community can be classified as a utopia because, members within this community are driven by a desire for a better future, in line with Levitas' (1990) description of utopian aspirations, with the community's visual creativity reflecting elements of modern utopia (Bloch, 1986). Yet, it is important to mention that its members remain seemingly oblivious to the presence of the utopian element in the community. Utopia is a by-product of their interactions rather than a goal they pursue; members of the Gucci community rather seek belonging within different structures that resonate with their modern lifestyles (Macionis, 1978; Bauman, 2013). Consequently, digital communities might have become a preferred safe space, offering solace through shared values and aspirations with like-minded individuals. Utopian thinking influences societal and creative engagement (Badaan et al., 2020; Oettingen 2012; Fernando et al., 2018). When applying this perspective to the fashion industry, especially within communities like Gucci's, there is a remarkable shift in the balance of power. Nowadays, consumers do not want to only consume; they desire impact, and the emergence of utopian digital communities will further democratise their influence. These acts provide glimpses of a utopian vision, embodying members' aspirations for an enhanced future where a collaborative community essence is elevated and shapes the web3 transformation. The community thus acts as a manifestation of these desires, offering momentary escape (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987), crafting an aspirational narrative while aligning with a beloved brand, and potentially acting as a catalyst for progressive thought (Hermand, 1975). This resonates with Bloch's predictions that the concept of utopia would evolve into smaller, more focused micro-utopias as the world develops (Bloch, 1989).

Limitations and Recommendations

This study extends established theories of brand engagement and introduces new perspectives of web3-based community utopias utilizing Netnography as a way to gain insight into digital fashion communities (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). However, concerns exist regarding the reliability of data, as findings may not fully represent broader consumer demographics (Mkono, 2013; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Generalizing findings beyond specific online platforms or communities remains a limitation, akin to traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2002). Additionally, despite efforts to mitigate bias, the researchers' prior engagement with web3 may influence data analysis and perspectives on the subject more broadly. Further research into web3 brand communities is therefore required.

CONCLUSION

This paper reports the findings of an in-depth netnographic study looking at the digital Gucci brand community on the web3 platform Discord. The findings suggest that this digital community is a new form of utopia that enables members to engage with the brand as co-creators in an artistic, collaborative social structure that is conceptualised as Community Integrated Brand Engagement (CIBE). This new way of brand engagement, focuses an emerging segment of consumers: digital communities. These findings have significant implications for both fashion enterprises, urging a more collaborative approach in this emerging space, and web3 developers, emphasising the importance of catering to these dynamic digital communities. In the words of Luhmann (1976): “utopias are [...] present futures”.

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