

Dissemination of Skin Fashion Among Fortnite Players: An Analysis from the Trickle Phenomenon Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Objective: this study aimed to analyze how reference groups influence the diffusion and adoption of skin fashion among Fortnite players from the perspective of the Trickle phenomenon. **Methods:** the research employed a netnographic approach. Data were collected through forty-five online interviews and non-participant observations conducted on social media platforms. **Results:** the findings revealed factors beyond economic capital that contribute to social distinction, including exclusivity, dedication, loyalty to the game, online visibility, nostalgia, skill, and specialized knowledge. These factors are associated with the Trickle-Down phenomenon, differing from traditional notions of socioeconomic class-based stratification while also signaling the emergence of new elite groups, such as professional players (Pro Players), tryhards, and content creators (YouTubers and streamers). The study also showed that individuals with lower status can influence those with higher prestige, characterizing a Trickle-Up process. Furthermore, evidence of Trickle-Across diffusion was identified in the dissemination of skins. **Conclusions:** this research demonstrates how specific reference groups within the gaming context shape the diffusion of skins, extending beyond economic capital and broadening the applicability of the Trickle phenomenon to virtual environments. The findings also provide valuable insights for marketing and game companies seeking to improve their promotional strategies and customer retention efforts.

Data Availability: The interview transcripts and the complete records of the non-participant observations conducted on social media cannot be made publicly available due to confidentiality concerns. Public disclosure of these materials could compromise the privacy of the individuals involved and potentially enable their identification.

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INTRODUCTION

The consumption of digital goods, such as skins, has become an increasingly common practice (Mohr et al., 2022). As avatars function as extensions of the self, skins serve as a means of signaling socially observable identity (Silva, 2025; Silva et al., 2024), enabling processes of comparison, imitation, and differentiation among players. The consumption of these skins is also influenced by social groups that shape consumption practices both within virtual environments and beyond them (Albarelo et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2020; King & De La Hera, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2020; Silva, 2025).

These phenomena occur within environments commonly referred to as the metaverse – that is, virtual spaces inhabited by avatars and controlled by individuals in the physical world. Consequently, companies across a wide range of industries have increasingly explored commercial opportunities in these environments, including fashion brands (Joy et al., 2022). A prominent example is Fortnite, where companies such as Balenciaga, Havaianas, DC Comics, Coca-Cola, Nike, and others offer virtual clothing and accessories (skins) through in-game stores.

Developed by Epic Games, Fortnite can be understood as a metaverse environment because it enables social interaction, avatar-based self-representation, ownership of virtual goods, and digital commerce (Joy et al., 2022). The game features several gameplay modes, the most popular being Battle Royale. In this mode, one hundred avatars are placed in a digital environment where the objective is to survive by employing a variety of strategies (King & De La Hera, 2020).

In Fortnite, skins constitute the avatar's appearance and were not designed to enhance players' performance (King & De La Hera, 2020). Nevertheless, 68% of users spend money on in-game purchases in Fortnite (Li et al., 2020). This scenario raises questions about how social distinction and hierarchy are structured in an environment where the functional performance of clothing is not the primary determinant of its value.

Previous literature highlights the need to better understand how individuals behave – both in terms of consumption and social interaction – within metaverse environments (Joy et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2024; Silva, 2025). Among the motivations for purchasing skins, functionality has been identified as an important factor, since certain skins – particularly those with smaller silhouettes and more subdued colors – may facilitate camouflage during gameplay (Pereira et al., 2024). Other motivations are associated with the influence of reference groups, including parents, online friends, offline friends (Albarelo et al., 2021), and streamers and

Youtubers (Carter et al., 2020; King & De La Hera, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2020).

Reference groups are individuals who influence the choices of others (Kemper, 2011), including clothing choices through status–power relationships. The study of reference groups contributes to understanding social distinction across social strata through processes of symbolic competition (Bourdieu, 2010). Comparative processes among reference groups shape the adoption and diffusion of fashion, a dynamic explained by Trickle theory, encompassing the Trickle-Down, Trickle-Up, and Trickle-Across models (Field, 1970; King, 1973; Robinson, 1973; Simmel, 2020; Veblen, 2018).

Previous research has shown that the Trickle phenomenon explains fashion consumption behavior in the physical world (Atik & Frat, 2013; Mohr et al., 2022), including dimensions that extend beyond economic capital by emphasizing lifestyle-related factors (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; McCracken, 2000). Likewise, the literature on skin consumption demonstrates that these digital goods express users' identities and are influenced by social groups (Carter et al., 2020; King & De La Hera, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2020). However, it remains unclear how the diffusion and adoption of skins occur through interactions among reference groups or how status–power dynamics are structured within these virtual environments.

Accordingly, this study aimed to analyze how reference groups influence the diffusion and adoption of skin fashion among Fortnite players from the perspective of the Trickle phenomenon. It builds on the contemporary view that such groups are not necessarily structured around economic capital but rather around other forms of capital associated with lifestyle.

By investigating who these influential actors are and how status–power dynamics are established, this study seeks to make theoretical contributions by extending fashion diffusion theories to virtual environments. It also provides strategic insights for marketing and game companies seeking to improve their promotional strategies and customer retention efforts. In digital environments, the logic of the Trickle phenomenon is reconfigured by forms of capital that transcend economic resources.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical background, followed by the methodological procedures, the results, and, finally, the concluding remarks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background integrates Bourdieu's field theory (social structure and distinction), Trickle theory, and the dynamics of digital platforms (algorithmic me-

diation and social influence), conceptualizing skins as symbolic goods involved in the construction of identity and social status.

Symbolic consumption on digital platforms

In digital contexts, skins can be understood as symbolic goods that perform multiple functions. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, they signal identity, group belonging, and social distinction (Li et al., 2020; King & De La Hera, 2020).

Skins enable individuals to differentiate themselves within gaming communities. Their symbolic value is often constructed through mechanisms of scarcity, such as limited-edition items and time-restricted availability, which intensify consumer desire (Pereira et al., 2024). Moreover, skins communicate players' trajectories over time. For example, items acquired during previous seasons or exclusive in-game events (Sharma, 2024) become symbols of experience, commitment, and superiority. Consequently, skin consumption encompasses temporal, social, and symbolic dimensions.

Some players also attribute strategic advantages to particular skins based on their visual characteristics. For instance, skins with smaller silhouettes or more subdued colors may facilitate camouflage during gameplay, reinforcing their association with cultural capital and gaming skill (Pereira et al., 2024; Sharma, 2024). Thus, skins function both as markers of symbolic distinction and as instruments of performance.

In online platform-mediated environments, these processes are intensified through real-time social interaction. Many of these environments – including Fortnite – can be understood as metaverse spaces in which the avatar represents an extension of the self (Carter et al., 2020; King & De La Hera, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2020). Within this context, skins operate as symbolic goods that simultaneously express identity, distinction, and social recognition (Sharma, 2024; Silva, 2025; Silva et al., 2024).

Classical consumer research has long recognized the symbolic role of goods, emphasizing their function in the construction of cultural meanings (McCracken, 2000). However, the emergence of digital platforms has introduced new dynamics to this phenomenon, particularly those associated with algorithmic mediation (Airoidi & Rokka, 2022), the attention economy (Faucher, 2014), and the growing centrality of digital intermediaries (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018).

Within these environments, visibility becomes a contested resource that is transformed into forms of prestige and social recognition. Accordingly, the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001) provides an important analytical lens for understanding contempo-

rary consumption dynamics, as algorithmically mediated attention increasingly determines which practices, styles, and digital goods gain visibility and, consequently, legitimacy within online communities.

Furthermore, digital influencers and content creators have emerged as new cultural intermediaries (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018), acting as curators, legitimizers, and disseminators of cultural meanings. These actors perform functions similar to those described by McCracken (2000), but within a platform-based logic in which algorithms and engagement metrics shape their capacity to influence audiences.

Structure and distinction: The field as an analytical lens

To enhance the understanding of how symbolic consumption is organized in digital environments, this study draws on Bourdieu's field theory. A field is understood as a social space in which agents and institutions compete for positions, resources, and recognition. Within this space, different forms of capital – economic, social, cultural, and symbolic – are accumulated, structuring hierarchies and power dynamics (Bourdieu, 2010, 2025).

In the context of Fortnite, the game can be understood as a relational field in which players interact, compete, and construct meanings that circulate both within the platform and beyond it, including social media and offline settings (King & De La Hera, 2020; Silva, 2025). Within this field, the forms of capital that enable social distinction assume context-specific manifestations. Economic capital is reflected in the ability to purchase paid virtual items (Li et al., 2020); cultural capital is associated with gaming skill and mastery (Pereira et al., 2024); social capital emerges from players' networks of interaction (Carter et al., 2020; Sanderson et al., 2020); and symbolic capital corresponds to the social recognition granted by the gaming community.

The interplay among these forms of capital enables individuals to attain prestige within the field. For example, acquiring rare skins (economic capital) may be converted into social recognition (symbolic capital), while high levels of gameplay skill (cultural capital) can generate visibility and reputation, thereby strengthening social capital. Accordingly, the consumption of digital goods can be understood as a mechanism through which social distinction, community legitimation, and hierarchical positioning are produced and maintained.

It is important to distinguish several concepts that are frequently used in the existing literature – including status, prestige, visibility, and skill (Joy et al., 2022; King & De La Hera, 2020; Pereira et al., 2024) – as they refer

to different dimensions. Status refers to an individual's social standing within a community; prestige denotes the symbolic value attributed to that individual; visibility concerns the degree of public exposure and audience reach; and skill refers to a player's competence and performance in achieving the objectives of the game.

Diffusion and symbolic circulation: Revisiting Trickle theory

Social influence shapes fashion adoption and diffusion through comparative processes based on reference groups (Simmel, 2020). Certain individuals influence the choices and behaviors of others through real or perceived status–power relationships (Kemper, 2011). Within this framework, fashion adoption and diffusion may occur through either hierarchical or horizontal structures. Accordingly, Trickle theory comprises three complementary mechanisms: Trickle-Down, Trickle-Up, and Trickle-Across.

The Trickle-Down model assumes a hierarchical flow in which lower-status groups adopt the practices and styles of higher-status groups through processes of emulation. Such dynamics may also communicate signals of wealth and social position to observers (Simmel, 2020; Um et al., 2024; Veblen, 2018). A traditional example is found in fashion weeks, where access is generally restricted to the media and individuals occupying prestigious social positions.

In contrast, the Trickle-Up model (Field, 1970) describes the reverse movement, whereby cultural elements originate among lower-status groups and are subsequently appropriated by more prestigious ones. In this process, an opinion leader identifies a trend emerging among lower-status groups and introduces it to higher-status audiences, thereby accelerating its diffusion within those groups. Examples include the popularization of activewear, inspired by streetwear and gym culture (Mohr et al., 2022), as well as trends initiated by micro-influencers that are later adopted by audiences with greater social prestige.

The Trickle-Across model (King, 1973; Robinson, 1973), in turn, proposes that fashion diffuses horizontally and simultaneously across different social groups. In contemporary society, this process has been reinforced by the internet, mass communication, promotional strategies, and greater consumer accessibility. The fast-fashion industry illustrates this mechanism, as designers rapidly translate luxury runway trends into products aimed at broader consumer markets (Mohr et al., 2022).

Despite its widespread use, Trickle theory has been criticized for oversimplifying social dynamics and placing excessive emphasis on social class struc-

tures (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Lipovetsky, 2009). Contemporary studies argue that the diffusion of symbolic goods occurs through more complex networks mediated by multiple factors, including lifestyle, media, and digital culture (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; McCracken, 2000; Wills et al., 2024).

These critiques and recent theoretical developments do not invalidate the core assumptions of Trickle theory. Rather, they suggest that its mechanisms should be reinterpreted to account for contemporary forms of consumption (Atik & Firat, 2013; Bonneau & Aroles, 2021; Mohr et al., 2022). Nevertheless, research on Trickle theory has yet to adequately examine consumption behaviors shaped by the internet, social media, and avatar fashion within metaverse environments (Wills et al., 2024).

It is important to emphasize that Trickle theory is conceived here as a mechanism of symbolic circulation operating within a field rather than as a theory explaining social structure itself. While Bourdieu (2010, 2025) provides the conceptual framework for understanding how positions and hierarchies are structured, Trickle theory explains how fashion circulates among different groups within that field, thereby accounting for its adoption and diffusion.

Finally, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of diffusion and adoption in the context of fashion. Diffusion refers to the process through which symbolic elements circulate across social groups, whereas adoption occurs at the individual level, when a person decides to incorporate a particular style or symbolic good into their own consumption practices (Lipovetsky, 2009; Reilly, 2021).

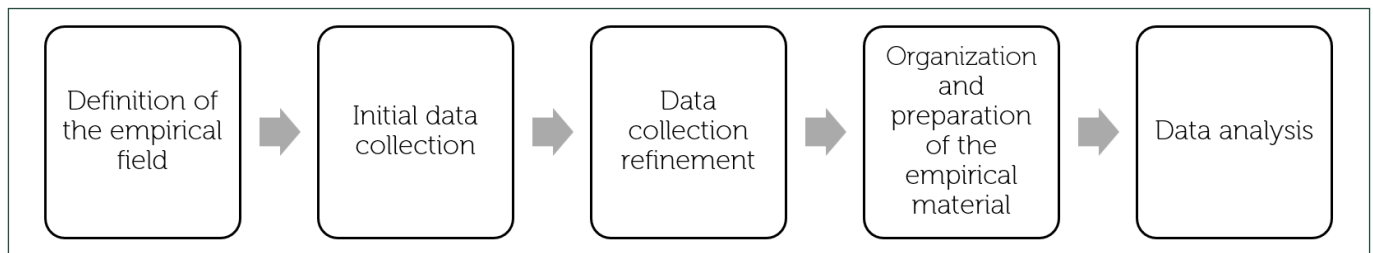
METHODOLOGY

This study forms part of a broader research project and adopted a qualitative approach, operationalized through netnography (Kozinets, 2014), combined with online interviews and non-participant observation. This methodological choice is justified by the nature of the phenomenon under investigation – consumption practices in digital environments – which requires an in-depth understanding of online interactions, meanings, and sociocultural dynamics. The netnographic study was conducted with a moderate level of researcher immersion, involving longitudinal observation between August 2023 and July 2024.

Throughout the study, the researcher assumed the role of a non-participant observer, refraining from intervening in group dynamics in order to preserve the naturalness of participants' interactions. Ethical procedures included the anonymization of participants and respect for the public nature of the online settings observed.

The research design was organized into sequential stages (Figure 1). This strategy enabled data collection

from multiple sources, thereby supporting methodological triangulation.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Figure 1. Stages of the netnography.

Netnography was conducted in five sequential stages: (1) definition of the empirical field and selection of digital materials, with Fortnite chosen due to its contemporary relevance and popularity among young adults (Albarelo et al., 2021; King & De La Hera, 2020); (2) initial data collection through non-participant observation to gain familiarity with the characteristics and dynamics of the selected field, as recommended by Kozinets (2014); (3) in-depth data collection, involving online interviews with YouTubers, streamers, and Fortnite players; (4) organization and preparation of the empirical material, including field notes and interview transcripts; and (5) data analysis, conducted using content analysis (Bardin, 2016).

The selection of digital settings was based on their relevance and popularity among Fortnite players, focusing on active Portuguese-language communities. Non-participant observations were conducted on Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, as these platforms are widely used by the game's community. YouTuber and streamer channels were identified through keyword searches on YouTube, and those selected met two criteria: recent activity and substantial audience

engagement, defined as at least one million subscribers. Non-participant observation was conducted across thirteen YouTube channels, involving the examination of published content, videos, and user comments. In addition, seven Facebook and WhatsApp groups were identified through keyword searches on Facebook. Interactions within these communities were systematically observed and documented through field notes.

All participants in the online interviews were over eighteen years of age. YouTubers and streamers were invited to participate via email and Instagram, and interviews were conducted with all those who agreed to participate (Table 1). Fortnite players were recruited from Facebook groups dedicated to the game through voluntary and random participation (Table 2). This recruitment strategy introduces a self-selection bias, with a predominance of participants who were more actively engaged in the Fortnite community. This limitation is acknowledged and considered in the interpretation of the findings.

Table 2 presents the demographic and profile characteristics of the Fortnite players interviewed during the data collection phase.

Table 1. Interviews with Fortnite YouTubers and Streamers.

Demographic Information				Subscribers/Followers			Interview duration (min)
Gender	Age	City	Has another occupation?	Youtube	Instagram	Twitch	
Feminino	27	São Paulo	No	322,000	86,000	55,100	60:02
	24	São Paulo	No	457,000	18,900	-	58:02
Masculino	31	Belo Horizonte	No	-	21,300	25,500	53:07
	30	São Caetano do Sul	No	514	13,700	60,200	60:01
	28	João Pessoa	No	3,730	15,900	211,600	38:46
Feminino	28	São Paulo	No	1,150	65,200	144,800	53:38

Note. Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2. Interviews with Fortnite players.

Gender	Age	Demographic Information			Interview Duration (min)
		Occupation	Traditional Social Class*	City/State	
Male	28	Mechanical Engineer	Middle (B)	Piracaia/SP	40:14
	26	Medical Student	Middle (B)	Buenos Aires/Argentina**	33:28
	27	Systems Analyst	Middle (B)	São Paulo/SP	36:14
	27	Graduate Student	Middle (B)	Ceilândia/DF	31:33
Female	26	Veterinarian	Middle (B)	Sumaré/SP	21:35
Male	19	Office Assistant	Middle (B)	Sumaré/SP	25:21
Female	28	Graduate Student	Lower (C)	São João Del Rei/MG	28:27
Male	23	Teacher	Middle (B)	Suzano/SP	26:55
Female	23	Stock Clerk	Middle (B)	Suzano/SP	28:07
Male	28	Biologist	Middle (B)	Monte Alegre/PA	39:05
Female	36	Self-Employed Professional	Middle (B)	Mogi Guaçu/SP	37:39
Male	25	Software Developer	Middle (B)	Florianópolis/SC	32:55
	39	Librarian	Middle (B)	Cianorte/PR	38:08
	28	Marketing Supervisor	Middle (B)	Rio de Janeiro/RJ	36:46
	34	Teacher	Middle (B)	Goiânia/GO	50:24
Female	35	Salesperson	Lower (C)	Manaus/AM	29:56
Male	29	Bank Employee	Lower (C)	Arroio dos Ratos/RS	01:02:05
	29	Accountant	Lower (C)	Maringá/PR	30:24
	29	Mathematics Student	Lower (C)	São Carlos/SP	34:02
	28	Public Servant	Middle (B)	Cascavel/PR	01:05:21
Female	26	Support Analyst	-	São Bernardo do Campo/SP	25:48
Male	32	Supermarket Supervisor	Middle (B)	Londrina/PR	31:25
	32	Auditor	-	Rio de Janeiro/RJ	25:01
	29	Graduate Student	Middle (B)	Santa Luzia/MG	30:02
	35	Marketing Analyst	Lower (C)	São Paulo/SP	27:13
Female	26	Tattoo Artist	Middle (B)	Aracaju/SE	37:27
	31	Personal Trainer	Middle (B)	Itajubá/MG	40:09
	23	Biology Student	Middle (B)	Recife/PE	36:57
	35	Lawyer	Middle (B)	Sorocaba/SP	33:14
Male	27	Military Personnel	Middle (B)	Belém/PA	38:23
	27	Self-Employed Professional	Middle (B)	Fagundes/PB	37:16
	34	Photographer	Middle (B)	Monte Alegre/RN	36:18
	31	Public Servant	Middle (B)	Curitiba/PR	36:14
Female	20	Business Administration Student	Lower (C)	São Paulo/SP	25:15
Male	26	Graduate Student	-	São José/SC	33:28
Female	30	Production Supervisor	-	Horizonte/CE	28:40
Male	29	Business Manager	Lower (C)	São Paulo/SP	31:17
Female	22	Biomedical Sciences Student	Lower (C)	Cabo Frio/RJ	27:38
Male	29	Driver	-	Santo André/SP	36:03

Note. * Participants' socioeconomic class was determined using the Brazilian Economic Classification Criterion (*Associação Brasileira de Empresas de Pesquisa* (2022). Brazilian Economic Classification Criterion. ABEP. <https://www.abep.org/criterio-brasil>). For some participants, socioeconomic class could not be determined because the relevant information was not provided. ** Although residing abroad, this participant is Brazilian. Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2025).

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide developed from the literature on symbolic consumption, reference groups, and Trickle dynamics. The instrument was organized into three sections: (1) participant profile; (2) consumption practices in Fortnite; and (3) processes of socialization and imitation, allowing the exploration of both descriptive and interpretive dimensions of the phenomenon. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and the study was approved by the institution's Research Ethics Committee (REC) (Protocol No. 72879323.0.0000.0104).

With regard to data saturation, thematic recurrence among Fortnite players became evident after the twenty-fourth interview (USER24). However, saturation was not achieved within the subgroup of YouTubers and

streamers (Table 1) due to the difficulty of gaining access to these participants. Given this limitation, the study does not seek to generalize findings concerning this subgroup. Instead, their accounts are used to complement and enrich the interpretation of the findings rather than serving as the primary basis for inference.

The empirical material – including field notes and interview transcripts – was analyzed using content analysis (Bardin, 2016), supported by the Atlas.ti software. The analytical process comprised the stages of pre-analysis, open coding, category development, and interpretation, the results of which are presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

Initially, the theoretical categories associated with Trickle dynamics (Trickle-Down, Trickle-Up, and Trickle-Across) were used as a guiding framework for the analysis, as previous studies suggest that these mechanisms

remain applicable in contemporary consumption contexts (Atik & Firat, 2013; Bonneau & Aroles, 2021; Mohr et al., 2022). However, the analysis adopted a reflexive and inductive stance, allowing additional units of analysis – particularly reference groups – to emerge from the empirical data. Previous studies have identified parents, online friends, offline friends, and YouTubers/streamers as the principal reference groups influencing Fortnite players (Carter et al., 2020; King & De La Hera, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the present study identified additional groups, such as Pro Players and Tryhards, highlighting the exploratory nature of these emergent categories.

The triangulation of non-participant observations and online interviews enhanced the analytical rigor of the study by enabling the complementary use of multiple data sources. Non-participant observations primarily contributed to understanding the dynamics of the game and familiarizing the researcher with participants' language and patterns of interaction. However, the majority of the empirical evidence underpinning the findings was derived from the online interviews. Additionally, social class data based on the Brazilian Economic Classification Criterion (ABEP, 2022) were used as contextual information, allowing traditional socioeconomic classifications to be contrasted with alternative forms of social distinction operating within digital environments.

RESULTS

Data collection involved Fortnite players who predominantly belonged to the middle socioeconomic class (Table 2). This profile is associated with the technological requirements for accessing the game, including relatively expensive devices and reliable internet connectivity, which create higher barriers to entry than games that are readily accessible via smartphones. Consistent with this finding, none of the participants reported playing Fortnite on a smartphone.

Trickle down

With respect to Trickle-Down dynamics, the adoption of skins associated with celebrities and characters admired by the gaming community (e.g., Travis Scott, Lady Gaga, John Wick, and Solid Snake) reflects players' desire to emulate the aesthetics and behaviors of these figures (Pereira et al., 2024). The prestige associated with celebrities motivates consumers to adopt fashion elements that are consistent with prevailing sociocultural contexts (Lipovetsky, 2009), thereby expressing identification with and loyalty to these symbolic figures (Kemper, 2011).

The public display of skin collections, purchase decisions, and skin reviews by YouTubers and streamers establishes consumption patterns and fashion trends that are subsequently imitated by the broader community. This finding emerged from both social media observations and interview accounts provided by players. For example, the use of the Default¹ skin by a particular streamer motivated many community members to imitate this choice, attributing new symbolic meaning to an otherwise ordinary cosmetic item. Notably, this streamer was also recognized as a Tryhard², reinforcing the role of high-status content creators in legitimizing consumption practices. These findings suggest that digital influencers act as influential cultural intermediaries within gaming communities (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018).

Within the Fortnite ecosystem, YouTubers and streamers serve as agents of aesthetic validation through activities such as contests to select the 'best skin.' Evidence of this practice emerged primarily from non-participant observations conducted on social media platforms. These findings indicate the coexistence of Trickle-Up and Trickle-Down dynamics, as skins submitted by players are selected and endorsed by YouTubers and streamers, and the resulting content is subsequently shared online. This process increases the desirability of these items and encourages their widespread adoption, as recognition by influential figures may evoke admiration and social envy among community members (Um et al., 2024; Veblen, 2018).

The organization of coordinated community campaigns encouraging viewers to use the same skin throughout a game season provides further evidence of imitation processes shaped by the influence of YouTubers and streamers, fostering a sense of group belonging (Simmel, 2020). This phenomenon was observed during the analysis of YouTube videos conducted in the initial phase of data collection.

Within the Fortnite ecosystem, YouTubers and streamers serve as agents of aesthetic validation through activities such as contests to select the 'best skin.' Evidence of this practice emerged primarily from non-participant observations conducted on social media platforms. These findings indicate the coexistence of Trickle-Up and Trickle-Down dynamics, as skins submitted by players are selected and endorsed by these influential content creators, whose content is subsequently disseminated online. This process increases the desirability of these items and encourages their widespread adoption, as recognition by influential figures may evoke admiration and social envy among community members (Um et al., 2024; Veblen, 2018).

The influence of YouTubers and streamers also extends to behavioral practices, such as demonstrating

strategies for deceiving 'simps' (gados³) into sending skins as gifts. These practices are used to generate content for their channels and are subsequently imitated by members of the gaming community. This represents an opportunistic practice mediated by social interactions. Thus, influential Fortnite content creators stand out not only because of their visibility but also because of their specialized knowledge of the game, even when that expertise is associated with controversial practices.

Trickle-Down dynamics were also observed among lower-status community members (novice players), who imitate the skins used by Tryhards. In this case, imitation is driven by admiration and social envy and can be understood as a strategy for symbolic social advancement, even though these players do not actually attain Tryhard status. Unlike the original formulation of Trickle theory, this process is not associated with socioeconomic class or wealth, but rather with the value attributed to skill and dedication, representing an adaptation of the theory to the context of skin consumption. Tryhards invest considerable time and effort in improving their performance and may eventually become Pro Players⁴. Their symbolic relevance is further reinforced through appearances on YouTubers' and streamers' channels, increasing both their visibility and the diffusion of their consumption practices throughout the gaming community (Aioldi & Rokka, 2022).

Pro Players play a central role in Trickle-Down dynamics, emerging as the most influential reference group within the Fortnite community. Players closely observe and imitate their skin choices because of their online visibility, exceptional skill, and dedication to the game. In practice, adopting skins associated with Pro Players may also serve a strategic function by intimidating opponents, particularly those with lower levels of skill.



Source: Elaborated by the authors. * The author of the Facebook group post included the following caption: 'My squad is on point – everyone looks like Pro Players.'

Figure 2. Example of pro players' consumption imitation*.

Playing as a team while using coordinated skins or identical cosmetic items is a common practice among Pro Players (see Figure 2 – Polarity skin), reinforcing the pursuit of optimal in-game performance. This practice is subsequently imitated by members of the broader gaming community during matches with friends. The symbolic relevance of Pro Players is further reinforced when the items they use are featured on YouTubers' and streamers' channels, increasing both the visibility of their consumption practices and players' perceived proximity to these influential figures (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Faucher, 2014).

Pro Players also influence the consumption practices of Tryhards who aspire to become professional players. From an aesthetic perspective, the items associated with Pro Players are perceived as facilitating skill development and in-game performance; symbolically, they represent dedication and commitment to the game. This process is further intensified by the appeal of Pro Players' online visibility and status, as this social position enables them to pursue full-time careers as online content creators and professional gamers, often supported by sponsorships and brand partnerships.

Further evidence of Trickle-Down dynamics emerged from the distinction between two subgroups within the online Fortnite community: novice and veteran players. The use of older and rarer skins constitutes a valued consumption practice among veteran players. Previous research has shown that rarity is highly valued by players (Pereira et al., 2024), as it symbolizes exclusivity, dedication, and long-term commitment to the game. Conversely, novice players often seek to avoid revealing their inexperience by refraining from using free, newly released, or Default skins. Instead, they adopt skins associated with veteran players as a means of signaling positive symbolic attributes. This practice is facilitated through resale transactions conducted on social media platforms, particularly within WhatsApp and Facebook groups, where such exchanges were frequently observed during fieldwork.

Finally, some players were found to collect fashion items, a practice that generates envy among friends who consume skins less frequently (Veblen, 2018) while simultaneously conferring social prestige through the accumulation of possessions. In this context, imitation functions as an attempt to achieve social parity, surpass others, or secure a sense of belonging within the gaming community.

Table 3 summarizes the findings related to Trickle-Down dynamics and presents the excerpts from the online interviews that most clearly illustrate this phenomenon, as this data source provided the richest empirical evidence supporting the analysis.

Table 3. Summary of Trickle-Down dynamics in Fortnite skin consumption.

Description of the dynamics and illustrative interview excerpts	
Music, film, and television celebrities → Online gaming community	
Players adopt skins associated with their favorite celebrities and film or television characters, reproducing consumption practices observed in both physical and digital contexts, driven by the symbolic value of online visibility and nostalgia.	"People in my neighborhood even think it's strange that I'm playing Lady Gaga at home because I usually listen to jazz, rock, and Brazilian popular music. But now they're hearing Lady Gaga – and it's all because of Fortnite." (USER31) "I think it's more about who he is than what he looks like. To me, his physical appearance doesn't really matter. I'm a blue-eyed White guy, and I still like Travis Scott." (INTER4)
YouTubers and Streamers → Online gaming community	
YouTubers and streamers publicly display their skin choices, collections, reviews, and recommendations through online content, encouraging imitation among the online gaming community by leveraging their online visibility and specialized knowledge. Followers and viewers share their own skin choices with YouTubers and streamers, who promote activities such as selecting the "best skin," thereby shaping aesthetic preferences through their opinions and symbolic validation. YouTubers and streamers organize coordinated campaigns encouraging their followers to use the same skin throughout a season and document this collective participation by sharing images and videos on social media. Some YouTubers and streamers produce content demonstrating strategies for deceiving "simps" (gados, in Portuguese) into sending skins as gifts. This behavior was observed among content creators and subsequently imitated by members of the online gaming community.	"I know that if I say something looks good, it can influence people to buy it. So whenever I buy something, I genuinely speak positively about what I'm using." (INTER3) "People join the lobbies (virtual waiting areas where players gather before a match) already wearing the same skin I'm using that day." (INTER3, explanatory note added for international readers) "Well, I think the people I watch do influence me in some way. Sometimes I see them wearing a skin that I think looks really cool, and then I want to buy it too, for example." (USER12) "A lot of guys pretend to be their sister or cousin so that other players will send them skins as gifts. Guys can be really gullible – they fall for it like simps (gados, in Portuguese). Everybody knows they learned those tricks from streamers." (USER15)
Tryhards → Online gaming community	
Because of their exceptional skill and dedication, Tryhards achieve recognition within the gaming community, leading other players to imitate their skin consumption practices.	"What counts as a Tryhard skin changes over time. Right now, it's usually the Star Bomber skin or the soccer skins. I don't really know why Tryhards chose those skins, but once they did, everyone started using them, and eventually even less skilled players begin to associate those skins with being good at the game." (USER20)
Tryhards → YouTubers and Streamers → Online gaming community	
The appearance of Tryhards' skins in content produced by YouTubers and streamers increases the visibility of their consumption practices, bringing these symbolic repertoires closer to the broader online gaming community.	"I think this whole Tryhard thing comes from professional players. They use a particular skin, then people see it on YouTube channels and social media, think, 'A famous player is using that skin, so I'm going to use it too.'" (USER31)
Pro Players → Online gaming community	
Pro Players showcase their skin choices in recorded videos, livestreams, and online tournaments, making their consumption practices highly visible and encouraging imitation by the online gaming community. Pro Players often coordinate their skins by wearing matching or identical cosmetic items as a team. The online gaming community imitates this behavior as a way of signaling prestige, gaming skill, and dedication within the Fortnite ecosystem.	"There are professional players who use these skins and coordinate them with their teammates. So, people start wearing the same skins to replicate that effect. You often hear things like, 'That player is wearing a Pro Player skin.'" (INTER1) "When a player reaches the Fortnite World Cup finals or competes in a major tournament wearing a particular skin, that skin will probably become highly sought after for the next three, four, or five months because players want to recreate those moments or feel part of that experience. The problem is that, in most cases, those skins are no longer available – they're rare." (INTER4)
Pro Players → YouTubers and Streamers → Online gaming community	
The appearance of professional players in content produced by YouTubers and streamers increases the visibility of their consumption practices, bringing them closer to the broader online gaming community.	"I laugh when I see people wearing what they call Pro Player skins. They think those skins will make them look better just because they saw streamers and professional players using them. But when you watch them play, they're actually terrible." (USER25)
Pro Players → Tryhards	
Pro Players showcase their skin choices in recorded videos, livestreams, and online tournaments, making these consumption practices highly visible and encouraging their imitation by Tryhards, who seek to signal gaming skill, dedication, and prestige within the online gaming community.	"That skin is popular among Pro Players. People who watch them and are also trying to improve their game end up wearing it too because they're influenced by them." (INTER5, emphasis added for clarity)
Veteran Players → Novice Players	
Novice players use rare skins to signal exclusivity, dedication, and loyalty, projecting qualities typically associated with veteran players, such as extensive playing experience and high levels of in-game performance.	"Sometimes, when I recognize that a skin is really old, from previous chapters, I immediately think, 'Wow, this player must be good – they've probably been playing for a long time.' But there are also people who buy old skins from other players through online marketplaces just to make it look like they're experienced and have been playing for years." (USER4)
Collectors → Friends who rarely purchase skins	
Competition among friends stimulates peer consumption as players seek to match or surpass one another while reinforcing their sense of belonging to the group. This process ultimately generates social prestige based on the volume of cosmetic possessions.	"It was kind of an internal competition within the group. I'd buy a legendary skin, and then someone else would buy one the following week, even if that wasn't really their thing. Then they'd say, 'Look how many legendary items I have.' It was all driven by that competitive spirit. It became an internal competition." (USER20)

Note. The code INTER was used to identify the interviewed YouTubers/streamers, whereas USER refers to the interviewed players. Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2025).

Therefore, only one form of social distinction was found to be directly associated with the volume of possessions – namely, players who collect skins and invest substantial financial resources to maintain this consumption pattern. However, several other factors were found to

evoke social envy and, consequently, the desire for imitation, including exclusivity, dedication, loyalty to the game, online visibility, nostalgia, skill, and specialized knowledge.

The following subsection examines Trickle-Up dynamics.

Trickle Up

Members of the gaming community frequently recommend fashion items to YouTubers and streamers during gameplay sessions, as these content creators often play alongside their followers. This interaction reflects Trickle-Up dynamics (Field, 1970), whereby the preferences of players with relatively low social status gain visibility and become legitimized once adopted by influential figures (Airoidi & Rokka, 2022).

This process is further reinforced through the ongoing interaction between followers and YouTubers and streamers, particularly through the sharing of skin preferences and community challenges designed to identify the 'best skin.' Given the extensive range of customization options available in Fortnite, these recommendations illustrate Trickle-Up dynamics operating alongside Trickle-Down processes, highlighting the gaming community's active role in the co-creation of fashion trends.

Furthermore, Pro Players and Tryhards often abandon particular skins once they become widely adopted by the broader community. A notable example is the Default skin, which has been strategically adopted by Tryhards and Pro Players as a means of differentiating themselves from players who imitate their consumption practices. Although the Default skin was initially associated with low-status players, its adoption by influential community members transformed its symbolic

meaning, making it a marker of high status, particularly in terms of skill and prestige.

This constant reconfiguration of symbolic value reflects processes of inconspicuous consumption (subtle status signaling) and the flexibility with which players adopt new identities (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020).

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Finally, some players belonging to the traditional middle social class deliberately adopt consumption practices typically associated with lower-income players, such as using free skins, the Default skin, or skins received as gifts. This behavior is particularly common among players who engage less intensively with the game, spend less time playing, and use these items as a way of resisting the status-oriented consumption logic associated with rare or paid skins. Some players who adopt this stance even reject the use of rare skins as a means of distancing themselves from prevailing trends (Li et al., 2020; Simmel, 2020; Reilly, 2021). These findings challenge the traditional expectation that greater purchasing power necessarily increases the tendency toward conspicuous displays of possessions (Veblen, 2018).

Table 4 summarizes the findings related to Trickle-Up dynamics.

Table 4. Summary of Trickle-Up dynamics in Fortnite skin consumption.

Description of the dynamics and illustrative interview excerpts	
Online gaming community → YouTubers and Streamers	
Followers and viewers influence the fashion items used by YouTubers and streamers during online group matches by suggesting which skins they should wear. Followers and viewers also share their own skin choices with YouTubers and streamers, who frequently organize "best skin" challenges in which participants submit their preferred skins for evaluation and aesthetic validation.	"I used to play with people from my livestream. It happened all the time – someone would say, 'Let's all wear the same skin.' If I didn't have it, someone would gift it to me. Other times, they'd buy the same skin I was wearing so we could match. We'd eventually reach a consensus." (INTER6)
Novice, low-income, and anonymous players → Pro Players and Tryhards	
As their skins become widely adopted by the online gaming community, Pro Players and Tryhards seek distinction by abandoning these items in favor of newer or less popular skins.	"I remember when (name omitted) started playing without any skins. He had been banned, had to start over from scratch, and was pretty frustrated, you know? So he began playing with the Default skin, and people started copying him." (USER26) "Then Pro Players realized that noobs had started wearing Tryhard skins. So they switched to the Default skin instead. After all, who would choose to wear the Default skin? How long that trend will last, nobody really knows." (USER21)
Low-Income Players → Middle-Class Players	
Middle-class players adopt consumption practices originally associated with low-income players.	"I think... Anyone who follows YouTubers' influence is just a fool. You should wear the skins you actually like, right? Not just because someone else is using them and you want to do the same. I think everyone should have their own style when it comes to skins. For example, I'm a really good player, and I only use free skins." (USER23)

Note. Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2025).

Evidence of Trickle-Across dynamics was also identified in relation to the consumption of fashion items in Fortnite. The findings are presented below.

Trickle Across

The consumption of skins associated with fashion brands diffuses across player groups regardless of their

social characteristics, illustrating the democratization of these consumption practices (Lipovetsky, 2009). This diffusion is facilitated by various consumption strategies, including gifting, the cost savings associated with digital goods compared with physical fashion products, and the purchase of skins from third parties through social media marketplaces at lower prices.

Another finding consistent with Trickle-Across dynamics (King, 1973; Robinson, 1973) concerns the widespread adoption of female skins regardless of players' gender. This trend is primarily driven by their association with superior in-game performance, as these skins are frequently used by Tryhards and Pro Players. As the use of female skins became increasingly popular, Epic Games responded by expanding the development of this type of cosmetic item. An important exception, however, concerns players who seek anonymity or wish to avoid negative social interactions. For example, some women choose male skins, whereas some men avoid female skins because of traditional gender stereotypes.

Another finding of this study indicates that YouTubers and streamers influence one another's skin consumption practices as they seek inspiration for creating content to share on social media. In contrast, the same pattern was not observed among Pro Players, for whom only limited evidence of peer influence was identified. Among the interview participants, only one respondent (INTER4) had previously been a Pro Player.

Furthermore, there are instances in which the appearance of an opponent influences other players' skin consumption decisions based solely on aesthetic appeal, rather than on status considerations. In these cases, adoption is driven by how visually attractive a skin is, depending on individual perceptions (Daimiel et al., 2022). Observing opponents' skins also enables players to evaluate the item's cost-benefit ratio by considering its price as well as the possible presence of bugs (software errors or glitches).

Fashion trends also spread horizontally among friends through the display of their skin choices, collections, online reviews, and recommendations. In this context, friends refer to players connected through Fortnite's friendship system who maintain regular social interaction. These exchanges stimulate consumption practices, shape individual aesthetic preferences in the absence of a clearly defined hierarchy, and strengthen players' sense of belonging, consistent with the logic of the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Faucher, 2014).

This finding is further supported by the common practice of groups of friends playing together while using coordinated skins, which functions both as an in-

game strategy and as a mechanism for Trickle-Across diffusion (King, 1973; Robinson, 1973). In addition, competition among friends regarding the ownership of rare or legendary skins (Pereira et al., 2024) encourages peer consumption. Being excluded from a reference group creates a need to restore one's sense of belonging, thereby motivating consumption practices aimed at social reintegration (Kemper, 2011).

During the initial phase of data collection, frequent displays of players' own skin choices – as well as those of their friendship groups – were observed across social media platforms, together with reviews and recommendations of fashion items. These practices contribute to the diffusion of trends and the popularization of particular skins, including female skins and those perceived as offering the best cost-benefit ratio, such as cosmetic items believed to enhance in-game performance while representing good financial value. The sharing of this type of content facilitates the horizontal diffusion of fashion trends regardless of social hierarchy (Mohr et al., 2022).

A finding consistent with this pattern is the resale of skins and player accounts through social media platforms, which expands access to consumption by reducing financial barriers and enabling players to acquire rare items that are no longer available in the game. Another mechanism through which fashion trends spread across player groups is the gifting of skins to friends or even strangers. These peer-to-peer exchanges reinforce players' active participation in the circulation of fashion trends, allowing them to diffuse more democratically across the community (Mohr et al., 2022).

Similarly to female skins, male skins are adopted regardless of the player's gender. This pattern may reflect a broader trend across digital platforms. For example, Aris et al. (2023) found that contemporary fashion consumption increasingly blurs traditional gender boundaries. In this context, the adoption of skins illustrates consumers' willingness to assume new identities in order to satisfy their symbolic and expressive needs (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Silva, 2025; Silva et al., 2024).

Another finding consistent with Trickle-Across dynamics concerns the diffusion of high-priced skins across players regardless of their income level. At first glance, the consumption of expensive cosmetic items appears to reflect traditional notions of upper social class and conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2018). However, the findings of this study suggest that such an interpretation is not sufficient, as players employ a variety of strategies that broaden access to these items, including receiving skins as gifts, substituting digital purchases for physical consumption, obtaining finan-

cial support from family members, and purchasing skins or accounts from third parties through social media marketplaces at lower prices.

Likewise, free or low-cost skins are adopted by a wide range of players, including those with relatively high purchasing power, particularly individuals who are less engaged with the game or who embrace anti-fashion practices by deliberately avoiding popular items (Li et al., 2020; Simmel, 2020). The Default skin exemplifies this phenomenon, as it carries multiple symbolic mean-

ings depending on the social context – from novice players to Pro Players and Tryhards. The interpretation of these symbolic meanings depends on the circumstances in which the skin is used, including players' behavior, their social interactions, and the communities to which they belong.

Table 5. Summarizes the findings related to Trickle-Across dynamics and presents illustrative excerpts from the online interviews.

Table 5. Summary of Trickle Across in Fortnite skin consumption.

Description of the dynamics and illustrative interview excerpts	
Fashion brands and online gaming community	
Democratization of access to fashion brands through in-game skins due to their affordability.	"I think it's kind of a childhood trauma. When we don't have access to certain things growing up, we try to experience them later, once we have enough income. It's like, 'I own a pair of Nikes – just in Fortnite.'" (USER15)
Epic games and online gaming community	
The fashion trend of female skins gains popularity through Epic Games' offerings in response to community demand.	"Male skins tend to have a more exaggerated style. Male characters are usually much bulkier. There's even a kind of culture around it – most players buy female skins. I think that's one of the reasons Epic Games started putting more effort into designing female skins with greater detail, since they're more popular." (USER12)
YouTubers and Streamers	
YouTubers and streamers observe the fashion choices of other YouTubers and streamers and imitate their consumption practices, contributing to the diffusion of fashion across diverse groups.	"Whenever I'm not playing and I see a post on social media or from an influencer saying that a certain skin is available in the Item Shop, I check it out and buy it. That's basically it." (INTER1)
Opponents	
Players imitate the consumption practices of opponents who demonstrate superior in-game performance.	"That Alien skin – because it's black and slim, you know? The opponent using it came up and eliminated me before I even noticed him. I was like, 'Wow, that scared me. I want a skin like that.'" (USER15) "Sometimes I get eliminated by someone and think, 'Wow, that player is using a really cool skin.'" (USER37)
Friends/ Fellow players	
Players share their fashion choices, owned items, reviews, and recommendations with friends, contributing to the diffusion of fashion across diverse groups. Friends play together in squads while wearing matching or identical skins, reinforcing shared fashion practices. The exchange of skins as gifts among friends contributes to the diffusion of fashion across diverse groups. Competition among friends over the ownership of rare and legendary items encourages players to match or surpass one another's collections while reinforcing group belonging.	"I've bought a skin because a friend of mine had it and only played with that one. We were going to compete in a tournament, and I thought, 'I'm going to buy that skin while it's in the Item Shop so we can play using the same skin.'" (INTER5) "Basically, we pick a skin, and someone says, 'Let's all wear the same one.' So we do. It helps us pull off little tricks to confuse our opponents... If someone in the group doesn't own the skin, we send it to them as a gift." (USER13) "It was kind of an internal competition within the group. I'd buy a legendary skin, then someone else would buy a legendary skin too. Then people would say, 'Look how many legendary items I have.' So that was really the motivation – it became an internal competition." (USER20)
Online gaming community	
Players share their own and their group's fashion choices, collections, reviews, and recommendations within online gaming communities, contributing to the diffusion of fashion trends. Access to fashion items through unofficial channels facilitates their diffusion throughout the online gaming community. Gifting skins to strangers within online gaming communities contributes to the diffusion of fashion across different groups. The pursuit of anonymity leads some female players to adopt male skins in order to avoid negative social interactions. The consumption of premium cosmetic bundles purchased exclusively with real money, as well as the choice to use no skin or only free cosmetics, represents fashion trends that diffuse independently of traditional social hierarchies.	"I get the skins through my account by buying them from someone outside the game. It's cheaper, so I end up buying more items. They add me as a friend, send me the item as a gift, and then I pay them via Pix." (USER8) "There are good and bad things about being a girl. The bad part is that people keep bothering you. The good part is that whenever you use a cute voice online, someone ends up giving you a gift. I got this skin from a guy who lives in Germany." (USER24) "A lot of guys use female skins to deceive other players. Many people ask to see them on webcam outside the game, so they get a sister or a cousin to appear on camera and trick guys into giving them skins. And we all know some men are gullible – they'll fall for it." (USER15) "I've seen many of my female friends playing with male skins. Sometimes they do it to avoid being constantly added by strangers, harassed, or insulted." (USER25) "I have friends who are wealthy but extremely frugal. They don't spend money on the game – they just use the Default skin or those free skins you get during the Christmas event." (USER11) "People are going to think I'm rich because I own several cosmetic bundles that can only be purchased with real money. But I'm not rich – I just save money to spend on the game." (USER29)

Note. Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2025).

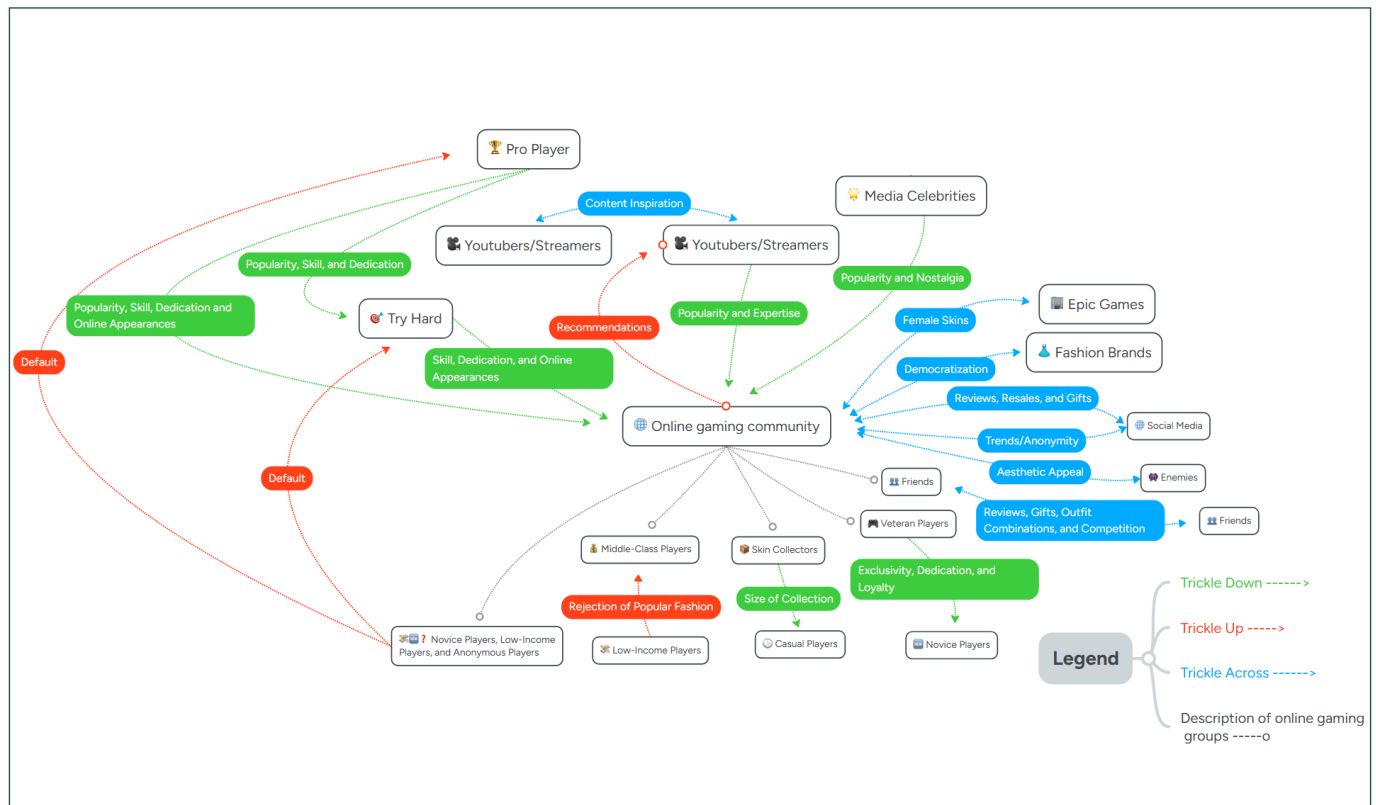
Figure 3 presents a conceptual framework summarizing the reference groups and the Trickle-Down (green), Trickle-Up (red), and Trickle-Across (blue)

dynamics identified in this study. The framework should be interpreted in conjunction with Tables 3, 4, and 5, which provide the empirical evidence

synthesized in the figure. It also highlights the key factors underlying these diffusion processes, as derived from the findings presented in the three tables.

For example, the figure illustrates how Epic Games' development of female skins has contributed to the diffusion of these cosmetic items throughout the gaming community regardless of

players' gender, exemplifying Trickle-Across dynamics. Another example concerns low-symbolic-status items, such as the Default skin, which was originally associated with novice players but was subsequently adopted by Pro Players and Tryhards as a strategy of symbolic differentiation, illustrating Trickle-Up dynamics.



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research data (2025).

Figure 3. Summary framework of the Trickle phenomenon in skin fashion consumption.

In Figure 3, the online gaming community is represented as comprising players with diverse characteristics. This is illustrated through the use of gray connectors, which denote the 'detailed composition of the online gaming community', as indicated in the figure legend.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study investigated how reference groups influence the diffusion and adoption of skin fashion among Fortnite players from the perspective of the Trickle phenomenon. Extending classical theories of fashion diffusion, the findings suggest a reconfiguration of the concept of status, which is no longer determined exclusively by economic capital but is instead constructed through hybrid forms of symbolic capital, including exclusivity, dedication, loyalty to the game, online visibility, nostalgia, skill, and specialized knowledge.

More specifically, these factors can be understood as distinct forms of capital that enable social distinction

in digital environments. These include scarcity capital (exclusivity), performative capital (skill and dedication), visibility capital (online prominence), temporal capital (loyalty to the game and accumulated experience), and affective capital (nostalgia). Together, these forms of capital highlight the multidimensional nature of the symbolic resources through which players construct belonging and social distinction via fashion within the investigated digital environment.

Accordingly, the findings indicate that symbolic scarcity – that is, the value attributed to rare, legacy, or prestigious in-game items – can outweigh players' monetary scarcity. The results also show that interactions within online communities continuously reshape the symbolic status of cosmetic items, while digital distinction is primarily constructed through the combination of in-game performance, players' trajectories, and their visibility within the gaming community.

The study's primary theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that the diffusion and adoption of digital fashion are not organized predominantly around traditional economic hierarchies. Instead, these processes are driven by forms of visibility and social validation mediated by the gaming community. In doing so, the study extends contemporary discussions of Trickle theory by showing how mechanisms of social distinction and imitation are reconfigured in digital environments, where multiple reference groups – notably YouTubers and streamers, Pro Players, and Tryhards – interact with algorithmic dynamics that amplify particular cultural repertoires.

From a managerial perspective, the findings offer practical implications for the digital goods industry. Companies may develop monetization strategies based on historical rarity and controlled scarcity, segment skin collections according to the status archetypes valued by different player communities, and recognize influencers as key legitimizers of symbolic repertoires. Furthermore, the importance attributed to nostalgia and identity suggests opportunities for developing collections with strong symbolic and media appeal, while the existence of secondary marketplaces may provide valuable insights into unmet consumer demand.

This study also has several limitations. First, it is context-specific, focusing on Brazilian players and Portuguese-speaking digital environments, which limits the transferability of the findings to other cultural settings. Second, participants were recruited through voluntary participation, introducing the possibility of self-selection bias toward more highly engaged community members. In addition, theoretical saturation was not achieved among Pro Players or YouTubers and streamers, limiting the depth of the findings regarding these groups. Finally, the qualitative design and the focus on a single game constrain the broader applicability of the results to other digital gaming contexts.

Future research could examine how processes of social distinction operate across different games and digital platforms, as well as explore the conversion of digital capital into economic capital. Additional studies may also investigate the role of algorithms and platform architectures in legitimizing virtual goods, while comparing the symbolic dynamics surrounding purely cosmetic items with those associated with functional in-game advantages. Finally, research focusing on different player profiles – such as Pro Players, novice players, and collectors – may further advance understanding of consumption dynamics in digital gaming environments.

ENDNOTE

1. The Default skin is the free, standard character appearance available in Fortnite. It is typically associated with novice players and is automatically assigned when a player has not selected any other skin before entering a match.
2. Tryhard is a term commonly used in gaming communities to describe players who are primarily focused on winning. Rather than playing solely for entertainment, Tryhards adopt a highly competitive approach, dedicating substantial time and effort to maximizing their in-game performance.
3. 'Simp' (*Gado*, in Portuguese) is a slang term commonly used in online gaming communities to describe someone – typically a man – who is perceived as showing excessive attention or devotion to another person, often by buying gifts or in-game items in an attempt to gain affection, approval, or attention.
4. A Pro Player is a professional competitor who participates in official gaming tournaments. Although all Pro Players can be considered Tryhards because of their strong commitment to maximizing in-game performance, not all Tryhards become Pro Players, as many highly competitive players do not qualify for or participate in professional tournaments.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW SCRIPT WITH USERS

Part 1: RESPONDENT CHARACTERIZATION

Questions

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. What is your educational background?
4. What kind of work do you do?

Part 2: UNDERSTANDING CONSUMPTION IN FORTNITE

Questions

5. How much time do you spend playing Fortnite?
6. What is your current career level in Fortnite?
7. When did you start playing Fortnite?
8. How frequently do you purchase skins? How much do you spend?
9. How many skins do you own?
10. What motivates you to purchase skins?
11. Are you satisfied with the skins you own, or would you like to purchase more? Please explain.
12. Which skin best represents you?
 - Ask the participant to display the indicated skin.

Part 3: SOCIALIZATION AND IMITATION

Questions

13. Do you play/have you played Fortnite Creative Mode?
14. If you could create an ideal world within Fortnite, what would it be like?
15. How many friends do you have on Fortnite?
16. Do you maintain friendships with people you met through Fortnite?
17. How do you keep up with Fortnite-related updates and trends?
 - Social media, YouTube, Twitch?
18. Do you participate in or engage in discussions within Fortnite groups and communities? Which ones?
19. How do you identify a powerful user in Fortnite? What does this power mean?
20. Has anyone influenced you to purchase skins? Please explain.
21. Can you identify characteristics from the real world in other Fortnite users?
 - Social class, gender, age, nationality, popularity?

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW SCRIPT WITH YOUTUBERS/STREAMERS

Part 1: RESPONDENT CHARACTERIZATION

Questions

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. What is your educational background?
4. What kind of work do you do? (other than content creation)

Part 2: UNDERSTANDING CONSUMPTION IN FORTNITE

Questions

5. How much time do you spend playing Fortnite?
6. What is your current career level in Fortnite?
7. How frequently do you purchase skins? How much do you spend?
8. How many skins do you own?
9. What motivates you to purchase skins?
10. Which skin best represents you?
 - Ask the participant to display the indicated skin.

Part 3: SOCIALIZATION AND IMITATION

Questions

11. How do you interact with your followers?
12. If you could create an ideal world within Fortnite, what would it be like?
13. How do you identify a powerful user in Fortnite? What does this power mean?
14. Has anyone influenced you to purchase skins? Please explain.
15. Can you identify characteristics from the real world in other Fortnite users?
 - Social class, gender, age, nationality, popularity?