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WHERE IS THE MELANIN
IN THE METAVERSE?
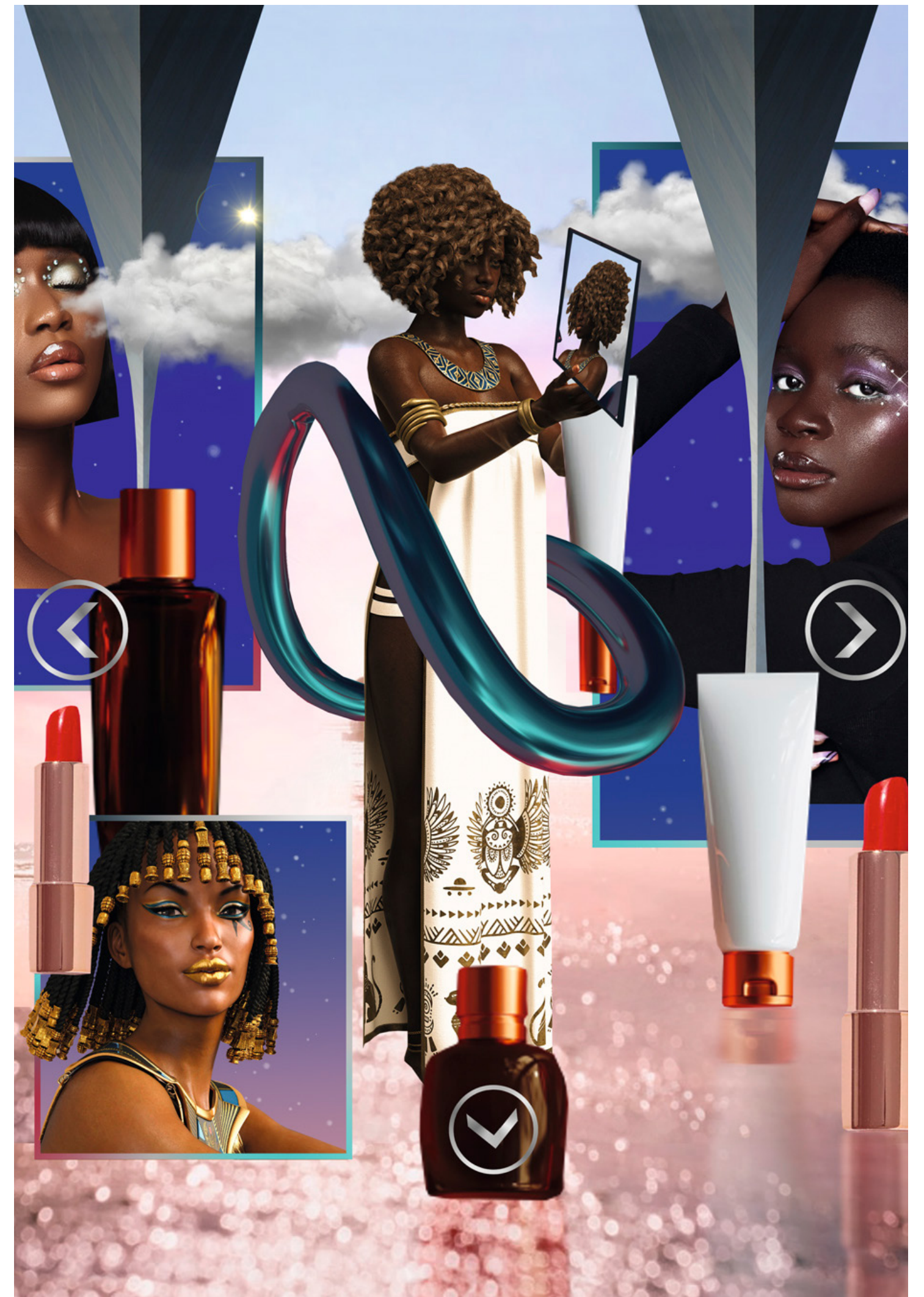
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When it comes to beauty, the metaverse is like a teenager's bedroom – a cluttered space where looks are tested and refined before they take a spin in the real world, and hedonistic cultural trends, as well as childlike fantasies, are taken seriously. This experimental quality has attracted bold new creators to the arena, offering a fresh take on what it means to be beautiful in a world where literally anything is possible.

"The metaverse is creating a cadence. It's a valuable place to gather and talk about beauty in more nuanced ways," says Darian Symoné Harvin, beauty editor-at-large at *LA Times Image.* "The thing about beauty is that it's one of the few things you still have to show up for. Somebody can auction off a cool image of a lipstick, but it will fall flat unless you assign deeper meaning to its creation."

Everyone – even the people making their fortunes from it – struggles to explain what the metaverse is and where it ends. While we were all sitting at home during the pandemic, what originated as a portmanteau of 'meta' and 'universe' in a 90s sci-fi novel became shorthand for the next frontier of digital engagement. As Eric Ravenscraft explains in *Wired* magazine, "the term doesn't refer to any specific type of technology, but rather a broad shift in how we interact with technology."

It's the internet on hyperdrive – a loose network of augmented reality, virtual reality, video games and other immersive technologies. Because it is decentralised, everyone experiences it in radically different ways. Cartoonish torsos chat in environments reminiscent of the movie *Tron*. Avatars with bobbleheads sit around sterile conference tables. Then there are more experimental places where alien-like creatures populate new dimensions or hyper-realistic models march down catwalks.

"Gaming affords players a unique opportunity to interact and connect with the brands they love, discover new ones and get inspired," says Lucy Yeomans, former *Porter* editor and founder of gaming app Drest. "For brands, gaming enables them to meet their target consumers where they are spending their time. It also provides an innovative way to forge affinities with the luxury consumers of the future and create deeper connections that go beyond gameplay. Our partnerships with the likes of Prada, Cartier and Messika allow players to immerse themselves in their world."

The options for beauty are elaborate and seemingly endless, and as a result, the standards are constantly changing. Clinique and Nars were among the first to venture into the space, with the former introducing NFT (non-fungible token) versions of its Black Honey Almost Lipstick and Moisture Surge, alongside a chance to win physical products. Gucci has partnered with Nintendo's Animal Crossing to create GG Island, centred on its Gucci Guilty fragrance and featuring kitschy storefronts as well as a Jared Leto avatar. On Drest, celebrity make-up artists such as Mary Greenwell curate social face filters to complement the platform's vast luxury-fashion collection. Whatever the entry point, users are spending serious money to ensure that when they create representations of themselves in the metaverse, people take notice.

"I love that people are interrogating what they'll wear in the metaverse," says Brooke DeVard Ozaydinli, creator marketing manager at Instagram and host of *The Naked Beauty* podcast. "It's a place where you can go further than what's possible in the real world. If I'm wearing a T-shirt, maybe the colour changes based on my emotions or how many compliments I've gotten today."

By nature, metaverse style bristles against everything that came before it. The people creating the most talked-about looks aren't always fashion-school graduates. They're more likely to be 3D designers and tech devotees who've found a new and lucrative creative outlet. The stakes are also different. Creators are less concerned with fabric sourcing and ad budgets and more invested in toothy issues such as ownership and decentralised economies. Transactions take place using cryptocurrency and ownership is traceable through NFT signatures.

The metaverse also arguably chips away at the fashion-industry machine that's based on acquiring prestigious prizes and lofty social connections to get ahead. Enterprising individuals can upload designs to the metaverse from their bedrooms, set prices on a whim, and offer as few or as many versions of a product as they like. And just as much money is funnelling into metaverse design from Silicon Valley as it is from Paris.

Using business models popularised by Telfar's bag security – a QR system that stops bots snapping up stock – and Supreme's weekly drops, brands can use the metaverse to screen designs. In theory, it's an attempt to democratise fashion production and limit waste. Rather than creating goods and hoping for the best, brands debut digital iterations of new designs online to see how they perform before putting them into production. In 2021, virtual-sneaker creator RKTFK partnered with then-unknown 19-year-old artist Fewocious to create hundreds of bold sneaker designs featuring expressive characters. The collection sold for $3.1 million in just under five minutes.

The metaverse is also using fashion as a tool for social commentary. Gabe Gault, the first artist-in-residence for Meta's @Metaverse Culture Series, recently presented his VR experience, *I Am a Man*, as part of its Black History Month campaign. Ripe with anti-establishment undertones, he recreates himself as a sort of puppet master whose electric-blonde hair and tangerine hoodie are seen against a backdrop of pivotal Civil Rights demonstrations. Historical icons in tailored suits holding handmade signs remind us that protest fashion has changed drastically in the last half-century. "The future of fashion has always been born from anti-culture," says Gault. "Anti-80s fashion bred 90s, anti-90s bred 00s, and so on. Now AR/VR fashion is rising, and the only limit is our imaginations."

The first-ever Metaverse Fashion Week took place in March 2022. Hosted on the virtual real estate platform Decentraland, the high-profile event attracted Etro, Dundas, Dolce & Gabbana and Estée Lauder among others. One stand-out was the LA-based label Imitation of Christ, who collaborated with photojournalist Lynsey Addario to present a collection that included liquid-metal hoodie dresses and flaming gowns, a comment on the climate crisis and California's ongoing wildfires. A portion of the profits went to Ukraine Dao, a crypto-based Ukrainian support fund.

The metaverse, therefore, has the potential to become an arena for positive change. But the ecosystem still falls victim to the biases that plague the human world and most modern technologies. Light skin, European features and thin bodies are over-represented, leaving many users hungry for textured hair, darker make-up shades, plus-sized clothing options and more to help them feel welcome. "I noticed an uptick in companies wanting to work with people of colour after the George Floyd protests," says Morgan Nixon, a popular gamer and make-up artist better known as BettyNixx. "In summer 2021, interactive livestreamer Twitch tried to give Black creators more visibility. Fast forward to this year's Black History Month, and I didn't see much representation. I know that it will probably take a long time before anything changes." Nixon famously slammed drugstore beauty brand Elf Cosmetics last year for attempting to launch a dedicated Twitch channel to "uplift female gamers" and instead visibly excluded trans people and women of colour.

It's a curious decision, considering how much people of colour – specifically Black women – spend on beauty. According to a 2019 Neilsen study, Black Americans bought more beauty products year over year than any other group, outspending their counterparts by nearly 19 per cent. In addition, the number of high-income Black households grew by 26 per cent. Simply put, overlooking Black beauty in the metaverse isn't just a political misstep, it's an economic one too.

Ensuring that the metaverse upends old beauty standards requires more than mindless board meetings and half-hearted brand activations. "When it comes to inclusion and true equity I think it's going to be important that the people behind it – the creators, engineers, etc – are coming from various points of view," adds Ozaydinli. "You need to have Black and Brown people involved in creating avatars, so things as simple as hair texture are right. If I want my avatar to have my laid baby hairs, I'd love to know that there is a designer that understands what that means and why someone would want that as an option."

In defence of this, diverse creatives worldwide are ramping up output. "In the early days of the internet, there weren't many Black investors and even fewer opportunities," says Gault. "I believe it can be a redemptive place for more people of colour to shape how the metaverse will look and feel before it takes off."

London's Thrill Digital gives us an idea of what Black people creating phygital (physical/ digital) experiences through gaming technology can achieve. Staffed by diasporic Nigerians across the UK, Canada and Lagos, the firm uses Web3 technology to produce show-stopping versions of fashion's most coveted items, such as the Dior saddlebag and Nike Air Jordans. But what's most striking is its ability to create life-like avatars that reflect the features, skin tones and hair textures of Black people. For their work the group recently received a grant from Epic Games.

"I see the metaverse as a virtual reality created for the utility of avatars, in the same way our physical reality is created for human bodies," says Alex 'Delz' Erinle, CEO of Thrill Digital. "We research what people want out of avatars – some want real life and others desire fantasy. It's still early but so much of what we see in the metaverse is driven by *certain* body types. Some brands seem to think that you can't sell clothes on models who don't look one way. We believe the metaverse should be inclusive for everyone." Thrill Digital has turned these ideas into action by creating Astra, a metaverse that encourages users to compete to win digital fashion NFTs for their avatars. The lead character is a dark-skinned woman with full lips and coiled hair whose mix of loud gold jewellery and multi-coloured catsuits are undeniably afro-futuristic.

Leighton 'Late-FX' McDonald, a New York-based spatial interaction designer whose CV includes collaborations with Yeezy, Complex Media and Under Armor, presents his vision of an inclusive digital future through AR. Most recently, he collaborated with Snapchat on the release of an exclusive lens for their Spectacles Augmented Reality Glasses, dubbed BlackSoul Gallery. Inspired by McDonald's childhood desire to see Black artists depicted in museums in his native South Carolina, the experience showcased portraiture, photography and sculpture by young Black artists in a gallery-like space and was available to the public.

Projects such as this highlight the barriers facing independent creators from underrepresented backgrounds who need to have the money to purchase the high-quality computers and software required to create eye-catching 3D work. They also need funding to scale. "Pitching as a Black agency has been terrible," reflects Erinle. "We've seen other people who don't even have a deck raise millions, while we still have to convince people we are genuine. Most investors want to see at least one white or Asian person—we're a bunch of Nigerians. But I'm stubborn, I'd rather die than have someone white show up and pretend to be me."

To court a truly global audience, fans from all socioeconomic levels need access to high-speed internet, VR. headsets or AR-enabled smartphones, or other gaming equipment. *The Washington Post* found that roughly 37 per cent of the world's population has never used the internet. And according to *Fortune*, less than one per cent of Eritrea's population, and 1.16 per cent in Myanmar, have online access.

"Our first gaming demo was with a Nigerian audience," says Niyi Okeowo, chief design officer and co-founder of Thrill Digital. "They kept complaining about the internet speeds, which must be fast if you want several people playing at once. Otherwise, the players can't hear or talk. It's an unfortunate reality we can't escape at the moment. If we only marketed ourselves to African consumers, we'd leave ourselves closed to the customers whose resources and access make them better primed to enjoy the full experience."

While big brands playing in the metaverse may seem to be having harmless fun, their interactions have to translate to dollars, which often leaves inclusivity low on priority lists. Many have therefore opted to promote the same globally appealing products to court those they believe are most active in the metaverse. Yet adaption is slow and segmented even in countries with high online penetration rates. Because beauty and fashion products are sold as NFTs, information has to be conveyed before a person can do something as simple as buying a new lipstick for their avatar. To get Ethereum, Bitcoin, or any of the other cryptocurrency coins, you must first be able to transfer bank funds in a crypto wallet, which exist on apps or web pages that need to be downloaded and require legal verification. It also means consenting to participate in this often volatile currency market.

"People who bet big on NFT projects right now are mostly white men," says Harvin. It's a harsh truth she learned trying to auction off her viral Mona Lisa in Paris NFT, rallying for Black women to share their visits to the Louvre and get their first passports. "A lot of people don't have crypto wallets or money in them. I don't think it's a reflection of Black people only. The average person isn't tapped into crypto. A lot has to be done to get people to understand the value of NFTs and what the metaverse is going to evolve into."

Community building can offer an answer. Across the metaverse, people of all stripes are rallying around the brands they love and products they covet to form new social connections and understand what it truly means to be immersed in this brave new world. "The metaverse is such a powerful lever for beauty because it is going to allow people to create communities no matter where they are," says Ozaydinli. "People of colour have stronger ties and affinity toward beauty brands that work for us and our skin because we know that we're not always being catered to."

So, next time you're in the metaverse be sure to stop and take a look around. More than the next frontier of the internet, it is emerging as the best hope for truly inclusive notions of beauty and is helping rebut the standards that limit creativity, expression and even the way we see ourselves.