"I Like the Way the Skin Looks": Player Perspectives on Aesthetic Appeal and Self-Representation with Video Game "Skins"

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Abstract. Microtransactions are the purchasing of in-game items in video games, often using real money. Through microtransactions, game players can obtain a type of cosmetic called "skins" that change the physical appearance of playable characters. Considering the default "skin" in many games is that of a white male, there are various psychosocial and economic costs that may be extended to players of color when attempting to select skins for their avatars. To examine how players of different racial and ethnic backgrounds interact with "skins," and the additional costs associated with them, we conducted a survey asking participants about their spending patterns with "skins" and reasons for choosing certain "skins" over others. The most common response from participants when asked why they select their skins was "because I like the way the skin looks." As this statement is broad, we delve into other results from our survey and previous studies by other scholars to analyze what this response may be able to tell us about players who selected this as their answer.

Keywords: Representation in Games, Microtransactions, Skins.

1   Introduction

Microtransactions—the purchasing of in-game items after acquiring the initial game—are major contributors to revenue in the gaming industry [3]. Through microtransactions, players can obtain power-ups that grant in-game advantages, or cosmetics—items that simply change the look or feel of a player's experience. Though the role of microtransactions varies between games, the purchase of cosmetic *skins* through microtransactions has gained prominence in games. Skins are purchasable cosmetics that change the physical appearance of in-game avatars. They are optional and ostensibly only for player enjoyment, but their impacts on players may be greater than mere aesthetics.

The practice of purchasing and donning skins allows game developers to utilize character representation to increase revenue via microtransactions. In single player games, such as *Assassin's Creed,* players expressed frustration toward microtransactions and were more focused on gameplay advancement than aesthetic purchases, like skins [19]. Most games that our survey participants reported they bought skins from were multiplayer games, including *Fortnite* and *Overwatch*. Within multiplayer games, a player's avatar can be seen by others who are playing the game at the same time, a highly social role. In this sense, buying skins through microtransactions is a way for players to present themselves and represent who they are in front of other players.

As part broader attempt to explore the purchase of self-representation, we created a survey to gain insight on the motivations behind players' selection and purchase of skins. We examine the level of influence a skin's resemblance to players' own racial and ethnic identity has on their interactions with skins. In this survey, we encountered the common theme of participants that reported "[they] like[d] the way the skin looks" as a reason for buying them. This theme can be seen in the work of previous scholars such as that of Klastrup and Tosca [9]. In order to further delve into this response, we analyze what it might mean to "like the way a skin looks" by examining player's spending patterns alongside their sentiment toward self-representation and diversity.

2   Related Work

2.1   A Subsection Sample

Fundamental to our approach is an understanding of skins as a commodification of the sort of virtual performative representation described by Nakamura [11]. We situate this work within broader research on the diversity of players [1, 2], diversity in games [4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 17, 18, 20], and how players engage with that diversity [10, 13, 14]

Previous research has studied how players interact with or self-represent through in-game cosmetics items [8, 9]. Klastrup and Tosca examine players' in-game cosmetic choices in their article "Because it just looks cool!" using the popular game *World of Warcraft* as a case study of player performance and in-game individuality [9]. Their focus on armor offers insight into how players are motivated by control of their in-game appearances. Although armor does have in-game functions, Kastrup and Tosca focus on how players use it for non-mechanical purposes and observe highly competitive

players pursuing armor for cosmetic reasons [9]. They describe several ways players might choose armor because of personal preference or to influence how they are perceived by other players. Klastrup and Tosca's analysis sheds light on how players might be willing to spend extra time acquiring appearances that matter to them.

In "Blacks Deserves Bodies Too!" Kafai et al. explore dynamics between player identity and avatar representation by observing conversations about race in the virtual world *Whyville* [8]. *Whyville* featured early examples of purchasable skins, where players could buy clothes and bodies to customize their avatars. However, the selection of bodies of color were limited, and often more expensive when available, leading users to speak out about the exclusion of their skin tones. Kafai et al.'s findings are an early example of how diverse and equitably priced representation can matter to users in digital spaces, particularly those who have limited options.

While Kafai et al. explored the workings of a virtual world featuring virtual currency acquired through gameplay, contemporary games that sell skins rely on real money. Since players now have more of an economic stake in these purchases, it is worth researching their motivations for dedicating extra time and money on customizing their virtual representations.

Shankar et al. evaluate ways people acquire objects and consume media, particularly CDs, as markers of their identity formation [16]. One of their participants stated that they bought certain CDs to project a specific identity to their peers. While they also note that scholars often overestimate the role of consumption in the expression of identity, it is important to note that external factors, such as socialization and sense of belongingness are impactful in many consumers' economic choices. Skins, as purchases that players use to literally represent themselves to their peers, can be seen as an indication of their motivation to project certain identities within a game.

3 Methods

3.1 Overview

We composed a 9-item survey utilizing three categories: player identity, representation in games, and purchasing practices, drawn from an initial literature review [15]. Our questions asked players to specify their age and race/ethnicity, and whether they play games that include purchasable skins. We also asked about the quantity of skins players purchased and the amount they spent on them. Additionally, we included a qualitative question asking players to describe how representation in games affects their choices regarding whether to play the game and what skins to purchase. The results allowed us to examine links between participants racial/ethnic identities, their impressions of representation in games, the frequency at which they purchase skins, and the reasons they do so.

3.2 The Survey

Participation in the survey required respondents to be eighteen or older and have played at least one game that involved the purchase of in-game skins. Most participants were

recruited through snowball sampling. We used various social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, as well as email lists and Discord—a communication software for gaming communities—to distribute the survey to a wide range of players from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. By utilizing these platforms, we were able to reach a broader audience and specific groups of diverse players. We collected a total of 173 responses, which we screened for anyone under 18, or those who gave incomplete or inapplicable data, such as playing games without skins. In our final data set, we examined 158 responses.

We examined our results quantitatively and qualitatively using Google Sheets to compare observations. We analyzed racial identity and the amount of money spent as individual variables or as a combination of self-identified racial/ethnic groups. The demographic breakdown of our sample was 45.9% White or Caucasian, 26.8% Hispanic or LatinX, 11.5% Black or African American, 6.4% South or Southeast Asian, 2.5% East Asian, 1.9% Middle Eastern or North African, and 1.9% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Using statistical analysis program JASP, we ran t-tests comparing the responses of different demographic groups to those of White players to observe any difference in responses.

We analyzed the results of our qualitative question—which asked players to explain how much diversity mattered when choosing games to play—in order to gain insight into the reasoning behind their purchasing practices, and how they viewed diversity within games. Our qualitative analysis consisted of each author reading the responses and coding recurring themes. We collaboratively discussed and analyzed these themes as they related to our quantitative data, such as desire for diversity or importance of skins that self-represent.

4   Results

Players of color in our sample buy more skins on average than their White counterparts. Additionally, Black or African American participants and Hispanic or LatinX participants stated that they spend more money on skins compared to White participants.

In our survey responses, there were notable differences between how often players of different ethnicities bought skins. Regardless of race, when participants were asked "How often do you normally buy skins?" many reported that they either bought skins "occasionally throughout the year" (26.6%) or "only when event or limited skins are available" (22.2%).

We also asked participants, "Why do you choose to purchase skins?" and provided six options to choose from in a "check all that apply" format. The most frequent answer was "because I like the way the skin looks," which was selected by 102 participants. Demographically, this breaks down for our larger sub-samples as 60% of all East Asian participants, 50% of all White or Caucasian participants, 50% of those who identified as mixed race or "other," and 35.8% of Hispanic or LatinX participants. Other answer options were selected fewer than 60 times.

In our qualitative responses, we identified a recurring theme we describe as *quasi-acceptance,* which we define as the simultaneous resignation of our participants to limited character representation in games, while placing importance on the possibility of greater self-representation and diversity. This may help us understand why players place emphasis on "the way [a] skin looks" compared to other factors, as a lack of representation no longer necessitates that they stop playing. It is also important to note that players do not often say they actively search for skins which represent them racially and ethnically, possibly because they are aware of the lack of such skins. However, the hope of possible representation may contribute to the aesthetic allure of a skin. Twenty-two of our participants reported that, although representation matters, the lack of representation was not a defining factor of game choice, as representations of various races and ethnicities can be difficult to find. As a result, participants state that while they prefer diverse options, they cannot stop playing games that do not feature them as there would be a minimal pool of games to choose from.

Although "because I like the way the skin looks" was the most common reason our participants used for why they bought skins, 18 participants (11.4%) directly stated that they actively look for skins that reflect their racial and ethnic identities. One of these participants, who identified as Hispanic or LatinX, explained their desire for representation by saying, "I enjoy the content of the game more if it can be made to feel as though I'M actually playing it, and it involves characters who reflect the diversity of the world around me." Responses like this appear repeatedly throughout our data, creating a theme of players of color who *accept* the characters in their games, but enjoy games more when they feel they are accurately represented.

5 Discussion and Future Work

Although our survey aimed to study how players of color represent themselves in games, many more participants claimed to simply like the aesthetics of the skin rather than the way it represented their own identities. As this response is extremely broad, it creates another opportunity for future research.

We found that players of color do spend more money on skins and buy more skins on average than White players. More research is needed to contextualize the reasons behind these microtransactions. For players to be so selective in their spending patterns and yet respond that they only do so because they "like the way the skin looks" indicates a more complex phenomenon. Although it may seem like superficial reasoning, our findings and previous research suggest the consumption of skins is a multidimensional phenomenon highly informed by identity and socialization.

The *quasi-acceptance* players expressed toward diversity and skins suggest that self-representation could be a factor in their selection of skins. Our findings expand on Shaw's observations of "acceptance" in her informants [17], and Passmore et al's observations of "learned neutrality" in their work [13], by acknowledging that while these attitudes are present, they are not absolute, as players do retain some agency when they choose to diversify the games they play. Shankar et al. suggested that social belonging-ness is an influencer in identity formation, and the purchase of material possessions

were markers of those sentiments. It is possible that social belonging is a factor behind liking a skin aesthetically, possibly to connect with players of the same race, or to represent their racial identity in the community [16]. In Klastrup and Tosca's work, even though armor *did* have some in-game advantages, their participants acknowledged that they selected certain armors to present an image to other players, particularly one that projected experience or prestige [9].

In future research, we will conduct follow-up interviews to evaluate the motivations behind players' selection of skins. In addition to asking how players identify racially and ethnically, as we did in our survey, we will ask participants which skins they have recently purchased and how accurately they believe those skins resemble their personal identities. We will also ask participants to further explain their reasons for choosing those skins. Additionally, since liking the aesthetics of a skin was such a popular response in our survey, we will focus much of our in-person interviews on what makes skins "look cool." In-depth responses to these questions will help us determine if overarching answers like "because I like the way the skin looks" are related to players' racial and ethnic identities.

Focus groups would provide another dimension to potential responses about players' views toward skins and diversity. Due to the social element of games, focus groups would be able to provide settings in which players get a chance to express their consensus of what makes a skin look cool or more purchasable. Focus groups could utilize the same participants that we recruited for our first survey. We could also focus on colleagues or teams that play together, to further study how other players influence which skins players select.

6　　Summary

The dedication of additional time and money in order to acquire skins that seemingly have aesthetic purposes is a phenomenon worth further exploration. Our research, which focuses on players of color, suggests that there may be a relationship between self-representation, the desire for diversity, and the microtransactions of skins.

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