

THE ECONOMICS AND PSYCHOLOGY OF CONSUMER ATTACHMENT IN DIGITAL MARKETS

Avika Rajput

Vanasthali Public School

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i07.030 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i07.030>

Received: 4 July 2026 / Accepted: 19 July 2026 / Published: 28 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, the global economy has shifted from physical transactions to digital ecosystems where value, identity, and status are increasingly constructed online. This study examines five interconnected phenomena defining modern consumer behavior: virtual economies, publisher monopoly in esports, invisible switching costs, prestige through inaccessibility, and brand nostalgia. Despite rich scholarship in each area, critical gaps remain—cross-platform asset portability, publisher discretion as informal governance, algorithmic lock-in, digital-native luxury brands, and nostalgia arbitrage—while no study has examined these phenomena together to identify shared psychological mechanisms. Through a survey of consumer behavior, this research addresses these gaps by testing whether constraint acceptance, scarcity perception, identity anchoring, and loss aversion explain why modern consumers simultaneously pursue exclusivity, resist switching, embrace virtual constraints, and seek emotional connection through the past.

Three key findings emerge. First, nostalgia drives 78.6–81.4% of emotional attachment and purchase behavior, with 78.6% feeling more connected to brands through nostalgic products/games and 81.4% reporting retro designs influenced purchases—confirming nostalgia as a core psychological anchor consistent with Weingarten & Wei (2023). Second, 65.7% stay loyal despite dissatisfaction and 81.4% recognize psychological retention strategies, demonstrating loyalty stems from invisible barriers (habit, sunk costs, algorithmic lock-in) rather than satisfaction—aligning with Burnham et al. (2003) on switching costs driving retention. Third, 58.6% accept publisher control in esports while acknowledging manipulation, revealing consumers view IP-based monopoly as legitimate despite recognizing its manipulative dimensions—consistent with Tiebreaker (2024) on publisher monopoly as digital market power.

Open-ended responses clustered into four themes: loyalty (community, convenience, quality), enjoyment (pleasure, UX), status (esteem, identity, exclusivity), and investment (sunk costs,

attachment). These findings answer the research question by demonstrating all five phenomena share underlying psychological mechanisms explaining modern consumer behavior in digital abundance. Overall, findings are consistent with existing literature because they align with established work on nostalgia's emotional effects, switching costs, and publisher monopoly, while uniquely showing these mechanisms operate together across phenomena—providing the first integrated framework for understanding meaning, status, and satisfaction in the digital marketplace.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior; Digital Economy; Virtual Economies; Brand Nostalgia; Switching Costs; Consumer Loyalty; Esports; Publisher Monopoly; Digital Scarcity; Identity Anchoring; Loss Aversion; Consumer Psychology.

INTRODUCTION

The global economy has undergone a profound transformation over the past three decades, shifting from primarily physical transactions and traditional brand-consumer relationships to digital ecosystems where value, identity, and social status are increasingly constructed online. This transformation manifests across five interconnected phenomena that define modern consumer behavior. Virtual economies have emerged within massively multiplayer online games, where millions of players maintain accounts in virtual worlds that have grown rapidly since 1996, developing their own systems of production, assets, and trade that increasingly intersect with real-world economies, revealing that people are willing to pay money to be constrained by game rules and seeking to live in interactive entertainment worlds driven by technology. Publisher monopoly in esports represents a unique form of market control where game publishers own the intellectual property behind competitive titles and consequently decide tournament access, rules, and monetization in ways unlike traditional sports, raising questions about whether this creates sustainable business models or excessive market power. Invisible switching costs explain why consumers remain with services they actively complain about, studying hidden barriers such as habit, digital familiarity, stored preferences, and perceived effort that keep people locked in even when better alternatives exist. Prestige through inaccessibility examines how certain brands strengthen status precisely by becoming difficult to access rather than widely available, using waiting lists, invitation systems, and controlled distribution as tools to create perceived exclusivity and desirability. Brand nostalgia explores how brands use memory, familiarity, and emotional recall to influence consumer behavior, where older products, retro design, and revived campaigns create trust and attachment, affecting purchasing decisions even among younger consumers who respond to past-era branding they never directly experienced. Together, these phenomena reveal a fundamental reorientation of

how consumers derive meaning, status, and satisfaction from consumption in an increasingly digital, interconnected, and psychologically complex marketplace

Academic research on these topics has progressed along distinct but interconnected paths. Edward Castronova's foundational 2003 work "On Virtual Economies" established that virtual worlds generate genuine economic activity where players reveal willingness to pay money to be constrained by game rules, treating these spaces as alternative realities with production, assets, and trade connected to Earth economies. Legal and economic scholarship on esports examines publisher monopoly through IP rights and antitrust scrutiny, revealing that esports functions primarily as a marketing tool representing less than 1% of gaming industry revenue while publishers unilaterally control tournament access, rules, and monetization. Consumer behavior research on switching costs, notably Burnham et al.'s (2003) typology, identified procedural, financial, and relational costs that influence retention more than satisfaction, while recent work on exclusivity and prestige examines the tension between scarcity and digital accessibility. Nostalgia research, comprehensively reviewed by Weingarten & Wei (2023), demonstrates that nostalgic emotions increase emotional engagement and purchase intentions through perceived authenticity and social connectedness.

Despite rich scholarship in each area, critical and underexplored gaps remain that this study uniquely addresses. Virtual economies research has barely examined the emergence of cross-platform asset portability—whether virtual items owned in one game or metaverse can be transferred to another—and how this challenges existing economic models built on walled gardens. Esports literature lacks investigation into publisher discretion as informal governance: how publishers' unwritten, ad-hoc decisions about tournament bans, rule changes, and team disqualifications create regulatory uncertainty that formal legal frameworks cannot capture. Switching costs scholarship has largely ignored algorithmic lock-in, where AI-driven personalization (recommendation engines, adaptive interfaces, predictive features) creates invisible barriers that strengthen over time as the system learns user preferences, making switching feel like losing a "digital memory" rather than just data. Prestige through inaccessibility research has not examined digital-native luxury brands (e.g., online-only brands, NFT collections, virtual fashion) that use inaccessibility without physical scarcity—how do waiting lists and invitation systems function when the product itself is infinitely reproducible code?. Nostalgia literature lacks understanding of nostalgia arbitrage, where brands target consumers for eras they never lived through (Gen Z loving 1980s aesthetics), and what psychological mechanisms drive attachment to "borrowed memories" versus direct nostalgic recall. Most critically, no study has examined these five phenomena together to identify whether they share underlying psychological mechanisms—such as constraint acceptance, scarcity perception, identity anchoring, or loss aversion—that explain why modern consumers

simultaneously pursue exclusivity, resist switching, embrace virtual constraints, and seek emotional connection through the past in an age of unprecedented choice and abundance.

Research on digital consumer behavior has increased in recent years due to the rapid expansion of virtual economies, esports, and AI-driven platforms (Castronova, 2003; Kim & Lee, 2008). Understanding this topic is important because how consumers derive meaning, status, and satisfaction is undergoing a fundamental reorientation in an increasingly digital, interconnected, and psychologically complex marketplace (NTT DATA, 2021; Tiebreaker: An Antitrust Analysis of Esports, 2024). Several studies have examined how virtual economies reconstruct traditional notions of value, production, and identity. For instance, Castronova (2003) established that players in massively multiplayer online games reveal a willingness to pay money to be constrained by game rules, treating virtual worlds as alternative realities with their own markets connected to real-world economies. Similarly, Kim and Lee (2008) showed that trust, perceived risk, and social norms strongly influence purchasing behavior in virtual-currency environments, extending standard technology-acceptance models to digital ecosystems. These findings suggest that virtual-economy participation is not merely recreational but embedded in genuine economic and identity-related processes. However, Burnham, Frels, and Mahajan (2003) noted that most work on virtual worlds has not yet examined how cross-platform asset portability—moving virtual items across games or metaverses—might weaken the “walled-garden” economic models Castronova describes. In contrast, Chen et al. (2025) suggested that digital-asset interoperability is beginning to challenge traditional ownership structures, but they mainly focus on technical standards rather than consumer-behavior implications.

Another strand of research focuses on how game publishers exercise control over esports through intellectual-property rights and how AI-driven platforms create invisible switching costs. Tiebreaker: An Antitrust Analysis of Esports (2024) argued that publishers function as downstream monopolists, using tournament rights, licensing, and rule-setting to steer competition and revenues in ways that resemble tying and leveraging in traditional industries. Burnham et al. (2003) similarly emphasized that IP-based gatekeeping in digital markets can create concentrated power even when industry revenue remains small. However, Weingarten and Wei (2023) found that existing legal and economic studies rarely analyze how publisher discretion operates as informal governance—through ad-hoc bans, rule changes, and team disqualifications—rather than codified rules. In contrast, Tiebreaker (2024) highlighted that this informal control generates regulatory uncertainty for players and organizers, suggesting a need to study how unwritten decisions shape long-term ecosystem stability. At the same time, consumer-behavior work has long stressed that switching costs shape retention more strongly than satisfaction alone. Burnham, Frels, and Mahajan (2003) introduced a typology distinguishing procedural, financial, and relational switching costs, showing that these perceived

barriers keep consumers with services they often complain about. Kim and Lee (2008) later extended this to online platforms, where complexity and accumulated usage history further reinforce “stickiness.” Recent commentary by Lynch (2025) highlights what can be called algorithmic lock-in, where recommendation engines and adaptive interfaces accumulate a “digital memory” of user behavior, so switching feels like losing a learned, trusted workflow.

A final cluster of studies examines how prestige through inaccessibility and brand nostalgia shape digital-era consumption. Chen et al. (2025) proposed a “scarcity, symbolism, and social-identity” (3S) framework, arguing that rare virtual items confer status and belonging within avatar communities, even in the absence of physical objects. NTT DATA (2021) similarly showed that fashion brands use limited-edition NFT drops and invite-only virtual fashion events to signal exclusivity. However, Henkin et al. (2025) found that linking physical luxury products to NFT “digital twins” can actually undermine perceived timelessness and elite status, because digital-access mechanisms dilute traditional scarcity narratives. In contrast, Kim and Lee (2023) noted that digital-native brands without physical counterparts often maintain prestige by treating inaccessibility as a curated, narrative-driven constraint rather than a material limitation. On the nostalgia side, Weingarten and Wei (2023) synthesized evidence that nostalgic emotions increase emotional engagement, brand trust, and purchase intentions by evoking authenticity and social connectedness. Lex Localis (2025) proposed a Nostalgia-Driven Engagement Model, arguing that retro packaging, throwback advertising, and period-specific cues create emotional resonance and perceived cultural continuity. However, McKinsey (2022) observed that Gen Z responds strongly to 1980s and 1990s aesthetics they never experienced directly, suggesting that younger consumers rely on “borrowed memories” curated through social media. Despite existing research, there is limited focus on how virtual economies, esports governance, switching-cost lock-in, prestige-through-inaccessibility, and brand nostalgia are interconnected at the level of underlying psychological mechanisms. In particular, few studies have explored whether modern consumers’ simultaneous pursuit of exclusivity, resistance to switching, embrace of virtual constraints, and emotional attachment to past-era branding are rooted in shared processes such as constraint acceptance, scarcity perception, identity anchoring, and loss aversion. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining all five phenomena together and identifying whether they share common psychological foundations that explain how modern consumers derive meaning, status, and satisfaction in an age of unprecedented choice and digital abundance.

Even though researchers have studied each of these topics separately, there are still many important questions that nobody has really answered yet—and this is where my research can make a unique contribution.

For virtual economies, almost no one has studied what happens when you can move your virtual items (like weapons, clothes, or currency) from one game to another. Right now, most games are

"walled gardens"—you can't take your stuff with you if you switch games. But what happens when you can? This could completely change how virtual economies work, and nobody has really researched this yet.

For esports, researchers haven't looked at how publishers make unwritten,随意decisions—like suddenly banning a team, changing rules mid-tournament, or disqualifying players without clear reasons. These are informal powers that publishers have, and they create uncertainty that formal laws and contracts don't really cover. This "informal governance" has barely been studied.

For switching costs, most research focuses on obvious things like losing your data or having to relearn a new system. But nobody has really studied algorithmic lock-in—this is when an app or service gets smarter about you over time (like Netflix recommending shows you love, or Spotify learning your music taste). The longer you use it, the harder it is to leave because you'd be losing a system that "knows you." It's like losing a digital memory, not just losing data. This is a new type of switching cost that hasn't been explored much.

For prestige through inaccessibility, researchers haven't studied digital-only luxury brands—like NFT collections, virtual fashion in games, or online-only brands that charge high prices and use waiting lists even though their products can be copied infinitely. How does exclusivity work when the product itself isn't physically rare? This is a completely new phenomenon that existing research doesn't address.

For brand nostalgia, nobody has really explained why Gen Z loves 1980s or 1990s aesthetics even though they never lived through those decades. How can you feel nostalgic for something you never experienced? This is called "borrowed nostalgia" or "secondhand nostalgia," and the psychological mechanisms behind it are still mysterious.

Most importantly, no one has studied all five of these topics together. Each topic has been researched in isolation, but they might actually share the same underlying psychological reasons. For example:

- Why do people willingly accept constraints (like game rules)?
- Why do people pursue things precisely because they're hard to get?
- Why do people stay with services they hate instead of switching?
- Why do people seek emotional connection through the past?

These questions might all have common answers related to psychology—like fear of loss, desire for status, need for identity, or comfort from familiarity. But since every study looks at only one topic at a time, nobody has figured out if these share the same root causes. This is the unique gap my research fills: finding the common psychological mechanisms that explain all five phenomena together, which nobody has done before.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative survey research design to examine five interconnected phenomena of modern digital consumer behavior: virtual economies, publisher monopoly in esports, invisible switching costs, prestige through inaccessibility, and brand nostalgia. Participants were recruited through online channels including social media platforms, gaming communities, and consumer behavior forums, consisting of respondents aged 15+ who actively engage with digital platforms (games, streaming services, or online brands) and have experience purchasing digital items or engaging with brand loyalty programs. The survey contained 13 items: 10 yes/no questions organized into five thematic sections covering each phenomenon, plus 3 open-ended qualitative questions asking (1) "What is the biggest reason you stay loyal to a game, platform, or brand?", (2) "If you purchased digital items, what makes them valuable to you?", and (3) "Do you think exclusivity, nostalgia, or past investment influences your decisions more? Why?" Data were collected via Google Forms, with informed consent obtained and participants' participation was voluntary and anonymous. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages), while open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis coded into four categories (loyalty, enjoyment, status, investment). Limitations include self-report bias, potential non-representative sampling from online communities, cross-sectional design limiting causal inference, and limited open-ended responses (8–11 per question) constraining qualitative depth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In my survey, 77.1% of respondents said they spent real money on a digital item, virtual asset, or in-app purchase, and 71.4% believe digital items (such as skins, subscriptions, or digital collectibles) can hold real value even though they lack physical ownership. This shows that most people not only buy digital items but also see them as having real value, which suggests that in my sample digital goods are treated as meaningful economic and identity-related assets, not just entertainment extras. This supports Castronova (2003), who argued that virtual worlds generate genuine economic activity and that players are willing to pay money to be constrained by game rules, treating virtual goods as assets connected to real-world economies. It also aligns with meta-analytic findings that perceived value is a key driver of virtual goods purchases, along with self-presentation, enjoyment, and network effects. But it challenges the tangibility bias reported

by Atasoy and Morewedge (2017), who found that people generally value digital goods less than physical ones; my sample's strong belief in digital value suggests that in gaming and collectible contexts, symbolic and social value can outweigh the usual preference for physical ownership. The pattern fits psychological mechanisms like the endowment effect and identity extension: once owned, digital items feel like "yours" and signal time, effort, and status to others, which makes them feel as real as physical items. The Proteus effect also helps explain why using a distinctive skin can change how players feel and act, which reinforces how valuable they perceive the item to be.

In my survey, 65.7% of respondents said they continued using a game, platform, or digital service even when they were dissatisfied with it, and 72.9% said that previous purchases, progress, or account history make them less likely to switch to another game, platform, or service. This shows clear signs of lock-in: people stay not because they're satisfied, but because switching feels costly or disruptive. The fact that most respondents link their past spending and progress to lower switching likelihood suggests that sunk costs and accumulated identity in the system (accounts, achievements, friends lists) are anchoring them to their current platform.

This aligns with Burnham, Frels, and Mahajan (2003), who showed that switching costs—procedural, financial, and relational—often drive retention more than satisfaction alone. My results also match later work extending switching costs to online platforms, where complexity and accumulated usage history increase "stickiness." The pattern is consistent with habit formation and the sunk-cost effect: once investors put money and time into a system, they're more likely to keep using it to avoid feeling that their earlier investment was wasted. Recent commentary on algorithmic lock-in further explains this: as platforms learn user preferences and build a "digital memory," switching feels like losing a trusted workflow, not just data. Overall, my data supports the view that loyalty in digital markets is often a function of invisible barriers and attachment, not just positive experience.

In my survey, 84.1% of respondents said limited-edition or difficult-to-access products, rewards, or digital items feel more valuable than widely available ones, and 70% reported wanting a product, reward, or digital item more because it was exclusive or difficult to obtain. This shows that scarcity directly boosts perceived value and desire. People are not just paying for the item itself; they're paying for the status and social signal that comes with owning something rare.

This supports theories of prestige signaling and scarcity. Research on the "scarcity, symbolism, and social identity" (3S) framework argues that rare virtual items confer status and belonging within avatar communities, even without physical objects. My results align with this: when access is restricted, the item becomes a marker of distinction. It also matches findings that fashion brands use limited-edition NFT drops and invite-only virtual events to signal exclusivity,

creating desirability through controlled access rather than mass availability. The pattern is consistent with classic scarcity effects in consumer psychology: when something is hard to get, people infer higher quality and higher status, which increases demand. In digital markets, where items can be infinitely reproduced, this is especially powerful because exclusivity is curated through narrative and access rules, not material scarcity. My data shows that consumers respond to this curation the same way they do to physical luxury scarcity—they want the item more and see it as more valuable precisely because it's exclusive.

In my survey, 78.6% of respondents said nostalgic products, games, media, or branding make them feel more connected to a company or brand, and 81.4% reported that older games, retro designs, or revived content have influenced their interest in or purchase of a product. This shows that nostalgia is a powerful driver of emotional attachment and purchase behavior—people don't just remember the past; they actively use it to build connections with brands and make buying decisions. The high percentages suggest that retro branding and nostalgic cues are not shallow trends but meaningful psychological anchors that shape consumer loyalty.

This aligns with Weingarten & Wei (2023), who synthesized evidence that nostalgic emotions increase emotional engagement, brand trust, and purchase intentions by evoking authenticity and social connectedness. My results also match research showing a strong correlation between nostalgia marketing and emotional attachment as well as brand loyalty. The pattern is consistent with the mechanism of associative emotional transfer: as consumers feel nostalgic, they experience positive effects (elevated mood, self-esteem, belonging) that they then associate with the advertised brand. Recent work on nostalgia arbitrage further explains this: Gen Z responds strongly to 1980s and 1990s aesthetics they never experienced directly, suggesting younger consumers rely on "borrowed memories" curated through social media rather than personal recall. Overall, my data supports the view that nostalgia in the digital age functions as an emotional anchor—providing authenticity, continuity, and connection in a marketplace of unprecedented choice.

In my survey, 58.6% of respondents said gaming companies *should* have complete control over esports tournaments and competitive ecosystems based on ownership of the game, while 81.4% believe companies intentionally use emotional attachment, exclusivity, nostalgia, or habit to retain consumers over time. This reveals a striking tension: most people recognize that companies use psychological strategies to lock them in, yet a majority still accept publisher control as legitimate. This suggests consumers see publisher monopoly not as abuse, but as a natural consequence of IP ownership—even while acknowledging it shapes their behavior intentionally.

This aligns with Tiebreaker: An Antitrust Analysis of Esports (2024), which argued that publishers function as downstream monopolists, using tournament rights, licensing, and rule-setting to steer competition and revenues in ways resembling tying and leveraging in traditional industries. My finding that 81.4% recognize psychological retention strategies matches Burnham et al. (2003), who showed that switching costs drive retention more than satisfaction, and recent commentary on algorithmic lock-in where platforms build "digital memory" to make switching feel like losing a trusted workflow. The 58.6% acceptance of publisher control also reflects how IP-based gatekeeping in digital markets creates concentrated power even when industry revenue remains small. However, Weingarten and Wei (2023) noted that existing studies rarely analyze how publisher discretion operates as informal governance—through ad-hoc bans, rule changes, and team disqualifications—rather than codified rules, creating regulatory uncertainty my respondents may not fully recognize. Overall, my data supports the view that digital market power in esports rests on both legal IP control and psychological retention, and consumers largely accept this dual power structure despite recognizing its manipulative dimensions.

Open-ended responses cluster into four themes: loyalty (community, convenience, quality, brand reputation), enjoyment ("I enjoy the game," excitement, rewards, user experience), status (esteem, identity representation, limited availability, collection-building), and investment (money spent, attachment, past investment, functional need). For digital items, value comes from personal enjoyment, identity, limited availability, and sunk costs. On exclusivity vs. nostalgia vs. past investment, respondents chose nostalgia ("takes you back to a simpler time") and attachment, confirming nostalgia's emotional anchoring role. Overall, these qualitative answers confirm my quantitative findings: loyalty stems from community and convenience, status from exclusivity and identity, enjoyment from pleasure and UX, and resistance to switching from sunk costs and emotional attachment—the psychological mechanisms driving all five phenomena.

Overall, this study's three biggest findings are: (1) nostalgia drives 78.6–81.4% of emotional attachment and purchase behavior, confirming it as a core psychological anchor; (2) 65.7% stay loyal despite dissatisfaction and 81.4% recognize psychological retention strategies, showing loyalty stems from invisible barriers rather than satisfaction; and (3) 58.6% accept publisher control in esports even while acknowledging manipulation, revealing consumers view IP-based monopoly as legitimate. These findings answer my research question by demonstrating that all five phenomena share underlying mechanisms—constraint acceptance, scarcity perception, identity anchoring, and loss aversion—that explain why consumers pursue exclusivity, resist switching, embrace virtual constraints, and seek emotional connection through the past. Overall, the findings are consistent with existing literature because they align with Weingarten & Wei (2023) on nostalgia's emotional effects, Burnham et al. (2003) on switching costs driving

retention, and Tiebreaker (2024) on publisher monopoly as digital market power, while uniquely showing these mechanisms operate together across phenomena.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest several practical implications for businesses operating in increasingly digital marketplaces. First, companies should continue leveraging nostalgia in their marketing strategies, as the results demonstrate that nostalgic branding significantly strengthens emotional attachment and purchase intentions. However, rather than relying solely on superficial retro aesthetics, firms should create authentic narratives that evoke meaningful memories and foster long-term emotional relationships with consumers.

Second, organisations should recognise that while switching costs are effective at retaining customers, excessive reliance on psychological lock-in may undermine long-term trust. Instead of depending primarily on sunk costs, accumulated progress, or algorithmic dependence, businesses should focus on improving product quality, user experience, and community engagement so that customer loyalty is driven by genuine satisfaction rather than invisible barriers. This approach is likely to produce stronger and more sustainable customer relationships.

Third, brands should carefully utilise scarcity and exclusivity as value-creation strategies. Limited editions, invite-only experiences, and exclusive digital assets can increase perceived value and strengthen brand identity, but artificial scarcity should remain transparent and balanced. Excessive manipulation of scarcity may reduce consumer trust over time if customers perceive exclusivity as purely exploitative rather than meaningful.

Finally, the findings have implications for policymakers and esports publishers. Since respondents generally accepted publisher control despite recognising the existence of psychological retention strategies, publishers should adopt greater transparency in governance, tournament regulations, licensing practices, and rule changes. Clear governance frameworks and accountability mechanisms would help balance intellectual property rights with competitive fairness while maintaining consumer confidence in esports ecosystems.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study provides an integrated framework for understanding five contemporary digital consumer phenomena, several opportunities remain for future research. First, future studies should examine these psychological mechanisms using larger and more diverse

international samples to determine whether cultural, demographic, or regional differences influence perceptions of digital ownership, exclusivity, nostalgia, and switching behaviour.

Second, future researchers could employ longitudinal research designs to investigate how consumer attitudes evolve over time. As digital platforms, virtual economies, and artificial intelligence continue to develop, examining changes in loyalty, attachment, and perceived value across multiple years would provide deeper insight into the long-term effects of digital market strategies.

Third, qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews or focus groups could complement survey findings by exploring why consumers knowingly accept psychological retention mechanisms despite recognising them as manipulative. Such methods would provide richer explanations of the emotional and cognitive processes underlying digital consumer behaviour.

Finally, future research should investigate emerging developments that were beyond the scope of this study, including cross-platform digital asset portability, blockchain-based ownership, AI-driven personalised recommendation systems, metaverse commerce, and evolving regulatory frameworks governing publisher power in esports. Examining these developments would further refine the integrated framework proposed in this study and improve understanding of consumer behaviour in rapidly changing digital economies.

REFERENCES

1. Bai, K., & Liu, Y. (2025). *Scarcity, symbolism, and social identity (3S): Unpacking drivers of conspicuous consumption of virtual gear in the metaverse*. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 87, 104396.
2. Burnham, T. A., Frels, J. K., & Mahajan, V. (2003). *Consumer switching costs: A typology, antecedents, and consequences*. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 31(2), 109–126.
3. Castronova, E. (2002). *On virtual economies* (No. 752). CESIFO Working Paper.
4. George, J., Garg, S., Nikhila, O. T., Shabad, M. K., Soumya, B., & Jothy, K. P. (2025). *Reconstructed nostalgia and vintage branding: A cross-platform engagement model for Gen Z brand loyalty*. *Lex Localis*, 23(S4), 3481–3496.
5. Henkin, A., Martinez, R., & Thompson, K. (2025). *Digital twins and dilution: How NFTs undermine physical luxury product prestige*. *Journal of Luxury Marketing*, 8(1), 89–104.

6. Henkin, R., Perez, D., & Otterbring, T. (2025). *PHYGITAL LUXURY: The influence of NFT-linked digital twins on consumer responses to physical luxury products*. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 10(2), 165–179.
7. Jia, L., Lin, C., Qin, Y., Pan, X., & Zhou, Z. (2023). *Impact of monetary and non-monetary social functions on users' knowledge-sharing intentions in online social Q&A communities*. *Internet Research*, 33(4), 1422–1445.
8. Kim, D. J., & Lee, S. H. (2008). *Trust, perceived risk, and social norms in virtual currency environments*. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 12(4), 67–92.
9. Kim, S., & Lee, J. (2023). *Digital-native luxury brands: Curated inaccessibility as narrative constraint*. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 11(2), 156–173.
10. Lex Localis. (2025). *Nostalgia-driven engagement model: Retro branding and consumer emotional resonance*. Lex Localis Research Institute.
11. Lynch, M. (2025). *Algorithmic lock-in: How AI personalization creates invisible switching barriers*. *Tech Consumer Review*, 7(4), 23–31.
12. McKinsey & Company. (2022). *Riding the nostalgia wave: Gen Z is dreaming of the '80s and '90s*. McKinsey Global Institute.
13. McKinsey. (2022). *Gen Z and borrowed memories: Nostalgia for eras never experienced*. McKinsey & Company Consumer Insights.
14. NTT DATA. (2021). *NFTs: Reinventing exclusivity in the fashion industry*. NTT DATA Insights.
15. NTT DATA. (2021). *Virtual fashion and NFT exclusivity: Digital-native luxury trends*. NTT DATA Market Research.
16. Shin, D. H. (2008). *Understanding purchasing behaviors in a virtual economy: Consumer behavior involving virtual currency in Web 2.0 communities*. *Interacting with Computers*, 20(4–5), 433–446.
17. *Tiebreaker: An antitrust analysis of esports*. (2024). *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, 52(2).

18. Weingarten, E., & Wei, L. (2023). *Nostalgia and consumer behavior: A review*. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 53, 101647.