

## Editorial

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### Acknowledgements

This issue of ZMJ is dedicated to the memory of Giovanni Gastel

Issue 11.1 of ZMJ is dedicated to the relationship between fashion and digital, in particular to the process of mediatization, that is to the cultural and social transformations induced by the media. A topic that is, it would not even be necessary to underline it, of crucial importance in this historical period in which all forms of digital have become accentuated or even have taken new directions — from magazines, to fashion presentations, to the ways of communicating. The fashion system, as it is well known, has often been accused of being late with regard to digital issues, almost guilty of a fatal error capable of compromising its established leadership as a trend setter in the world of consumption and communication. On the contrary, this issue offers a formidable reflection on the many ways in which digital is present in an innovative way in the fashion marketing and in the construction of the identity of fashion brands — from the relationship with the audience, to the organization of fashion shows, to the relationship with bloggers and influencers up to the challenge of sustainability. The editors, Mariachiara Colucci and Marco Pedroni, thanks to their complementary experiences, economics and business management on the one hand — sociology of communication on the other, propose for this issue of ZMJ a careful selection of essays aimed at representing the quality, the variety and the global perspectives of fashion branding in the digital age.

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# Mediatized Fashion: State of the art and beyond

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## Abstract

The concept of mediatization concerns the role and influence of the media in both society and the fields of cultural production. Fashion has witnessed several processes of mediatization, exemplified by the rise of fashion bloggers and influencers and the emergence of several online activities — e.g., broadcasting fashion shows — alongside or in place of those that previously took the form of face-to-face interaction. Such a mediatization has then accelerated rhythms of fashion communication imposed by the new digital environment. Moreover, thanks to the role of legacy and digital media, fashion as a cultural industry has been increasingly able to fuel global social imaginaries. This article briefly reviews the state of the art of studies on mediatization in the field of fashion, with a focus on the role of fashion brands. The essay also considers the Covid-19 pandemic as an accelerator of digitization processes, and proposes a number of valuable questions to investigate the future of mediatization in fashion. First, how do fashion brands, whether mass-market or high-end, interface with their audience, advertise their products, reach their targets, finalize the sale, and retain consumers? Second, how has digital technology changed the format and meaning of fashion shows and catwalks? Thirdly, how do fashion brands cooperate with, defend themselves against or exploit new digital intermediaries such as bloggers, influencers and content creators? Finally, how do brands pursue the quest for authenticity, as a value and a rhetoric construction, through digital channels? The contributions of this special issue provide, through the study of empirical cases, elements to answer these questions.

**Keywords:** Mediatization; Fashion Brands; Digitization; Authenticity; Fashion Communication.

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*In this digital age, we live through our screens, documenting the moment. We no longer look: we film. We no longer listen: we tape. And we no longer talk: we post.*

(Alber Elbaz)

## Mediatization and digitization in the field of fashion

Over the last two decades, the process of digitization has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of the field of fashion. Scholarly debate has framed the overall societal changes in this regard under the category of mediatization,<sup>1</sup> understood as a meta-process of cultural and social transformation influenced by the media.<sup>2</sup> The relevance of media has been recognized “in the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole,”<sup>3</sup> with understood as mediatization a process “grounded in the modification of communication as the basic practice of how people construct the social and cultural world.”<sup>4</sup> The mediatization of society functions as a process “whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic.”<sup>5</sup>

Fashion is no exception to this reasoning. Its relationship with the media has been a close one ever since it turned to the press as a means of circulating information regarding clothing and trends. With the development of photography and the inclusion of advertising, fashion magazines as we know them were born.<sup>6</sup> The business model of the contemporary magazines only established itself in the 1890s, with *Vogue US* launching its first issue in 1892: high print runs, sale of the magazine at a price below the cost of production, and profits generated by advertisements. The editorial system consolidated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been disrupted during the last two decades by the advent of digital media. In 2000, the Style.com website was launched, while between 2002 and 2003 the first fashion blogs appeared.<sup>7</sup> Their relevance in the field of fashion became evident towards the middle of the next decade, when platforms such as Instagram imposed themselves as new channels of communication, consecrating the figure of the digital influencer.<sup>8</sup> Concurrently, online fashion magazines multiplied, both the digital versions of the main paper magazines such as the authoritative *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and pure online magazines, such as *Hint* and *Net-a-Porter*. In the long history of the fashion editorial system, digital media, with their power to shape the structure of the industry and the relationships between brands, investors, journalists and the public, seem to be much more than simple tools.

The concept of mediatization concerns the role and influence of the media in society and the fields of cultural production. Fashion, a cultural field itself, has witnessed four processes of mediatization, all made possible by the media:<sup>9</sup>

1. Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2013)
2. Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Laura Gemini, Francesca Pasquali, Simone Carlo, Manolo Farci, Marco Pedroni, *Fenomenologia dei social network: Presenza, relazioni e consumi mediiali degli italiani online* (Milan: Guerini, 2017), p. 29.
3. Friedrich Krotz, “Mediatization: A concept with which to grasp media and societal change,” in *Mediatization*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 21–40, p. 24.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
5. Stig Hjarvard, “The Mediatization of Society. A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change,” *Nordicom Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2008): 105–134, p. 113.
6. Monica Titton, “Fashion criticism unravelled: A sociological critique of criticism in fashion media,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2016): 209–223. Hazel Hahn, “Fashion Discourses in Fashion Magazines and Madame de Girardin's *Lettres parisiennes* in July–Monarchy France (1830–48),” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2005): 205–277.
7. Joe Sinclair, “Fashion Blogs,” *The Age*, 17 October 2002. Retrieved at <http://goo.gl/Pj6Hbr>. Agnès Rocamora, “Personal Fashion Blogs: Screens and Mirrors in Digital Self-Portraits,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2011): 407–424.
8. Marco Pedroni, “Meso-celebrities, fashion and the media: How digital influencers struggle for visibility,” *Film, fashion and consumption*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2016): 103–121.
9. Schulz, Winfried, “Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept,” *European journal of communication*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2004): 87–101.

- (a) Media extend communication skills across time and space (e.g. fashion blogs and social media profiles have created a 24-hour discussion arena accessible anywhere, even by people previously excluded from fashion information);
- (b) The media replace some social activities that previously took the form of face-to-face interaction (e.g. social media create a space for online comparison and discussion between fashion consumers; the online broadcasting of fashion shows during the Covid pandemic);
- (c) The media create a mixture of online and face-to-face activities, infiltrating our daily lives (e.g. fashion influencers displaying online their private and offline lives; hybrid forms of communication and hybrid events taking place under the label of “phygital”);
- (d) Social agents have to adapt their behaviour to fit the assessments, formats, routines imposed by the media (e.g. social media have changed the rhythms of fashion communication, imposing continuous updating and forcing the traditional fashion press to evolve towards the digital environment).

Furthermore, mediatization is linked to the processes of globalization in at least two ways. On the one hand, globalization is technically made possible by the existence of means of communication (the media) that connect remote points on the planet, reducing time and distance to zero, whereas on the other hand, globalization amplifies the process of mediatization by institutionalizing forms of mediated communication in numerous new contexts. Fashion is exemplary of these processes not only because of its nature of global industry (e.g., production delocalization, market globalization, the birth of transnational fashion conglomerates), but also because of its power to create a globalized fashion imaginary. As has been noted, fashion creates a “stock of images, values, practices and rules that dominate the western fashion industry and that its participants take for granted in their relationship with fashion.”<sup>10</sup> An imaginary is “carried out in images, stories, legends which are shared by large groups of people”<sup>11</sup> and the media play a key role in shaping it.

Fashion is one of our most powerful global social imaginaries<sup>12</sup> thanks to the circulation of several and increasingly sophisticated media objects.<sup>13</sup> From fashion films to makeover TV shows and documentaries,<sup>14</sup> and early fashion blogs to Instagram and TikTok profiles of mega-influencers, fashion is more than clothing. It has become a key cultural industry<sup>15</sup> able to function as a source of meaning and identitarian values. Accordingly,

fashion has a pivotal role in the creative media industry as a provider of material fundamental for the formation of imaginary worlds. Fashion tells stories ... Moreover, as a creative industry and medium of entertainment, fashion shares with media ... the exhibition of its spectacular products to large-scale audiences.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the natural intertwining of fashion and media, fashion had for a long time a problematic relationship with the digital media in particular. The industry reacted erratically to the rise of fashion bloggers and influencers, who set the foundations of a new way of conceiving marketing known as influencer marketing.<sup>17</sup> As Bradford points out, “fashion bloggers are part of the landscape now, but

10. Emanuela Mora, Agnès Rocamora and Paolo Volonté, “Editorial: Feeding the Imaginary,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2016): 177–184, p. 177.

11. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23.

12. Emanuela Mora and Marco Pedroni, *Fashion Tales: Feeding the imaginary* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017)

13. Marie-Aude Baronian, Adriano D’Aloia and Marco Pedroni, “Fashionating Images,” *Comunicazioni Sociali. Journal of Media, Performing Arts and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1: 3–12.

14. Marco Pedroni, “Documenting Fashion in the Era of Instagram: A Critical Reading of Chiara Ferragni’s ‘Unposted’ and Asri Bendacha’s ‘Follow Me’,” in *Documenting Fashion*, eds. Boel Ulfsdotter and Elena Caoduro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021, forthcoming)

15. Emanuela Mora, *Fare moda: Esperienze di produzione e consumo* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2009)

16. Marie-Aude Baronian, Adriano D’Aloia and Marco Pedroni, “Fashionating Images”, p. 4.

17. Joel Backaler, *Digital influence* (Cham: Macmillan, 2018)

when they first emerged in the mid-2000s they were met with bafflement and some derision.<sup>18</sup> The institutionalization of fashion influencers — a now well-established process<sup>19</sup> — took place through (and despite) fierce press attacks and stances against the new digital actors.<sup>20</sup> The post of the former director of *Vogue Italia* Franca Sozzani is worth mentioning in this regard. Sozzani,<sup>21</sup> at the beginning of the 2010s, stated that they “don’t hold a real importance in the business”. Even harsher was the invitation from *Vogue.com*’s editors to “bloggers who change head-to-toe, paid-to-wear outfits every hour. Please stop. Find another business. You are heralding the death of style”<sup>22</sup> (Singer et al. 2016). Despite being later in exploiting the advantages of digitization than other cultural industries, fashion was inevitably involved in this “mediatization of everything.”<sup>23</sup> It is subject to mediatization in a variety of ways<sup>24</sup> which affect the processes of designing, producing, distributing, promoting and consuming clothes,

the adoption of digital media by fashion producers and consumers is concurrent with the adoption of new ways of producing and consuming fashion, from the production of fashion shows and garments to the retailing of clothes and the fashioning of the self; from the exclusive world of the fashion producer to ordinary practices of the self.<sup>25</sup>

Mediatization and digitization in the domain of fashion occur in two main contexts. First, the mediatization of fashion is particularly visible where the display of fashion takes place, such as the both physical and digital spaces of fashion events.

The rise of live streaming fashion events is an excellent example. The runway shows were traditionally fashion events for the previewing of the brand collections which excluded the viewing public and reserved to fashion professionals such as buyers and journalists. Recently, many fashion houses have decided to broadcast their catwalks via live streaming. The first to adopt this strategy were Victoria’s Secret in the United States and Krizia in Europe. The latter live streamed their Spring-Summer 2000 collection in Milan and included scenes of backstage activity. Japanese buyers were permitted to place orders without being physically present in Milan. The live streaming of runways has since become a mainstream practice in less than 10 years. Among the luxury and haute couture brands, Gucci and Armani should be mentioned. They began to live stream respectively in 2006 and 2007, followed quickly by Michael Kors (2008) and Z Zegna (2009). In February 2010, the London Fashion Digital Week was first launched. Burberry must be cited here as a leading experience among other examples. The brand created an enriched digital strategy, the “Runway to Reality”, where the live streamed runway, broadcast in 3D, is accompanied by offline events, diffused via mobile device and linked to the possibility of purchasing. According to this concept, the online and the offline worlds are not, erroneously, viewed as being opposed, but integrated. Far from being a mere technological shift, the rise of the live streaming runways shows a change in the way the fashion world conceives both the web — no longer a threat, but a resource — and the final consumers, who are permitted to receive information at the same time as fashion professionals. The overall meaning of the catwalks has changed through a process of disinterme-

18. Julie Bradford, *Fashion journalism* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 199.

19. Agnès Rocamora, “The labour of fashion blogging,” in *Fashioning Professionals*, eds. L. Armstrong and F. McDowell (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): 65–81.

20. Marco Pedroni, “Collaboration, antagonism, exploitation: Which is the relation between fashion blogging and fashion journalism,” in *Digital Development in the Fashion Industry: Communication, Culture and Business*, eds. M. Torregrosa, C. Sánchez-Blanco, T. Sádaba (Pamplona: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2014): 87–101.

21. Franca Sozzani, “Bloggers: a culture phenomenon or an epidemic issue?” *Vogue Italia*, Editor’s blog, 28 January 2011. Retrieved at <https://www.vogue.it/en/magazine/editor-s-blog/2011/01/january-28th>.

22. Sally Singer, Sarah Mower, Nicole Phelps and Alessandra Codinha, “Ciao, Milano! Vogue.com’s Editors Discuss the Week That Was,” *Vogue.com*, 25 September 2016. Retrieved at <https://www.vogue.com/article/milan-fashion-week-spring-2017-vogue-editors-chat>.

23. Sonia Livingstone, “Foreword: Coming to terms with ‘mediatization’,” in *Mediatization: Concept, changes, consequences*, ed. Knut Lundby (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009): 9–13, p. x.

24. Agnès Rocamora, “New fashion times: Fashion and digital media,” in *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, eds. Sandy Black, Amy de la Haye, Joanne Entwistle, Regina Root, Agnès Rocamora, Helen Thomas (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 61–77. Agnès Rocamora, “Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (2017): 505–522.

25. Agnès Rocamora, “Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion”, p. 14.

diation which opens up the secrecy of the runway shows and exposes them to a worldwide and real-time view. The very setting of the fashion shows should be reconsidered in light of the impact of digital social media, for example, in how the scenography has become more functional to the influencers' needs to capture fashion images for their followers.<sup>26</sup> As Rocamora summarizes,

digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat ... have become legitimate spaces of diffusion of the collections. In this context the shows are increasingly designed with social media in mind; they have become mediatized events — that is, events produced and staged with a view to being consumed online, on a digital screen.<sup>27</sup>

Mediatization and digitization also affect the spaces of communication, selling, and consumption. Fashion has today been transferred from its traditional spaces, stores and printed magazines, to the digital environment where it is presented in fashion blogs and Instagram profiles.<sup>28</sup> The lines between the editorial and the commercial are now blurred and the new media have reshaped fashion spaces. Online media and the blogs have contributed to the modification of magazines, making them more visual and interactive than ever, the screens of computers and tablets as instruments of information about fashion and for the creation of fashion content, and led to stores with digital mirrors and their integration with websites and apps.<sup>29</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic, in this context, has accelerated or exasperated processes of mediatization already underway. E-commerce has represented the only source of revenues for almost all companies, and those who were hesitant to invest in e-retailing have been forced to overcome their resistance. Retailers with a heavier concentration of in-store sales have faced increased pressure to drive consumers online and rapidly scale e-commerce operations. Meeting the demands of an increasingly online audience requires retailers to be agile in embracing the omnichannel experience. This may mean permanent shifts in consumer shopping behaviour, pushing more traffic and categories online.<sup>30</sup> Fashion weeks and fashion shows have taken place digitally and have been broadcast,<sup>31</sup> creating a renewed demand in fashion for digitization, virtual and augmented reality, and artificial intelligence.<sup>32</sup> However, the change brought about by the pandemic is not just technological. The change is above all cultural, and has to do partly with the need to rethink the relationship between brands and consumers, and partly with how the fashion industry itself works. In this regard, the words of Giorgio Armani aroused great interest when, in April 2020, he sent an open letter to *WWD*

“The decline of the fashion system as we know it began when the luxury segment adopted the operating methods of fast fashion, mimicking the latter’s endless delivery cycle in the hope of selling more, yet forgetting that luxury takes time, to be achieved and to be appreciated.”<sup>33</sup>

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26. Silvano Mendes, “The Instagrammability of the Runway: Architecture, Scenography, and the Spatial Turn in Fashion Communications,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2021): 311–338.
27. Agnès Rocamora, “Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion”, p. 6.
28. Agnès Rocamora and Djurdja Bartlett, “Blogs de mode: les nouveaux espaces du discours de mode,” *Sociétés*, Vol. 104 (2009): 105–114. Agnès Rocamora, “Hypertextuality and remediation in the fashion media: The case of fashion blogs,” *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2012): 92–106. Marco Pedroni, “‘Stumbling on the heels of my blog’: Career, forms of capital, and strategies in the (sub) field of fashion blogging,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2015): 179–199. Rosie Findlay, *Personal style blogs: Appearances that fascinate* (London: Intellect, 2017)
29. Agnès Rocamora, “Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion”.
30. McKinsey & Co., “Perspectives for North America’s fashion industry in a time of crisis,” *McKinsey & Co.* 2020. Retrieved at <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/perspectives-for-north-americas-fashion-industry-in-a-time-of-crisis>.
31. Jiali Xie and Chorong Youn, “How the luxury fashion brand adjust to deal with the COVID-19,” *International Journal of Costume and Fashion*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2020): 50–60.
32. Barbara Silvestri, “The Future of Fashion: How the Quest for Digitization and the Use of Artificial Intelligence and Extended Reality Will Reshape the Fashion Industry After COVID-19,” *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2020): 61–73.
33. Luisa Zargani, “Giorgio Armani Writes Open Letter to WWD. The designer praises a slower fashion movement and plans to realign collections with seasons in stores,” *WWD*, 3 April 2020. Retrieved at <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/designer-luxury/giorgio-armani-writes-open-letter-wwd-1203553687/>.

In praising a slower fashion movement and proposing to use the pandemic crisis as “an opportunity to slow down”, the Italian fashion designer forgot to say that the frenzied pace of the fashion industry is not only an effect of the advent of fast fashion but also of its mediatization. But what effect has Covid-19 had on the processes of digitization of fashion. We have seen how communication and marketing activities have moved further to an online presence. The crisis of the influencers, deprived of their mobility and physical settings during the lockdown, lasted only a few months. Social media practitioners soon re-organized themselves by producing new content at home and exploiting their local contexts, increasing the authenticity effect of their channels.

However, other activities, mainly manufacturing, cannot be virtualized or managed remotely, and the impact of Covid-19 has been negative. Fashion brands have cancelled orders, negatively impacting garment workers. As Bridges and Hanlon explain, “the crisis has reinforced existing structural inequalities within the industry, with workers disproportionately impacted across multi-mediated global production networks.”<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the crisis has shown how fundamental digital media are in the material and symbolic infrastructure of contemporary fashion.

## Fashion brands in the era of digital media

Mediatization and digitization are affecting the field of fashion, and the role of fashion brands in particular. Nowadays, fashion brands, whether mass-market or established *maisons*, interface with their audience, advertise their products, reach their targets, finalize the sale and retain the customers in an irreversibly digital world where the customer’s journey moves on the web through e-commerce and social networks. Physical retail selling has been profoundly transformed by digital means, whether in-store or out-store, a contamination that moves on the thread of omni-channel retailing and of concepts such as “phygital”, the physical + digital, creating a smooth flow between the real and the virtual worlds. As mentioned above, digital technology has also changed the fashion shows — the format of the show has gone beyond the boundaries of the traditional catwalks, building scenography that offers creative directors such as Karl Lagerfeld and Alessandro Michele almost unlimited opportunities to express their genius and to make the brand’s aesthetic available to a wider audience. Furthermore, the spread of connectivity facilitated by digital media has promoted the development of new business models that allow — benefit from — a combination of skills for the creation of new products and the connection between supply and demand. Even more fluid and compelling, thanks to the increasing use of social networks, the relationship between fashion brands and their audience has become ever more direct. Consumers have the means to affect the reputation of the brand without intermediation by expressing their opinions through reviews and online tutorials.

Social media is regarded as a global phenomenon, culturally as well as economically relevant. “Social media is used by billions of people around the world and has fast become one of the defining technologies of our time,”<sup>35</sup> creating a potential massive audience connected on various platforms for many hours a day. In this context, exploiting social media as a new type of digital marketing channel has opened up a whole new era for fashion companies and brands, encouraging them to identify innovative relationships with consumers. To face such new challenges, an understanding of the drivers of brand credibility, brand image, and the effects of social media activity on consumers behavior is of paramount importance for companies.<sup>36</sup> Company-centric traditional brand communication and messages appear to be less effective than before, as the Internet has considerably changed the sources of information on

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34. Brydges T, Hanlon M. “Garment worker rights and the fashion industry’s response to COVID-19,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* Vol.10 n.2 (2020): 195–198.

35. Gil Appel, Lauren Grewal, Rhonda Hadi, and Andrew T. Stephen, “The future of social media in marketing,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2020): 79–95, p. 79.

36. David Martín-Consuegra, Monica Faraoni, Estrella Díaz, and Silvia Ranfagni, “Exploring relationships among brand credibility, purchase intention and social media for fashion brands: A conditional mediation model,” *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2018): 237–251.

which consumers rely on.<sup>37</sup> Social media platforms have become the primary source of information for consumers and one of the most powerful marketing tools for fashion companies. Instagram has for example been recognized as the currently most influential source for fashion insight.<sup>38</sup> Given the power — and the economic returns — of creating content and gaining consumer attention on social media, fashion companies begun to regard digital communication as more valuable and authentic than traditional advertising.<sup>39</sup>

The tremendous growth of user-generated content<sup>40</sup> has led to a considerable power shift in brand strategies, driven by consumer demand for more authenticity from brands. Consumer-centric tools are increasingly embraced by companies to build meaningful relationships with audiences and to help them feel involved in a brand's authentic communication strategy. Research indicates that consumers trust peer consumers more than they trust companies, and are likely to use information provided by fellow consumers to evaluate products and services before making a purchase decision.<sup>41</sup> In particular, consumers appear to trust the apparently genuine personal recommendations from credible and influential digital gatekeepers who help identify and set trends in the fashion markets.<sup>42</sup>

Authenticity, indeed, appears to be the new keyword in the relationship between fashion brands and social media. Authenticity — what is “real”, or “genuine” or “true” or “original” — is in high demand in the markets.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the public debates “about who and what should be called ‘real’ versus ‘fake’”<sup>44</sup> have increased. Authenticity is also used as a rhetorical strategy<sup>45</sup> by both fashion companies and digital influencers to justify their practices of product placement, product seeding and, more generally, brand promotion. Through digital influencers, brands seek to deliver messages that are perceived as genuine and authentic.<sup>46</sup> In the fashion market, it seems that the “realness” of “next-door” influencers is designed to maintain the audience's perception of non-biased information, or to reinforce the trust in the brand. *The Guardian* has effectively explained that in fashion today “realness is prized” and that the digital “influencer industry is going authentic.”<sup>47</sup> Finally, an increasing number of academic works focus on the concept of authenticity, which has informed numerous topics in management and sociological research, initiating with the seminal work by Peterson<sup>48</sup> on fabricating authenticity in the music indus-

37. Long-Chuan Lu, Wen-Pin Chang, and Hsiu-Hua Chang, H. H., “Consumer attitudes toward blogger's sponsored recommendations and purchase intention: The effect of sponsorship type, product type, and brand awareness,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 34 (2014): 258–266.

38. Shu-Chuan Chu and Yoo-Kyoung Seock, “The Power of Social Media in Fashion Advertising,” *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2020): 93–94.

39. Shu-Chuan Chu and Yoo-Kyoung Seock, “The Power of Social Media in Fashion Advertising”.

40. Teresa K. Naab and Annika Sehl, “Studies of user-generated content: A systematic review,” *Journalism*, Vol. 18, No. 10 (2017): 1256–1273.

41. See for example Kyung-Tag Lee and Dong-Mo Koo, “Effects of attribute and valence of e-WOM on message adoption: Moderating roles of subjective knowledge and regulatory focus,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (2012): 1974–1984.

42. Gil Appel, Lauren Grewal, Rhonda Hadi, and Andrew T. Stephen, “The future of social media in marketing”.

43. David W. Lehmann, Kieran O'Connor, Balázs Kovács, and George E. Newman, “Authenticity,” *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2019): 1–42.

44. David W. Lehmann, Kieran O'Connor, Balázs Kovács, and George E. Newman, “Authenticity,” p. 1.

45. Crystal Abidin, “‘Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?': Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity,” *Social media+ society*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2016): 1–17; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* Vol. 10, (Paris: Gallimard, 1999); Joanne Jacobs, “Faking it How to kill a business through astroturfing on social media,” *Keeping Good Companies*, Vol. 64, No. 9 (2012): 567–570; Agnès Rocamora, “The labour of fashion blogging”.

46. Mariachiara Colucci, and Marco Pedroni, “Got to Be Real: An Investigation into the Co-Fabrication of Authenticity by Fashion Companies and Digital Influencers,” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, in press (2021).

47. Sophie Elmhirst, “‘It's genuine, you know?': why the online influencer industry is going ‘authentic’,” *The Guardian*, 5 April 2019. Retrieved at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/apr/05/its-genuine-you-know-why-the-online-influencer-industry-is-going-authentic>.

48. Richard A. Peterson, *Creating country music: Fabricating authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

try.<sup>49</sup> Whether it is a matter of consistency, conformity, connection or continuity,<sup>50</sup> it cannot be denied that the quest for authenticity will shape fashion brands in the digital era.

## In this Issue

Fashion companies and brands are core actors in the fashion industry as creators of innovations and value-added throughout the supply chain, but also as co-producers of fashion narratives themselves or in partnership with gatekeepers such as magazines and digital influencers. Accordingly, a set of questions may be raised in the light of digitization and mediatization.

First, how do fashion brands, whether mass-market or high-end, interface with their audience, advertize their products, reach their targets, finalize the sale, and retain consumers? Rebecca Halliday, in her essay, shows that fashion brands have become imbricated via social media into politics, a process that has an impact on the relationship between the brand and its consumers. The shoe brand New Balance, in the aftermath of Donald Trump's victory in 2016, criticized the Obama administration for forgetting American workers with its pro-globalization policies, and declared that President Trump, with the anti-global market positions of his Administration, was going in the right direction. The sneaker brand has since then been associated with Trump, resulting in the company being the subject of a campaign of attacks on social media by disillusioned Democrats. New Balance's PR crisis, Halliday states, shows the existence of a culture of mediatization in fashion, in which it is difficult for companies to sidestep political conversations or to render apolitical statements. Once a brand has a social media presence, interaction with the audience can work both as an opportunity and a threat.

Second, how has digital technology changed the format and meaning of fashion shows and catwalks? How has physical retail been transformed by digital, whether in-store or out-store? Here, the role of Covid-19 has been pivotal. Forced to cancel the most part of physical events in 2020, before gradually returning to pre-pandemic practices, the fashion press largely adopted the neologism *phygital*, as Linfante and Pompa note, to describe the hybrid nature of fashion weeks where live and online audiences co-exist. Fashion has demonstrated its ability to incorporate and normalize the crisis, as suggested also by the use of "new normal" as a term to identify the (also aesthetic) practices that became routine during the pandemic. According to the authors, Covid-19 has been an accelerator of fashion digital transformation, the signs of which have been appearing for some time. Similarly, Spagnolo and Iannilli discuss the fashion industry's ability to adopt new technologies and opportunities in terms of communication and distribution strategies, pushing towards an increased integration between physical and digital systems. The role of technology is further explored by Pereira through the lens of aesthetic capitalism; the author put the recent digital fashion artefacts in dialogue with post-digital aesthetics theories, discussing the blurred boundaries between the digital and the post-digital. Another question arises from this approach: does the convergence of fashion with art and technology lead to the influence of post-digital aesthetics on fashion, and, consequently, of the fashion system on post-digital artistic production?

Thirdly, how do fashion brands cooperate with, defend themselves against or exploit new digital intermediaries such as bloggers, influencers and content creators? As we have shown elsewhere<sup>51</sup> and previously discussed in this essay, the relationship between brands and influencers is built on an attempt of the former to control the latter and an attempt of the latter to keep their editorial autonomy despite the requests of the companies. Consumers use authenticity as an ideal to convey quality judgments, placing

49. See Michael B. Beverland and Francis J. Farrelly, "The quest for authenticity in consumption: Consumers' purposive choice of authentic cues to shape experienced outcomes," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (2010): 838–856; Charles B. Guignon, *On being authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004); David W. Lehmann, Kieran O'Connor, Balázs Kovács, and George E. Newman, "Authenticity"; Alice Marwick, "They're really profound women, they're entrepreneurs': Conceptions of authenticity in fashion blogging," *7th international AIII conference on weblogs and social media (ICWSM)*, Vol. 8 (July 2013).

50. Olaf Dammann, Katja M. Friederichs, Sabine Lebedinski, and Kerstin M. Liesenfeld, "The Essence of Authenticity," *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 11 (2021): 4021.

51. Mariachiara Colucci, and Marco Pedroni, "Got to Be Real: An Investigation into the Co-Fabrication of Authenticity by Fashion Companies and Digital Influencers".

value in the authentic. The demand for authenticity by consumers has pushed companies to embrace authenticity as a primary goal in their digital marketing and communication practices, and fashion influencers are used as partners, yet a means, to achieve this goal.

Our last question is related to this: how do brands pursue the search for authenticity, as a value and a rhetoric construction, through digital channels? Martina's contribution highlights authenticity as a value not only in the domain of influencer marketing, but also for sustainable brands such as in the paradigmatic case of Veja's tagline use in "Reality must take over fiction". Brand storytelling focused on transparency, where the whole process of creation is revealed and involves the consumer as a participant, is something made possible and at the same time imposed by the existence of an active audience on social media. The same can be said about Twyg, a South African media company launched in 2019 to promote an eco-conscious fashion and lifestyle and analysed in Picarelli's essay. Created to mobilize grassroots consumer activism for a just transition of South African fashion, Twyg focuses on the negative impact of fast fashion and supports the growth of an independent and slow-fashion industry. Key to its activities are the website and social media channels where, once more, the digital media work as the milestone to both promote commerce together with fashion culture by drawing on authenticity as a value for the fashion producers as well as the consumers and users.

A wide range of research directions need to be explored in order to understand the growing process of mediatization of fashion. We hope that the essays hosted in this special issue will contribute to this debate, one we are sure will remain central to fashion studies in the years to come.

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# The Alt-Right and the Mobilization of Brand Affect: New Balance and Neo-Nazis' Athleisure Affiliations

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## Abstract

This article probes American sportswear manufacturer New Balance's reputational and public relations crisis, which resulted from an executive's statement of support for Donald Trump's US-focused trade policies in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. Reported consumer backlash to New Balance's apparent alliance with Trump was exacerbated when neo-Nazi publication *The Daily Stormer* penned an editorial appropriating New Balance as "the official shoes of White people." Using theories of affect in social media and consumer culture as a framework, I situate the New Balance case within the current culture wars as enacted in politicized social media threads, as well as prior instances in which alt-right groups have attempted to co-opt sportswear brands' cultural associations in the service of extremist politics. Performing manual inductive content analysis on a sample of tweets from before the publication of the editorial (n=100) and after (n=77), I illuminate a polarized political division between users in terms of their backlash or endorsement of New Balance's stance, which correlates with stated anti-Trump or pro-Trump positions, and articulate how users position themselves in terms of a consumer/customer relation to New Balance as brand, while sneakers become a material outlet for consumers to enact their discontent in a mediatized forum.

**Keywords:** New Balance; Social Media; Callout; Affect; Alt-right.

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## Introduction

On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump was declared the winner of the United States presidential election. Less than 24 hours later, in the middle of a resultant political shockwave, Sara Germano, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, tweeted a comment from Matt Lebreton, vice president of public affairs of the sportswear brand New Balance, in which Lebreton stated that Trump's US-prioritized economic policies would benefit the company. Lebreton had criticized Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade talks under the previous administration of Barack Obama and felt that Trump would promote New Balance's interests in domestic production.<sup>1</sup> Lebreton — as cited in Germano's tweet (since deleted), and in a subsequent article — stated: "The Obama admin turned a deaf ear to us and frankly, with President-elect Trump, we feel things are going to move in the right direction."<sup>2</sup> Social media users were swift to respond to this statement, with videos and photographs posted in the immediate aftermath in which users tossed New Balance sneakers in the trash or lit pairs on fire. New Balance subsequently clarified that it had advocated for local manufacture in order to provide fairly-compensated positions in the United States, and its opposition to the TPP stemmed from not wanting competitors such as Nike, a confirmed TPP supporter, to increase profits based on outsourcing of cheap labour. In a statement to *Business Insider* on November 11, New Balance confirmed its position:

As the only major company that still makes athletic shoes in the United States, New Balance has a unique perspective on trade in that we want to make more shoes in the United States, not less. ... New Balance publicly supported the trade positions of Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump prior to election day that focused on American manufacturing job creation and we continue to support them today.<sup>3</sup>

Lebreton further asserted that his statement had been taken out of context and attempted to distance himself and the company from political intent or implication:

The statement ... is correct in the context of trade, not talking about large geo-political anything, but in the context of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. ... It's inaccurate. Everything I've said is in the context of trade. ... [New Balance has no intention of] getting involved in the politics of presidential elections. ... My statements aren't political, this is policy related solely to TPP.<sup>4</sup>

New Balance's public relations crisis exemplifies a condition, instantiated through a culture of mediation, in which it is impossible for companies to sidestep political conversations or render statements divorced from the policies of administrations — indeed it is contentious and wishful to surmise that statements on trade and international labour were ever apolitical. In this case, New Balance's affirmed commitment to its domestic workforce, uttered within hours after the presidential election, became imbricated in the insidious "America First" discourses on which Trump's trade (and immigration) policies were predicated.<sup>5</sup> On November 12, Andrew Anglin, founder of the neo-Nazi online publication *The Daily Stormer*, added fuel to cultural and actual fires when he wrote an editorial calling for a mass soli-

1. This research was presented at the symposium "The American Everyday: Resistance, Revolution & Transformation" at the Columbia College Chicago on February 15, 2020. Thanks to the conference attendees, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, for their feedback.
2. Sara Germano, "New Balance Faces Social Media Backlash After Welcoming Trump," *Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-balance-faces-social-media-backlash-after-welcoming-trump-1478823102>.
3. Dennis Green, "Consumers Set New Balance Shoes on Fire After CEO Praises Trump Victory," *Inc.*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.inc.com/business-insider/new-balance-anger.html>.
4. Brad Esposito and Caroline Donovan, "People Are Pissed Because They Think New Balance Supports Donald Trump," *BuzzFeed News*, November 9, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/bradesposito/people-are-pissed-because-they-think-new-balance-supports-do?utm\\_term=.wgqBrrxpr#.dJONYIVY](https://www.buzzfeed.com/bradesposito/people-are-pissed-because-they-think-new-balance-supports-do?utm_term=.wgqBrrxpr#.dJONYIVY).
5. Not reported at the time was the fact that New Balance Owner and Chairman Jim Davis had donated \$396,500 USD to the Trump Victory Committee. While he has donated to both Republican and Democratic candidates, this is complicated by its tacit endorsement of Trump's social policies, at least insofar as these benefit his business interests. Jim O'Sullivan, "New Balance founder gave nearly \$400,000 to Trump," *Boston Globe*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/01/13/new-balance-founder-gave-nearly-trump/HEoVw5ig6OHhLKOc3dDorO/story.html>.

parity purchase of New Balance-branded products. Anglin's take-up of New Balance's position more explicitly co-opted the brand within an extremist, white supremacist politics that targeted not just persons of colour but members of homosexual and trans communities. In a discussion of the editorial's ramifications, Alex Esculapio further notes, "An image of actor and director Mel Gibson wearing New Balance trainers accompanied Anglin's article, thus implicitly linking anti-Semitism — Gibson's 2006 rant has made him somehow popular among American nationalists — to the footwear brand and conflating economic localism with economic nationalism."<sup>6</sup>

This article contributes to explorations into cases in which alt-right groups have attempted to use online and social media to co-opt brands' 'mainstream' cultural associations in the service of extremist politics. Specifically, it examines the cultural and digital implications of New Balance's statements after the election of Donald Trump and the loaded social media responses that resulted. Through qualitative content analysis of tweets produced in the wake of Lebreton's ill-conceived comments, and later the *Daily Stormer* editorial, I find that consumer sentiment towards New Balance as a brand is enmeshed with a polarized pro-Trump or anti-Trump politics that is then connected to alt-right, neo-Nazi and/or white supremacist movements, albeit still at national (and nationalist) levels.<sup>7</sup> This article explores, via the New Balance case, how politicized discourses have implicated fashion companies and brand identities and how social media platforms function as battle or activist sites. To date, most examinations of fashion's intersection with international politics have trod the terrain, nonetheless fruitful, of embodied, contextual dress practice.<sup>8</sup> The mediatization of the field of fashion necessitates a reframing of fashion and/as the political towards a mediatized fashion politics.<sup>9</sup> This article advances recent studies of the culture wars — as manifested in fashion — in its focus towards consumer response or brand perception, accounted for in social media content, and its use of affect as a theoretical framework to assess the maintenance of online communities.

## From Materialities to Digital Affect Cultures

Studies of affect in consumer and media cultures locate its movement across material and mediatized phenomena. Consumer culture scholars reference Brian Massumi's concept of affect as *intensities*, shown as outward emotion, to explain our attachments to and our embodied interactions with certain brands. Celia Lury identifies the logo as, pace media theorist Lev Manovich, the *interface* with the brand, that opens up a sense of transformative potentialities.<sup>10</sup> Consumers' affiliation to the New Balance brand assumes the dual forms of online interaction and the wear of products emblazoned with the N logo. As performance scholar Maurya Wickstrom observes at the Niketown store, such tactile engagement with branded sportswear can produce a sense of transcended capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Tae-Im Han and Dooyoung Choi examine the affective dimension inherent in the concept of brand love and find that emotional attachments to certain brands increase "consumer loyalty," and this allegiance is tied to self-congruity — in other words, "consumers are more emotionally attached to fashion brands that express their identity" in facets that include but are not limited to social/political values.<sup>12</sup>

6. Alex Esculapio, "Operation New Balance: How Neo-Nazis Hacked the Mall," *Vestoj*, October–November 2017, <http://vestoj.com/operation-new-balance/>.

7. In a related case, in Fall 2020, British sportswear brand Fred Perry pulled its black and yellow polo shirt with its laurel wreath logo from the US market after it was appropriated as part of a uniform for the neo-fascist group the Proud Boys (which also operates in Canada).

8. For example, Andreas Behnke, ed. *The International Politics of Fashion: Being Fab in a Dangerous World* (London: Routledge, 2016).

9. On the mediatization of the field of fashion, see Agnès Rocamora, "Mediatization and Digital Media in the Field of Fashion," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, Vol. 21 (September 2017): 505–22.

10. Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

11. Maurya Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 13–42.

12. Tae-Im Han and Dooyoung Choi, "Fashion Brand Love: Application of a Cognition–Affect–Conation Model," *Social Sciences*, Vol. 8 (September 2019): 264–65.

Sara Ahmed's concept of *affective economies* locates affect, as emotion, as laden in textual discourses, as well as in material engagements. For Ahmed, *relational* identities and structures are defined in the *circulation* of emotion. Ahmed writes: "it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" — in discursive realms.<sup>13</sup> Ahmed's attention to the *economic* relations of hate speech is further relevant to brand discourses within a politicized climate, as it addresses how hate "circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement," in textual and visual systems of meaning-making both worn on bodies and produced, located, and felt across bodies in networked environs.<sup>14</sup> Ahmed's concepts are referenced in numerous characterizations of affect and its operation within digital and mediatized cultures and the formation of relational communities or discursive events.<sup>15</sup>

This article frames the social media backlash to New Balance's statement within more recent communication research into *digital affect cultures*, a term coined by Katrin Döveling, Anu A. Harju, and Denise Sommer, based on empirical research into online fandom and into processes of memorialization connected to events such as terrorist attacks or celebrity deaths.<sup>16</sup> The term describes "relational, contextual, globally emergent spaces in the digital environment where affective flows construct atmospheres of emotional and cultural belonging by way of emotional resonance and alignment."<sup>17</sup> The authors deem this framework useful for studies in "politics and populism" as it aids in the evaluation of which types of emotion and sentiment, which identities, and which views are privileged or contested in discursive formations.<sup>18</sup> Their application of this concept to politicized responses or communities is instructive for studies in networked fashion brand affiliations and reactions to actions or statements read as offensive or unproductively performative. The authors draw from Zizi Papacharissi's concept of *affective publics*, which emphasizes the function of affect in the constitution of mediated socialities and locates social media, notably Twitter, as a forum in which connective threads are interwoven or separated.<sup>19</sup> The structuration of online political communities resonates moreover with Angharad Closs Stephens's theorization of *national affective atmospheres*, instilled in patriotic events or moments of crisis, and their attendant discourses, that breed nationalist sentiment.<sup>20</sup> The 2016 Trump campaign and New Balance's support for domestic trade policies appropriated a xenophobic nationalism demonstrated in political rallies but more pervasively in social media threads. While the case of New Balance can be situated within histories of sportswear's co-optation for white supremacist and white nationalist movements, I aim to reframe the discussion in terms of a circulation of discursive and affective content within a late-capitalist and mediatized political climate.

## New Balance as Nationalist Brand

New Balance was founded in Boston in 1906 and maintains its headquarters there: the firm produced arch support products and orthopedic shoes until the 1960s, at which time marathon runners started

13. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 11. For an application of Ahmed's affect theories to the sphere of feminist fashion production in a digital context, see Rosa Crepax, "Digital Fashion Engagement Through Affect, Personal Investments and Remix," *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 33 (October 2018): 461–80. On the affective economies of fashion curation as politicized practice, see Delacey Tedesco, "Curating Political Subjects: Fashion Curation as Affective Methodology," *GeoHumanities* (June 2021): 1–17.

14. Ahmed, 44.

15. Cf. Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman, eds. *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

16. Katrin Döveling, Anu A. Harju and Denise Sommer, "From Mediatized Emotion to Digital Affect Cultures: New Technologies and Global Flows of Emotion," *Social Media + Society* (January–March 2018): 1–11.

17. Döveling, Harju, and Sommer, 1.

18. Döveling, Harju, and Sommer, 7.

19. Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality," *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 19 (March 2016): 307–24.

20. Angharad Closs Stephens, "The affective atmospheres of nationalism," *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 23 (April 2016): 181–98.

to ask for custom-made shoes.<sup>21</sup> A 1999 brand case overview finds that, “New Balance’s attention to quality through technological innovation, coupled with its fostering of strong positive associations through ... local manufacturing has allowed it to establish a loyal following within its niche segment, and potentially beyond.”<sup>22</sup> The authors observe that “New Balance’s consistent adherence to local manufacturing practices has created significant positive associations when compared to the myriad of social irresponsibility charges facing Nike” which at that time was embroiled in scandal over its use of sweat-shop labour.<sup>23</sup> In the more than two decades since, New Balance has expanded into several sectors of sportswear and from the 2017 to 2019 fiscal years saw annual revenues of at least \$4,000,000,000.<sup>24</sup> In November 2016, *GQ*, acknowledged that New Balance’s staunch emphasis on US manufacture had been admired: “Over the past few years, we’ve lauded New Balance’s ability to turn out quality, stylish footwear while maintaining a manufacturing presence in the United States as other brands fled to China, Vietnam, and elsewhere.”<sup>25</sup> The election of Trump following the divisive and racist rhetoric that his campaign deployed could be read as an occurrence that turned New Balance’s nationalism toxic, but as this case study outlines, it informed the political polarization exemplified in social media responses to its statement. Ahmed identifies white nationalists as a cultural “organisation” based on the production of hate speech and the labeling of certain identities as undesirable within discursive spaces both ‘real’ and networked:

Such narratives work by generating a subject that is endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject. ... This narrative involves a rewriting of history, in which the labour of others (migrants, slaves) is concealed in a fantasy that it is the white subject who ‘built this land.’<sup>26</sup>

The “America First” ethos slides neatly into white supremacist and neo-Nazi beliefs of a threatened displacement; the New Balance statement that endorsed the preservation of domestic positions, however unintentionally so, tripped into these same logics.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss’s detailed archival work and ethnographic research documents the popularization of extremist fashion brands from the 2000s to the present, particularly among youth in Europe, as a case of “the extreme gone mainstream,” illustrating a “commercialization” of alt-right or neo-Nazi fashion brands or the wearing of their commodities to perpetuate extremist politics on a more insidious and networked scale.<sup>27</sup> Miller-Idriss demonstrates how such products often employ subtle and subversive codes that can slip under the radar of school and workplace dress codes or federal hate speech legislation. Miller-Idriss’s research focuses on companies such as Thor Steinar that have set up brick and mortar stores across Europe, as well as international online distribution, while Elke Gaugele performs a close reading of Thor Steinar’s site content to illustrate a networked confluence of nationalist, often white supremacist, referents in adherence to a semiotics of fashion.<sup>28</sup> Miller-Idriss points also to a historical “appropriation” or “co-optation” of mainstream fashion brands that dates back to the skinhead

21. James M. Gladden and Mark A. McDonald, “The Brand Management Efforts of a Niche Specialist: New Balance in the Athletic Footwear Industry,” *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, Vol. 1 (June–July 1999): 67.

22. Gladden and McDonald, 71.

23. Gladden and McDonald, 71.

24. “New Balance,” *Business Insights: Global*, December 31, 2019.

25. Jake Woolf, “Our New President Just Got His First Sneaker Endorsement (Update),” *GQ*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.gq.com/story/donald-trump-new-balance-sneakers>. Content strategist Aleks Kang reads *GQ*’s earlier praise for New Balance’s domestic production in terms of its nature as a set of “patriotic manufacturing practices.” Aleks Kang, “New Balance Suffers a Brand Mangling ‘Whitewashing,’” *Entrepreneur*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/285346>.

26. Ahmed, 42–43.

27. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017)

28. Elke Gaugele, “The New Obscurity in Style. Alt-right Faction, Populist Normalization, and the Cultural War on Fashion from the Far Right,” *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, Vol. 23 (November 2019): 717–20.

subculture, after the 1989 German reunion, and still manifests concurrent with the circulation of more extremist clothing: these resituated brands include “Lonsdale, Alpha Industries, Fred Perry, Pitbull, and New Balance for their coincidental symbolic resonance with the far right.”<sup>29</sup> She traces German neo-Nazis’ particular interest in New Balance shoes to a simplistic use of “alphanumeric codes,” as the N logo stitched onto the side of each shoe can stand for “Nazi” or “neo-Nazi,” encoding a doubled referent into the footwear that is not overt to consumers without neo-Nazi affiliations but could signal to those that do, within specific contexts such as rallies.<sup>30</sup> Social media act as a conduit for extremist politics via mainstream, sportswear, or athleisure brands, and also spark the need for executives and PR directors to combat these associations.

In the US, there is little evidence that New Balance has been irrevocably “co-opted” as part of an alt-right uniform — nonetheless, such a call occurred in a mediatized manner. Esculapio uses Andrew Anglin’s editorial — and later offer to become a New Balance ambassador after the firm distanced itself from his extremism — to discuss how neo-Nazi movements incorporate popular culture imagery, fast food icons, and additional sportswear brands such as Adidas.<sup>31</sup> Here the communicative utility of mainstream brands resides in a politics of “invisibility” that “overlaps with attempts by the far-right to look less threatening and appear more palatable to broader audiences” but also reinforces conditions of “whiteness” and heteronormative “masculinity” as dominant based on a *lack* of visual distinction.<sup>32</sup> Anglin’s first post in *The Daily Stormer* makes no specific link to German neo-Nazis’ affiliation for New Balance, though one could presume that, as a prominent identified neo-Nazi, he knows the codes of the international scene. Anglin writes about his ‘newfound’ appreciation for New Balance in terms that indicate subcultural affiliation but also push for the proliferation of codes into a collective utterance:

The fact is, they are publicly supporting Trump, publicly supporting US manufacturing. The fact that they are doing that because they believe it will be profitable is irrelevant. New Balance is making a gesture to support White people and to support US manufacturing. We need to support that.

I see New Balances now becoming the official shoes of White people.

I myself am due a new pair of sneakers. I’m browsing their website now.

This will be fantastic. We will be able to recognize one another by our sportswear.

... New Balance: the shoes of the people.<sup>33</sup>

Esculapio points to a difference in scale between social media users’ reaction to the New Balance statement and the later response to the *Daily Stormer* editorial, which took the form of media amplification but also meme circulation:

The social media outrage caused by Anglin’s endorsement of New Balance ... was an inadequate response inasmuch as it was mostly directed at the company rather than at Anglin and the political views he represents. Boycott may be appropriate in the case of companies who do business with certain political figures ... but it is misguided in the case of brand appropriation, which does not require direct affiliation on the part of the brand. Furthermore, by focusing on the PR scandal not only did most mainstream media outlets give free

29. Miller-Idriss, 77. Miller-Idriss coded 2924 photographs in total of which 234 were coded as representations of co-opted brands (8% of the total archive). While it’s not clear how many individual photos depicted New Balance sneakers, New Balance was mentioned as one of the representative brands from these samples.

30. Miller-Idriss, 53, 65. Miller-Idriss observes a distinct contrast in the level of alt-right organization, content circulation, and complex referentiality between German and US affiliates. Still, I would add here that the level of coverage devoted to the 2017 Charlottesville rallies in the United States does indicate more serious concentrations of these alliances and an emboldened practice of public demonstration.

31. Esculapio, para. 5

32. Esculapio, para. 6–8.

33. Andrew Anglin, “Your Uniform: New Balance Just Became the Official Shoes of White People,” *Daily Stormer*, November 12, 2016, <https://dailystormer.su/your-uniform-new-balance-just-became-the-shoes-of-white-people/>.

PR to Anglin and his site ... but they also failed to address the dynamics of neo-Nazi's [sic] appropriation of a mainstream footwear brand with a global distribution.<sup>34</sup>

The neo-Nazi editorial, however, must be seen as a second occurrence that took up a catalytic statement of support for domestic trade policies that provoked expressions of divided sentiment towards the New Balance brand, embroiled in the political turmoil that arose after the election of Donald Trump as US President. The New Balance case can be further read within recent phenomena of "call-out culture" or "cancel culture," in which, as Vanessa Gerrie outlines in a fashion context, individuals, public personalities, and companies are taken to task in mediatized forums for problematic statements, often accompanied with calls to boycott products in order to inflict financial repercussions, or to deplatform speakers.<sup>35</sup> Citing culture writer Asam Ahmad, Gerrie notes how call-out culture can counter claims to "freedom of speech" across the political spectrum and can both destabilize and reinforce "inherent biases of power dynamics."<sup>36</sup> Social media's tendencies to produce "viral" content facilitate the callout process and amplify its ramifications: "Call-out culture has come to the forefront of the cultural consciousness over the past decade particularly with the democratization of social media platforms making the space for public callouts all the more accessible."<sup>37</sup> In the event of consumer or stakeholder backlash, instantaneous and international content circulation can occur well before public relations teams can strategize an appropriate or effective crisis communications plan.

This article is oriented towards this more immediate social media response terrain and finds that expressions of political sentiment related to the New Balance scandal are concentrated on the company's statement of support for Donald Trump rather than the later media-circulated outrage over Anglin's editorial. User utterances reflect a polarized political climate and, as per Esculapio's observations on responses to the editorial, remain focused around the New Balance brand. At the same time, New Balance sneakers as objects become a material outlet for consumers to enact their discontent with the brand in a mediatized and hypervisible forum.

## Methods

I performed manual inductive content analysis on a nonrandom sample of tweets produced from between November 10 and 13, 2016. I searched for all tweets that used the phrase "New Balance" or tagged the account @newbalance from November 10-11 and then from November 12-13 and included tweets that were responses and tweets with links. I discarded tweets that repeated content, which came in particular from pro-Trump or MAGA (Make America Great Again) accounts (which could also be bots), tweets in languages other than English of which there were just two in the sample, and tweets in which content wasn't decipherable, of which there was one. While lack of access to Twitter's complete historical data at the time of research limited the number of tweets obtained, qualitative coding allowed me to determine not just whether or not users endorsed or criticized New Balance's statement, or rather their positive or negative orientation towards the brand, but how this sentiment was structured around the brand and its products, and how users connected the brand's politics and those of Trump and/or the Republican Party. This method moreover revealed commonalities in how users positioned themselves in terms of not just their consumer perception of but also their sense of material, affective relation to New Balance and its products. Of the tweets from November 10-11, I coded a sample of the first 100 unique tweets (n=100). From November 12-13, there were 77 tweets in total, all of which I coded (n=77). Prior content analysis of tweets in a fashion and consumer culture context has demonstrated

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34. Esculapio, para. 4.

35. Vanessa Gerrie, "The Diet Prada Effect: 'Call-out Culture' in the contemporary fashionscape," *Clothing Cultures*, Vol. 6 (December 2019): 100. Gerrie's research profiles the work of the fashion industry watchdog accounts Diet Prada and The Fashion Law.

36. Gerrie, 100.

37. Gerrie, 100.

that tweets offer an encapsulation of “real-time, apparently spontaneous thoughts by the users,” though additional information about individual users can be difficult to track or to correlate.<sup>38</sup>

## Results

Tweets were analyzed with initial dominant thematic codes of Positive (Pro-New Balance), Negative (Anti-New Balance), and Neutral/Unclear to assess users’ orientations towards New Balance. Of the tweets from November 10–11, 40 tweets (n=40) expressed a positive response towards New Balance while 44 (n=44) expressed a negative response, and 16 responses (n=16) expressed more neutral sentiments or political comments or were coded as unclear (Table.01). Of the tweets from November 12–13, there were 39 positive responses to New Balance (n=39), 33 negative responses to New Balance (n=33) and 5 tweets (n=5) coded as neutral or unclear (Table.02). 20 tweets across the total sample set (n=20) contained explicit statements of endorsement for Trump (with his name included in the tweet) and/or statements against Liberal positions: for example, “Buy you & your [heart emoji] ones New Balance products for #Christmas this year. It’ll make a liberal cry #PresidentElectTrump #TrumpWon @newbalance.” 16 tweets across the total sample set (n=16) expressed an explicit anti-Trump position, some accompanied with photographs of Trump, for example, a tweet critical of New Balance’s partisan endorsement, that read, “@NewBalanceUSA @newbalance Is this true? New Balance supports Trump products? No store should endorse any candidates [sic] products.” Another tweet advocated for the destruction of New Balance sneakers as if to purge Trump’s evil influence, accompanied by three photographs of New Balance product overlaid with a photograph of Trump delivering a speech: “burning your NEW BALANCE SHOES is the only way to destroy the hateful, bunyun-causing [sic] spirits that live inside. @newbalance.”

Of these dominant codes, I created several sub-codes that often overlapped across tweets in the total sample. In the first sample of tweets from November 10–11 (n=100), of the subset of 40 Pro-New Balance tweets, 29 tweets (n=29) praised or endorsed New Balance’s political stance, while 23 tweets (n=23) described a relation to New Balance as a consumer or endorsed consumption of its products; five of these tweets expressed intention to purchase products for family members or encouraged consumers to do so. A further eight tweets (n=8) referred to New Balance’s creation and/or preservation of American jobs. 10 tweets (n=10) made explicit pro-Trump references, expressed an overall anti-Liberal position, or made right-wing-oriented statements such as “all lives matter” or statements in support of free speech. Of the subset of 44 Anti-New Balance tweets, 26 tweets (n=26) expressed displeasure with New Balance in terms of a severing of an existing customer relationship with the brand — for example: “Dammit @newbalance! My New Balance shoes were my favorite, now I gotta throw these away [angry emoji]!” These tweets were coded as “done with New Balance” and were often accompanied with aforementioned photographs of sneakers thrown in the trash or lit on fire. 21 additional tweets (n=21) advocated for a consumer boycott of New Balance products in some form, with seven tweets coded as “Call for boycott of New Balance,” six tweets coded as “Get rid of/return/donate New Balance shoes” telling consumers what to do with existing product; four tweets coded as “Burn shoes” making explicit calls to light shoes on fire; three tweets coded as “Endorsement of another sportswear brand”; and one tweet coded as “Will never purchase New Balance” indicating a refusal to assume a customer role. 10 tweets were identified as critical of the brand’s political position (n=10) while nine tweets made anti-Trump statements (n=9).

While the total volume of tweets decreases in the time period from November 12–13, the proportional number of Pro-New Balance tweets increases slightly to 50.6% of this second sample. Within the subset of Pro-New Balance tweets, 29 tweets (n=29) refer to recent or future New Balance purchases, including a statement that a user “will only purchase New Balance” and a further five tweets supporting purchases of New Balance for family members. 12 tweets (n=12) endorse New Balance as a brand itself and correlate with expressions of customer affiliation. 10 tweets (n=10) express similar praise for New Balance’s

38. Cf. Joan. C. Chrisler, et al. “Suffering by comparison: Twitter users’ reactions to the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show*,” *Body Image*, Vol. 10 (September 2013): 651.

political stance as those tweeted between November 10–11. 13 tweets take an anti-Liberal position, making reference to the MAGA slogan used in Trump’s election — and circulated on fashion items such as the prominent, visible red ballcaps — or to specific alt-right movements, or praise Trump himself; as in the previous sample, an additional six tweets support the creation of US jobs. Of the tweets coded as Anti-New Balance (n=33), 20 tweets (n=20) refer to a customer stake or relation, with 18 tweets coded as “Done with New Balance” and two tweets coded as “Will never purchase New Balance.” 12 tweets (n=12) are critical of New Balance’s political stance with one tweet comparing New Balance as a brand to Nazis. Only five tweets reference a boycott of the brand or the return or destruction of its products, and seven express a specific anti-Trump sentiment.

Table 01. Sample of tweets analyzed from the date range November 10–11, 2016.

| November 10–11 (n=100)                          | Number of tweets | % of sample  | % of subset  |
|---|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Positive (Pro-New Balance)</b>               | <b>n=40</b>      | <b>40.0%</b> | —            |
| Praise/endorsement for NB political stance      | n=29             | 29.0%        | 72.5%        |
| Consumer relation or product endorsement        | n=23             | 23.0%        | 57.5%        |
| Refers to creation/preservation of US jobs      | n=8              | 8.0%         | 20.0%        |
| <i>Pro-Trump/Anti-Liberal statements</i>        | <i>n=10</i>      | <i>10.0%</i> | <i>25.0%</i> |
| <b>Negative (Anti-New Balance)</b>              | <b>n=44</b>      | <b>42.9%</b> | —            |
| ‘Done with’ NB/breakup of customer relation     | n=20             | 26.0%        | 60.6%        |
| Call for consumer boycott/return/trash products | n=21             | 21.0%        | 47.7%        |
| Critical of NB political stance                 | n=10             | 10.0%        | 22.7%        |
| <i>Anti-Trump statements</i>                    | <i>n=9</i>       | <i>9.0%</i>  | <i>20.5%</i> |
| <b>Neutral/Unclear</b>                          | <b>n=16</b>      | <b>16.0%</b> | —            |

Table 02. Sample of tweets analyzed from the date range November 12–13, 2016.

| November 12–13 (n=77)                             | Number of tweets | % of sample  | % of subset  |
|---|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Positive (Pro-New Balance)</b>                 | <b>n=39</b>      | <b>50.6%</b> | —            |
| Customer relation — recent or future NB purchases | n=29             | 37.7%        | 74.4%        |
| Customer relation — endorsement of NB brand       | n=12             | 15.6%        | 30.7%        |
| Praise/endorsement for NB political stance        | n=10             | 13.0%        | 25.6%        |
| Refers to creation/preservation of US jobs        | n=6              | 7.8%         | 15.4%        |
| <i>Pro-Trump/Anti-Liberal statements</i>          | <i>n=13</i>      | <i>16.9%</i> | <i>33.3%</i> |
| <b>Negative (Anti-New Balance)</b>                | <b>n=33</b>      | <b>42.9%</b> | —            |
| ‘Done with’ NB/customer breakup/never purchase    | n=26             | 26.0%        | 59.1%        |
| Critical of NB political stance                   | n=12             | 15.6%        | 36.3%        |
| Call for consumer boycott/return/trash products   | n=5              | 5.2%         | 12.1%        |
| <i>Anti-Trump statements</i>                      | <i>n=7</i>       | <i>9.1%</i>  | <i>21.2%</i> |
| <b>Neutral/Unclear</b>                            | <b>n=5</b>       | <b>6.5%</b>  | —            |

## Discussion

Results indicate a political polarization reflective of the climate that produced the election results of November 2016, in which Donald Trump won the electoral college with 304 votes to Hillary Clinton’s 227 but lost the popular vote by approximately 2,900,000 votes.<sup>39</sup> Tweets that expressed positive or negative sentiment towards New Balance correlated with users’ approval or disapproval of Lebreton’s comments and with users’ pro-Trump (or pro-Republican/anti-Democrat/anti-Liberal) or anti-Trump (or

39. Gregory Krieg, “It’s official: Clinton swamps Trump in popular vote,” *CNN*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/21/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-popular-vote-final-count/index.html>.

anti-Republican/pro-Democrat/pro-Liberal) positions, the latter positions evidenced in the use of hashtags such as #notmypresident or #theresistance. Pro-New Balance posts were more likely to use hashtags overall: these utterances included examples such as #MAGA #MakeAmericaGreatAgain, #Americafirst, #TrumpWon or #snowflakes (a common insult directed at Liberal users), as well as a proliferation of US flag emojis. In both the Pro-New Balance and Anti-New Balance subsets of tweets, users defined their stake in the brand as that of a (past, present, or future) consumer/customer or called for users to respond to the brand via material performances of consumption, waste, or purchase of competitors' products. In several photographs and video clips, sneakers become an effigy on which users' discontent with the New Balance brand is enacted via disposal or destruction, but through which the 'N' logo becomes even more prominent via its social media circulation than it had been prior to the public relations crisis — an ironic turn given the crisis's (and the editorial's) illumination of the neo-Nazi referents encoded into this icon. Some pro-New Balance (and therefore pro-Trump) users pick up on this doubled referent and post photographs of their "well-worn" New Balance sneakers and/or make statements of "love" for their New Balance sneakers. While it remains unknown how many users had purchased New Balance sportswear or felt an affiliation with the brand prior to Lebreton's statement, a significant proportion of tweet content expresses a discontinuance, continuance, or adoption of such a relation based on whether users feel that New Balance's values mirror their own.

While there is a slight proportional increase in the number of Pro-New Balance tweets after the publication of the *Daily Stormer* editorial, the total numbers of tweets decreases, and there is no indication of a new or renewed social media backlash sparked by the editorial itself. Tweets in the second sample, posted after (though not necessarily because of) the publication of and resultant media furor over the *Daily Stormer* editorial, tend to endorse the New Balance brand overall rather than praise its political position (though the timing of these tweets could still suggest a tacit political endorsement), and there are fewer articulations of 'breakups' with the brand. More specific references to recent or future purchases of New Balance products could however be prompted by the editorial's call for visible brand wear. There are few if any direct references to the editorial other than people retweeting mainstream media news stories *about* it, often with a neutral tone to the actual tweet content, in concordance with Esculapio's observation that the mainstream media amplified this second wave of the public relations crisis.<sup>40</sup> Only 16 tweets from the sample used the editorial's oft-circulated pull quote, "the official shoes of White people," and most of these either linked to mainstream news stories or remarked that this fact was old news, rather, that New Balance had already been a brand associated more widely with White consumers. The miniscule number of tweets that called for a boycott of New Balance or destruction of products indicates that the initial movement had lost momentum or perhaps, like a pair of sneakers, flamed out. The social media backlash that New Balance did face stemmed rather from its initial statement of support for Trump's domestic-focused trade policies, perceived in the election aftermath as an alliance with a broader, right-wing Trumpian politics, while the explicit textual co-optation of New Balance as a White (and white supremacist) uniform and media outlets' resultant attention to neo-Nazis' interest in the brand can be seen as an incidence of framing that furthered the brand's public relations quagmire.

## Conclusion

In the case of New Balance's 2016 public relations crisis, support for or criticism of the firm correlated with users' articulated political position, while users characterized their relation to the brand in terms of consumer positionalities, as current, former, or future adherents. Expressions of political sentiment related to the scandal fell within a polarized and extreme political spectrum — and indeed contained several pro-Trump statements — but were focused around the New Balance brand rather than on its footwear or other products per se, though select tweets did mention the level of quality in the shoes, for example, as a further reason to sever a customer relationship. At the same time, as outlined above, the shoes become a material outlet for consumers to enact and mediatize discontent. Ahmed's affective economies illustrates how objects can become "sticky" with affect, and function as beacons around

40. Esculapio, para. 4.

which affective utterances are concentrated.<sup>41</sup> In this instance, consumer affect was oriented towards New Balance but also the actual products, whose commodity form, referencing the Marxist foundation for Ahmed's theorization, occludes the labour within it.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, the shoes' actual production was effaced in resultant textual and visual discourses even as the issue of domestic production had underpinned Lebreton's remarks at the outset.

Tweets were oriented towards a particular statement from one New Balance executive that became a metonymic referent for the brand as a whole, illuminating concerns for companies in making sure that 'brand' values align with their executives'. Media outlets reported on American clothier L.L.Bean's support for Trump's election at the same time as New Balance Chairman Jim Davis's contributions were disclosed.<sup>43</sup> In August 2019, fitness empires Equinox and SoulCycle faced consumer backlash after owner Stephen Ross hosted an expensive, exclusive fundraiser for Donald Trump at Ross's home in upstate New York, imposing a set of associations that undermined SoulCycle's expressed brand values of diversity and inclusion.<sup>44</sup> In 2020, media outlets published entire lists of corporations whose CEOs had made donations to support Trump's reelection, with the consumer site *DoneGood* itemizing corporations (including New Balance) across a host of sectors including fashion and cosmetics, with several corporations functioning as parent companies to additional brands.<sup>45</sup> For its part, New Balance was forced to issue two statements, one after the initial comments to the press and another after the *Daily Stormer* editorial, disavowing white supremacist and/or neo-Nazi politics. Its November 14, 2016 statement read:

New Balance does not tolerate bigotry or hate in any form. One of our officials was recently asked to comment on a trade policy that was taken out of context. As a 110-year old company with five factories in the US and thousands of employees worldwide from all races, genders, cultures and sexual orientations, New Balance is a values-driven organization and culture that believes in humanity, integrity, community and mutual respect for people around the world. We have been and always will be committed to manufacturing in the United States.<sup>46</sup>

While the company reasserts progressive values, it reinforces its mandate to domestic manufacture, and attempts to tie this principle to its sense of inclusiveness, even as an association with the "America First" ethos remains implied in the text. New Balance is considered by content strategists to be one of the first cautionary tales in public statements of political partisanship and, of note, in making statements of alliance with a Trumpian politics, even at the purportedly isolated level of trade policies, as well as of "whitewashing" as a process of white supremacist co-optation in the public, consumer consciousness.<sup>47</sup> *GQ* reported that company representatives asked individual stockists not to take comments from one executive as part and parcel of the ethos of an entire brand.<sup>48</sup> This case points to nebulous distinctions between the brand as interface and executives' political positions as representative of the brand — territories that are still muddled and should be probed with attention to consumer response and brand perception, notably in a context of affective social media networks.

41. Ahmed, 11.

42. Ahmed, 11.

43. O'Sullivan, "New Balance founder gave nearly \$400,000 to Trump".

44. Alex Abad-Santos, "SoulCycle's instructors are as mad about its investor's Trump fundraiser as its riders are," *Vox*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/8/9/20791646/soulcycle-trump-fundraiser-backlash>.

45. Todd Lido, "Boycott Trump: Companies to Avoid Updated for 2020," *DoneGood*, June 4, 2020, <https://donegood.co/blogs/news/boycott-trump-companies-to-avoid>.

46. New Balance (@newbalance), "New Balance does not tolerate bigotry or hate in any form. One of our officials was recently asked to comment on a trade policy that was taken out of context. As a 110-year old company with five..." Twitter, November 14, 2016, <https://twitter.com/newbalance/status/798322478389035009>.

47. Cf. Aleks Kang, "New Balance Suffers a Brand Mangling 'Whitewashing'".

48. Cam Wolf, "New Balance, Under Armour, and the Year that Sneakers Got Political," *GQ*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.gq.com/story/new-balance-sneakers-politics-2017>.

This article presents one case study towards research that uses affect theories to examine how fashion brands have become imbricated via social media into the culture wars and into forms of populist, extremist, and activist persuasion. Limitations of the present methods include a lack of access to the entire archive of tweets related to the New Balance public relations crisis, or posted in response to related news media articles or to New Balance's official statement, to validate the findings from a more data-driven, quantitative standpoint. Nonetheless, qualitative coding reveals a clear polarization of political positions and consumer/customer identifications in the tweets posted after Lebreton's statement, as well as the bases on which these positions are expressed. Results point to the affective dimension within politicized social media discourses and consumer-brand affiliations and support the pursuit of further research in the role of affect in the mediatized discursive formations in which fashion and fashion companies are implicated. Miller-Idriss points to simultaneous tendencies in subcultural formations both to maintain membership and affiliation but also to resist the dominant culture. While her work is more continental in its scope, American cases — especially those from the Trump and post-Trump administrations — are fertile ground for the application of social theories of fashion and consumption, as well as an examination of how the culture wars are enacted in the circulation and production of affect, in and of users and their affiliations.

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# Space, Time and Catwalks: Fashion Shows as a Multilayered Communication Channel

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## Abstract

Fashion shows — the key moment in the fashion communication system — have become a privileged setting for experimenting with new communication languages that implement multifaceted and multi-channel strategies, poised between innovation and tradition. Fashion shows always could read and interpret the spirit of the times in different eras, transforming and shaping themselves into different formats each time while always remaining true to themselves. The article investigates the different contemporary forms of the catwalks, whether real or virtual, implemented due to the digital acceleration witnessed during the Covid-19 social distancing period. In this context, the fashion shows define new communication forms and strategies that are no longer limited to the “here and now” but expand space, thanks to the possibility of remote participation and time, by amplifying the whole concept: the catwalk-event become amplified with the inclusion of a pre, a during and a post. The time expands thanks to communication strategies that increasingly stage the phases that precede the fashion show (the creative process, the backstage, the work in progress), but also the subsequent phases, those of storytelling and narration, formerly the prerogative of a few privileged journalists, now shared storytelling, in which designers directly tell and explain their point of view, both through traditional narrative forms (such as interviews) and through forms of interaction typical of digital (such as gaming, sharing and Instagram live).

**Keywords:** Fashion Communication; Creative industries; Fashion Branding; Fashion Shows; Digital.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Fashion as a cultural, productive and creative system is by its very nature about transformation. As Yuniya Kawamura states, in fact, “whatever historical period we are talking about, the fundamental essence of fashion is change: the process of fashion explains the diversity and changes in styles”. Technological innovations have stimulated creativity related to fashion communication and vice versa. The development of the steam engine — a technology that could be defined as hard — allowed fashion, in the second half of the 18th century, to establish itself as one of the leading manufacturing sectors; today, developments in digital technologies have given new impetus — accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic — to the definition of new forms of communication and marketing of fashion and its artefacts.

The contemporary fashion system characterises itself as an innovative force for creative experimentation, managing to ride on and exploit Toffler’s so-called “third wave” of technology, characterised by a powerful digital component that manages information, space and creates the global village. The result is the realisation of visions that define new futuristic and futureable aesthetics but above all new forms of interaction that rewrite the way people interact, between people and objects and, last but not least, between brands and consumers. A technological present is taking place beyond the concepts of complexity and tangibility, favouring an increasingly simple, invisible and intangible technology, and for this very reason, more pervasive.

We are witnessing a sort of mutation of the typical form of the fashion show which, on the one hand, implements new narrative modes, and on the other, creates narratives that we could define as meta-fashion shows: fashion shows-not-shows which, while losing the concept of live broadcasting, maintain the form of the “classic” event, with a catwalk, a sequence of models, garments and occasions of use, presented according to precise, more or less linear paths, becoming, to all intents and purposes, true short films in the form of fashion shows, or vice versa, designed for digital. Through an analysis of the evolution of the relationship between fashion and digital communication (presented by Chiara Pompa) and an overview of the current framework (presented by Vittorio Linfante), the article aims to investigate how the fashion system has been expanding its communicative vocabulary, implementing narrative forms in which the boundaries between physical and digital are becoming blurred, as happened during the Balenciaga Fall 2021 fashion show in which real models walked among a digital audience or the Miu Miu Spring 2021 show in which a real audience, remotely connected, was at the same time both spectator and set of the event. Boundaries that also transcend tradition and innovation: for example, Moschino’s puppet theatre staged by Jeremy Scott for the Spring 2021 collection, or J.W. Anderson’s project Show-in-a-Box, in which the physicality of a box containing cardboard cuttings, notes and silhouettes are translated into a highly personal, physical and sensorial experience, shared and communicated through social networks. This blurring of boundaries also affects the form and content of the shows themselves, as in the interviews with Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons, who share their creative process through words, answering questions from the brand’s fans and interacting through various Instagram tools.

## Fashion Under Attack. Fashion Shows and Digital Resilience

*Le Mythe Dior*: this is the title of the short movie by Matteo Garrone to show the Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2020 collection of the historic Parisian Fashion House that won the first prize of the “Fashion Film Festival Milano 2021”, the first entirely online. A short film that — behind the fantastic patina of a bucolic dimension inhabited by fauns, nymphs, mermaids, statues in a metamorphosis who come to life and wear pieces designed by Christian Dior Couture — hides a message, not at all veiled, of resilience. The trunk in the shape of the historic headquarters of the Maison, in Avenue Montaigne,

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1. This article was conceived by both authors in its entirety. Specifically, Chiara Pompa is responsible for sections: “Fashion under attack. Fashion shows and digital resilience” and “The technological roots of fashion digital transformation”. Vittorio Linfante is responsible for sections: “Digital acceleration of fashion communication: from a necessity to an opportunity for experimentation and creativity”, “The catwalks will never die[?]” and “Fashion shows are dead, long live fashion shows [?]”.

carried by two porters in elegant livery who wander through the forests showing the mythological creatures the sumptuous collection kept there and reproduced on a small scale, is a reference to the famous travelling exhibition *Théâtre de la Mode*. After all, as the press points out, “comparisons between the post-lockdown and the second post-war period, given the right proportions, are easy.”<sup>2</sup> Among the promotional initiatives implemented by French institutions “following the isolation created by the war and the German occupation ... to bring the fame of French couture ... and textiles back into the international spotlight,”<sup>3</sup> the exhibition aimed to reaffirm the dominant position of Paris in the field of international fashion. Initially held in the Pavillon Marsan in Paris (today’s Musée des Arts Décoratifs) and later in numerous locations around the world, the exhibition displayed miniature mannequins with reproductions of the latest creations of the great couturiers, demonstrating the ability of French Maisons to face adversity and lead the renaissance of fashion. In this perspective, the Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2020 collection was therefore created to offer “a heartfelt tribute to this admirable spirit of rebirth and optimism,”<sup>4</sup> giving once again proof of the ability of French fashion to react, this time also using digital technology and cinematographic language.

And it is with these words that, as a proof of the digital resilience of Dior — and, we might add, of the entire Fashion&Luxury sector during the pandemic<sup>5</sup> — creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri commented on the reorganisation of the consolidated process of creation and presentation of the brand’s sartorial collections:

I started this haute couture in the middle of the quarantine, in my home in Rome, far from my staff, from the atelier, from the premières, from Paris. Once the first moment of disorientation had passed, we had to completely rethink the working method, from creating the garments to the way of presenting them, seeing that the fashion show was not a viable option this time.<sup>6</sup>

To comply with social distancing and travel restrictions, Paris Haute Couture Week took place entirely online for the first time since its inception. As officially announced by the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode in a concise press release issued at the end of May 2020,<sup>7</sup> the collections were presented “in the form of creative videos/films” published on a special platform and, in parallel, shared on the main international media networks as well as on the official channels of the various brands. As an alternative to the live show and in the presence of an audience, from 6 to 8 July, 31 audiovisual contents were uploaded online, according to a precise daily schedule: 6 fashion films; 4 videos in the form of fashion shows (i.e. défilés, without an audience, pre-recorded and broadcast in video format); 8 video look-books. The creative solutions adopted for the Paris Haute Couture Week Fall/Winter 2020 are among the timely and concrete reactions to the challenges imposed by Covid-19. They are essentially related, beyond the formal differences, to the three cases listed above.

If, in fact, today, one year later, we look at how the collections were presented before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, it is clear that the complete conversion to digital of the Fashion Weeks held in

2. For further investigation → see Serena Tibaldi, “Matteo Garrone, un film per l’alta moda: ninfe, sirene e gli abiti in miniatura di Dior,” *La Repubblica*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.repubblica.it/moda-e-beauty/2020/07/06/news/digital-fashion-week-haute-couture-autunno-inverno-2020-dior-matteo-garrone-291619113/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.
3. For an in depth analysis of the promotion strategies implemented by French fashion institutions to cope with the economic crisis after World War II, see, Gianluigi Di Gangirolamo, *Istituzioni per la moda. Interventi tra pubblico e privato in Italia e in Francia (1945-1965)* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2019), 29–33. See also: Dominique Veillon, *Fashion Under the Occupation* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).
4. For further investigation: [https://www.dior.com/it\\_it/moda-donna/sfilate-haute-couture/folder-collezione-haute-couture-autunno-inverno-2020-2021/le-theatre-de-la-mode-!%E2%80%99dissea-dei-sogni](https://www.dior.com/it_it/moda-donna/sfilate-haute-couture/folder-collezione-haute-couture-autunno-inverno-2020-2021/le-theatre-de-la-mode-!%E2%80%99dissea-dei-sogni) Accessed June 6, 2021.
5. For further investigation → see Silvia Pieraccini, “Tecnologie digitali e Ict: i big della moda pronti ad aumentare gli investimenti,” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/tecnologie-digitali-e-ict-big-moda-pronti-ad-aumentare-investimenti-ADn1c85>. Accessed March 30, 2021.
6. Maria Grazia Chiuri’s statement is reported in: Serena Tibaldi, “Matteo Garrone, un film per l’alta moda: ninfe, sirene e gli abiti in miniatura di Dior,” *La Repubblica*, July 6, 2020.
7. The press release mentioned can be found at the following link: <https://fhcm.paris/en/2020/05/28/haute-couture-online-2/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.

July 2020 marked a watershed.<sup>8</sup> As will be argued in the course of this contribution, from a basic bipolarity which contemplated only the canonical fashion show on the one hand and the look-book on the other, during the 2020s, a plurality of solutions was gradually experimented with, which necessarily expanded the range of tools that can be used to show a collection to all the actors involved. Moreover, companies, in synergy with the various national fashion institutions, have promptly been working to identify alternative platforms, formulas and languages, to upset the dichotomous system which, before the lockdown, contrasted a substantial predominance of live shows (with possible live streaming) with limited use of the look-book as the main viable option in digital terms. We should also point out that, although since September 2020 there has been a gradual “return to the real” — and for this reason, the sector’s press has adopted the neologism *phygital* (the result of the crisis of physical and digital) to describe the hybrid nature of Fashion Weeks characterised by the alternation of purely digital shows and fashion shows with both live and online audiences — the range of solutions employed has not contracted again. Invoked by a segment of the industry that is very reluctant about a complete conversion to digital or to solutions that, through the media, extend the concept of liveness beyond the spatial-temporal co-presence of the show and the audience,<sup>9</sup> this contrary thrust does not seem to have halted, at least for the moment, the process of *Digital Transformation* in the field under examination. According to a mapping of the different practices implemented by 270 brands as of July 2020, which supports the analysis of the phenomenon carried out in the following sections, it clearly emerges that one year later, in March 2021, the panorama is much more varied and tends to include not only live fashion shows and look-books, but also fashion films, videos in the form of fashion shows, digital catwalks (in 3D or AR and VR) and other solutions which, to the detriment of forced digitalisation, retrieve extremely physical materials and methods.

This phenomenon, described above, is certainly noteworthy as it can be observed from multiple points of view: if, in fact, on the one hand, it can highlight the ability of the Fashion System to respond to the crisis with timeliness and to manage the emergency in the short term, on the other hand, the recent tendency to return just as abruptly to normality — and not to the so-called *New Normal* —, implies an articulated reflection on the relationship that the sector has with technologies and digital cultures. In this sense, it is worth pointing out that the use of videos or fashion films in place of the conventional fashion show, as well as the involvement of the audience remotely through live streaming, are not a novelty introduced by the need to adapt to a new landscape in which, among the most affected sectors, there is undoubtedly that of the live show.<sup>10</sup> Suppose one looks back at the history of fashion shows from the point of view of the presentation methods adopted before the pandemic. In that case, it is clear that the various brands, trying to adapt quickly to the changes taking place, first of all, recovered and optimised the experiments already carried out — albeit sporadically or in niche contexts — during the previous decades and, in some cases, even during the 20th century. As we are going to discuss in the next section by reviewing a series of particularly illustrative cases, the potential of the moving image to promote fashion has been grasped and exploited since the days of early cinema, just as the possibilities of deferred fruition or remote participation through live streaming had already taken hold in previous decades, in conjunction with the technological changes that marked the decades at the turn of the millennium.<sup>11</sup>

8. If we exclude the experiments in complete digital conversion of the Tokyo and Shanghai Fashion Weeks, broadcast live on Tmall in April 2020 (and which in some cases exploited augmented reality to “virtually” host the public in the front row who could comment and buy the collections in real-time with the See now-buy now option), it was in July 2020 that the main Fashion Weeks were held, for the first time since their inception, exclusively online and without a live audience.

9. According to some studies on the various forms of live performance in the domain of theatre, the concept of “liveness” can also be applied to the analysis of fashion shows; the existence of multiple connections between theatrical performances and some modes of presentation of collections has in fact been investigated and attested by several studies. On the evolution of the concept of “liveness” in relation to the Digital Transformation and mediatisation in theatre, see: Laura Gemini, “Liveness: le logiche mediali nella comunicazione dal vivo,” *Sociologia della comunicazione* 51 (2016): 43–63. For an in-depth exploration of the fashion show and theatre nexus, see: Nancy J. Troy, “The Theatre of Fashion: Staging Haute Couture in Early 20th-Century France,” *Theatre Journal*, 53 (2001): 1–32.

10. For further investigation → see Laura Gemini, Stefano Brilli e Francesca Giuliani, “Il dispositivo teatrale alla prova del Covid-19. Mediatizzazione, liveness e pubblici,” *Mediascapes journal*, 15 (2010): 45–58.

11. The reference is to the important technological transformations that have taken place since the beginning of the 1990s in the iconosphere, “the sphere constituted by the set of images circulating in a given cultural context, the technologies

There is no doubt that Covid-19 highlighted the need to speed up digitisation processes, but the solutions adopted result from a change that was already underway. From the multitude of statements made by industry insiders in the early months of 2020, as well as the detailed analysis in the special edition, published following the pandemic outbreak, of the annual report on the state of fashion by Business of Fashion magazine and international strategy consultancy McKinsey & Company, a cohesive and widely shared position emerges: Covid-19 is the engine of change in a system that already had problems. This crisis factor has helped to accelerate the achievement of a greater degree of awareness by industry players of the need to redesign the Fashion System, perhaps starting with technological innovation.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, as will be argued in the following pages, it is possible to say that the pandemic has contributed to emphasising the urgency of investing in technological innovation and Digital Transformation, bringing to a new stage the experiments that had already begun in previous decades.

## The Technological Roots of Fashion Digital Transformation

During 2020 and early 2021, contemporary fashion brands innovated the live fashion show through heterogeneous digital tools, as can be seen in the mapping of the different ways of presenting clothing collections illustrated in the following sections. However, before reviewing these case studies and analysing them in detail, it is productive to contextualise this recent development within the previous fashion show mediatisation. In order to fully understand the digital transformation of fashion shows stimulated by the challenges imposed by the pandemic, it is, therefore, necessary to take a step back to investigate the nature of the exchanges that the fashion industry has had, and still has, with the media system and, in particular, with both still and moving images when presenting its stylistic innovations. First of all, it is necessary to start from a basic assumption, although we are aware that this may seem too unbalanced in a deterministic sense:

the acceleration of fashion's transformation evidently has to do with the technological expansion of this system. If fashion is changing so fast today, it is because there are a series of instruments that materialize it, fix it and, precisely because they fix it, stimulate change. ... fashion exists because there is a media system that establishes and communicates it.<sup>13</sup>

It follows that fashion shows — if intended as functional appointments for the presentation of new collections, which in turn are called upon to represent and feed the regime mentioned above of changing tastes on a material level — have always been accompanied by a media system. Fashion magazines in close synergy with photographic images, cinema, television and, in recent decades, websites and social networking platforms have contributed, in parallel with the fashion show, to disseminate to the public the stylistic innovations introduced in respect of previous seasons, mediating, freezing, fixing and communicating them to the point of establishing fashion itself.

It is also interesting to note that throughout the 20th century and up to the present day, these means of communication have been used to present the fashion show itself. As Caroline Evans noted, from the second decade of the 20th century, “both fashion journalism and newsreel began to show scenes of Paris

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with which they are produced, processed, transmitted and archived, and the social uses to which these images are put”. For further information, see: Andrea Pinotti e Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2016), 17–19.

12. The analysis presented in the McKinsey & Company report reveals five trajectories from which the change of course highlighted and accelerated by social distancing is expected to take place. These include Digital Escalation, which is now considered a priority throughout the value chain, and the Innovation Imperative, which requires the adoption of new tools and strategies to make business models shock-proof in the future. See: McKinsey & Company, *The State of Fashion 2020. Coronavirus Update*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/its-time-to-rewire-the-fashion-system-state-of-fashion-coronavirus-update>. Accessed March 30, 2021.

13. See: Claudio Marra, *Nelle ombre di un sogno. Storie e idee della fotografia di moda* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2004), 40–41.

mannequins — as fashion models were called — at work.”<sup>14</sup> If, in fact, the primitive forms of presenting new creations worn by a model, i.e. the défilé of the mannequins in the Parisian couturiers’ salon, had been invisible to the public in the previous decades,<sup>15</sup> from 1908 onwards, they were frequently documented through both still and moving images. Initially developed as a private, closed-door spectacle to present to an elite audience and foreign buyers from both Europe and America, the Paris fashion shows quickly came to the attention of a wider public. Alongside the habit of sending mannequins “to model” at the races, in holiday resorts, on cruise ships or tours of European and American department stores, after 1910, some couturiers opened the doors of their salons to photographers and cameramen.<sup>16</sup> At this time, the industry began to recognise and exploit the potential of the technological image to promote clothing and accessories. In order to retrace the main stages of the relationship between fashion and moving images and thus to understand the impact they had on the presentation of clothing collections, we must go back to the so-called “cinema of attractions”. As Evans’ study suggests, the pioneer film maker Georges Méliès has made 15 short publicity films in 1900, including one for *Mystère corsets* and another for *Delion hats*.<sup>17</sup> Two very interesting cases from several points of view. Primarily, as Marketa Uhlírova has pointed out, they constitute an early example of “the practice of expanding fashion advertising into the realm of the moving image,”<sup>18</sup> used in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mainly to promote ready-made items.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, they are noteworthy because they were projected at night onto the street outside his Theatre Robert-Houdin. From this perspective, they represent an early example of projecting filmed fashion products in public spaces, which has been very common in the last decades. It has become a widespread practice to project and live-stream fashion show on monuments or urban buildings in the digital era, as will be analysed in the following pages.

Among the first couturiers who, on the other hand, grasped the potential offered by cinema, we can mention Paul Poiret.<sup>20</sup> He was probably the first to have had “the idea of replacing the live fashion show with a film,”<sup>21</sup> thus adapting “the strategies of popular visual culture to high-end consumer culture.”<sup>22</sup> In 1911 the fashion parade held at his famous “The Thousand and Second Night” party was shown to foreign clients and buyers in August of the same year, projecting its film simultaneously to a live fashion show. Three years later, Poiret again used moving images to promote his collections on an American marketing tour, projecting it in preview at a dinner in his Parisien garden. In both cases, we are facing an *ante-litteram* example of “videos in fashion show form” — as we labelled some films produced by fashion houses during the pandemic. Differently from what we have called “fashion films”, they do not exploit the narrative potential of cinema and therefore do not transport the viewer into the diegetic universe. As Evans noted,<sup>23</sup> Poiret’s fashion show films present the models walking across the screen rather than telling a story.

In the same years, the fashion show also gained popularity in another film genre. Indeed, some Parisian Maisons began to allow film companies such as Pathé-Frères and Gaumont access to their ateliers to produce footage to be included in newsreels. In the 1910s and 1920s, in the newsreel footage began to appear

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14. Caroline Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows as a Cinema of Attractions,” in *Fashion in Film*, ed. Adrienne Munich, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 110.
  15. Ibid. According to Evans, between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the fashion shows of Parisian Maisons were not publicized because couturiers did not want to publicize their business relationships with American and European department store buyers.
  16. See: Caroline Evans, *The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900–1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)
  17. Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows...”, 120.
  18. See: Marketa Uhlírova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories,” *Fashion Theories*, 17 (2013): 140.
  19. Uhlírova, 140.
  20. Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows...”, 119–23.
  21. Marketa Uhlírova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film”, 153.
  22. Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows...”, 119.
  23. Evans, 119.

some mannequins [that] simply model as they would have done professionally to clients in the salon, but others play the role of society women, chatting and taking tea together in narrative scenarios that thinly veil the point of displaying the latest fashionable costumes, introducing a note of fiction into real-life modeling.<sup>24</sup>

In the first case, newsreels show “filmed defilé”. In the second, they start to utilise the narrative potential of cinema, even if still in a rudimentary way. We can partly find this bifurcation in the solutions adopted during the pandemic to overcome the impossibility of showing live collections. Leaving the “narrative fashion films” aside for the moment, it is, therefore, possible to state that the still alive relationship between the presentation of clothes worn by models and moving images has its roots in the first decades of the last century. In order to underline once again how the legacy of early exchanges between fashion and cinema has been exploited in recent decades, we can say that television formats such as Elsa Klensch’s *Style*, broadcast on CNN from 1980 to 2001, have their roots in fashion newsreels shown in cinemas. In the footsteps of *Style*, several TV programmes presented fashion shows and their backstages to the audience in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>25</sup> After all, behind-the-scenes fashion has a fascination that has often been revealed and made spectacular yesterday and today. In fact, some documentaries that became popular in the 1930s shine a spotlight on the hidden sides of the fashion industry on par with some live streaming fashion shows that begin backstage. Hybridizing the documentary style with advertising and avant-garde techniques, these films produced for promotional or educational purposes were dedicated to various aspects of the fashion industry, usually invisible to the public eye. From this perspective, Humphrey Jennings’ *Making Fashion* (1939) is emblematic, documenting the preparation of Norman Hartnell’s Couture Spring/Summer 1938 collection. Going through designing and creating the collection, the short film “culminates in two substantial modelling sequences — one internal, stage on the salon; the other a fashion show for a small audience.”<sup>26</sup> Drawing another connection between the past and recent years, SHOWstudio, the platform for fashion film founded in 2000 by fashion photographer Nick Knight and graphic designer Peter Saville, has often shed light on the fashion industry backstage, documenting its mechanisms and processes and making them accessible to web users. In addition to establishing itself on the scene as a pioneering project in digital fashion imaging and promoting film as a valuable alternative to the live fashion show, it has kept faith with its initial vocation, namely “to put the spotlight on the behind-the-scenes creative process of fashion and fashion image-making.”<sup>27</sup>

Without any claim to being exhaustive, the examples presented here allow the recent relationship between fashion shows and moving images to be framed as part of a broader story. This history is rooted in the relationship between fashion and cinema since its origins. From this perspective, the above examples support the thesis that digital technologies and the Internet have facilitated and thus helped normalise practices that were gradually consolidated in the pre-digital era. These practices have been intensifying since the 1990s, when some niche or avant-garde brands, in particular, started, thanks to the above-mentioned technological innovations, to use moving images to present their collections, substituting them for the live fashion show or incorporating them into it as its paratext. Used to cut the costs of catwalk shows or to respond to the need for aesthetic experimentation as in the case of Hussein Chalayan, Maison Martin Margiela or Viktor & Rolf, this exponential increase in the use of moving images set the basis for the explosion and dissemination of “digital fashion films” during the first two decades of the new millennium.<sup>28</sup>

Nothing more than disseminating a new genre for which it is difficult to provide a precise definition.

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24. Evans, 119.

25. Marketa Uhlířová, “100 Years of the Fashion Film”, 153.

26. Uhlířová, 146.

27. Uhlířová, 146.

28. As a testament to the transformation taking place, Newsweek’s March 2010 issue reads, “In any case, the revolution is probably just beginning. Labels and designers like Yves Saint Laurent and British avant-garde talent Gareth Pugh are eschewing runway shows altogether during certain seasons, opting instead to produce and present footage to publishers both in person and online. ... After all, embracing the future is what fashion does.” See: Sameer Reddy, “Streaming Live From the Catwalk,” *Newsweek*, March 4, 2010.

The label ‘fashion film’, in fact, refers to an increasingly wide range of audiovisual contents, mainly short (from 2/3 minutes up to about 15/20 minutes) connected in various ways to fashion. As Gary Needham noted, the term includes indistinctly: “promotional videos for seasonal collections, substitutes for conventional catwalk displays, electronic look-books, experimental films used to advertise brands (clothing, accessories, and perfume), ‘promos’ for the digital platform version of print magazines, e-stores, and brand-funded artists’ videos.”<sup>29</sup> Not to be confused with the widely described filmed catwalk shows, they are formally less formulaic and often adhere to the aesthetic vision of those directing them. In particular, the various luxury brands, having large budgets to invest in communication, now regularly commission such films from famous directors, photographers, or artists.<sup>30</sup> Among the latter, purely for simplification purposes, we can cite David Lynch for Dior (*Lady Blue Shanghai*, 2010), Harmony Korine for Proenza Schouler (*Snowballs*, 2010), Roman Polanski for Prada (*A Therapy*, 2012), Glen Luchford for Gucci (2017), Wim Wenders for Jil Sander (2018), up to Matteo Garrone, mentioned at the beginning of this paper and called to direct *Le Mythe Dior* in 2020. Unlike the other films listed above — which were mainly used as “promotional videos for seasonal collections” or “experimental films used to advertise brands”, and therefore disseminated on the Internet, through social media, independently of the fashion show — Garrone shot this video during the pandemic in place of the fashion show itself. Together with fashion films such as *Carillon* for Magliano or *The Adventures of Zoocom with Friends* for Luis Vuitton by Virgil Abloh (both shot for Digital Fashion Week of July 2020), the one by Garrone is based on an operational practice inaugurated by couturiers such as Paul Poiret and re-launched almost a century later by some designers in the Nineties. In 1998, Helmut Lang presented the year’s Fall/Winter collection exclusively through a video broadcast on the Internet and a CD distributed to the press,<sup>31</sup> following the footsteps of Rifat Ozbek, Jasper Conran e Antony Price who made this radical act in 1990 yet.<sup>32</sup> As a final point, however, it should be clarified that the ‘digital fashion films’ listed above do not merely show a sequence of outfits worn by models in a given space but also make extensive use of the narrative potential of the cinematic medium, sometimes respecting the conventions of mainstream films, sometimes moving away from them through a more experimental approach.

From this point of view, the pandemic has only stimulated a change that was already underway. As can be seen from this overview, which does not claim exhaustive, in the flow of crossings and grafts, of direct and indirect exchanges between cinema and fashion, different ways of displaying seasonal collections have emerged, which have further evolved in the digital age. On the threshold of the new millennium, unprecedented possibilities have opened up — especially in quantitative terms — for the production and dissemination of technological solutions capable of mediatizing the fashion show. In these years, in fact, it also began to be live-streamed through the digital screens that surround us, which are now proliferating.<sup>33</sup> Although the boom in live-streaming fashion shows occurred around 2010, it is possible to trace some experiments in this direction from the late 1990s that drove this evolution.<sup>34</sup> There is no doubt that the presentation events of Burberry Fall/Winter 2010 or Spring/Summer 2014 women’s collections represented a watershed. While the first one involved the broadcasting of the fashion show in live 3D streaming and events organized simultaneously around the world,<sup>35</sup> the second one is noteworthy for the impressive media exposure both on the web (on 11 social media), the flagship stores, and a series of giant screens positioned outside, in strategic places in metropolises like New York or Hong

29. Gary Needham, “Digital Fashion Film,” in *Fashion Cultures Revisited: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 105.

30. Gary Needham, “Digital Fashion Film”, 107.

31. Miles Socha, “Seminal Fashion Moments: Helmut Lang’s Online Show in March 1998,” *WWD*, May 5, 2020. Available at: <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/first-online-fashion-show-ever-helmut-lang-lessons-1203626257/>. Accessed June 6, 2021.

32. Marketa Uhlířová, “100 Years of the Fashion Film”, 145.

33. Gary Needham, “Digital Fashion Film,” in *Fashion Cultures Revisited: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 103–111.

34. See: Caterina Lughì, “Le sfilate vanno online,” in *Oltre il CRM. La customer experience nell’era digitale. Strategie, best practices, scenari del settore moda e lusso*, ed. Michela Ornati, (Milano: Franco Angeli, Kindle Format, 2011)

35. Lughì.



Figure 1: Models walk the runway during Alexander McQueen Pret-a-Porter show as part of the Paris Womenswear Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2010 at Palais Omnisports de Bercy on October 6, 2009 in Paris, France. The show was created in collaboration with Nick Knight and broadcast live on the SHOWstudio website.  
© Victor Boyko/Getty Images

Kong.<sup>36</sup> However, it is necessary to move the first experiments in this direction back more than a decade. The first remarkable case, which can be considered a forerunner of this phenomenon, was the fashion show for the presentation of Krizia's Spring/Summer 2000 collection. Held on 29 September, on the occasion of the Milan Fashion Week, Mariuccia Mandelli proposed, for the first time in Europe, the live streaming of her show on *krizia.net* in collaboration with Kataweb, also showing the backstage of the show and involving the Japanese market; in fact, Japanese buyers were offered the possibility of placing orders even though they were not physically present. This experiment was repurposed over the following years: from Armani Privé's Spring/Summer 2007 fashion show, broadcasted live on SMG and Cingular mobiles, to Alexander McQueen's Spring/Summer 2009 show (Fig. 01), produced in collaboration with Nick Knight and broadcasted live on the SHOWstudio website, as well as Gucci live broadcasts over the decade, on the occasion of the opening of its flagship stores around the world. Lastly, a final noteworthy example is the fashion show for the presentation of Ermenegildo Zegna's Fall/Winter 2011 collection. Entitled *In the Moon for China*, the event included, alongside the models on the catwalk, the projection of the backstage onto a huge back-drop of the Great Wall of China, anticipating the experiments that in the following decades often undermined or altered the space-time dimension. In the same years, fashion shows began to forge a close relationship with social media. Beginning with Dolce and Gabbana's show of September 2009 that featured fashion bloggers in the front row and the Burberry show for the Spring/Summer 2014 collection mentioned above, as Rocamora noted, "social media have become a staple of the shows, events increasingly geared at bringing the public in."<sup>37</sup> Their spread, in synergy with the smartphone screen, has favoured the democratisation of access to the fashion show, which has begun to 'travel' through the Internet rhizome until it becomes ubiquitous itself: either shown 'as is' delayed as well as live; or substituted by 'digital fashion films' which have taken its place in fulfilling the function of displaying collections, although often lowering them into a narrative universe; or presented in hybrid versions which we are going to illustrate in the following sections, as a result of attempts to adapt to the limitations of the pandemic context. Moreover, the spread of these points of junction and contact, as screens can be considered today, helped amplify and complete the redefinition of the *hic et nunc* that is peculiar to live shows and, consequently, also to the fashion shows. This redefinition had already begun in the early years of the massification of the Internet and the personal computer (which made live streaming of fashion shows feasible). It was taken to a new stage by the experimentation of digital liveness on various levels, which has been carried out in recent years and will definitively be normalised in 2020. As Rosie Findlay pointed out, "in dispersing the event and extending it to a broader audience, media coverage effectively gives the AFW shows a second life — they live beyond their liveness through their mediated transmission."<sup>38</sup> Finally, this proliferation has created the conditions for reducing the information asymmetry between brand and consumer,<sup>39</sup> or, as Nathalie Khan argued, for the metamorphosis of the latter into a spectator.<sup>40</sup>

In this context images of fashion are not simply a vehicle of consumption relying on the discourse of commodity fetishism, as is the case with fashion advertising. Instead one could argue that fashion film aims to break down boundaries between consumption and representation, by relying on cinematic language.<sup>41</sup>

From this perspective, the factors that have driven the changes made evident by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic are multiple and interconnected: from the advent of the Internet to the so-called Dig-

36. See: Rachel Strugatz, "Burberry's Spring Show Goes Global," *WWD*, September 17, 2013. Available at: <http://www.wwd.com/media-news/digital/burberrys-spring-show-goes-global-7160355/print-preview/>. Accessed June 12, 2021.

37. Agnès Rocamora, "Mediatization and Digital Media in the Fashion Field," *The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, (2016): 5.

38. Rosie Findlay, "Things to Be Seen": Spectacle and the performance of Brand in Contemporary," *About Performance*, no. 14-15 (2017): 115.

39. Michela Ornati (ed.), *Oltre il CRM. La customer experience nell'era digitale. Strategie, best practices, scenari del settore moda e lusso* (Milano: Franco Angeli, Kindle format, 2011), 1321-1322.

40. See: Nathalie Khan, "Cutting the Fashion Body: Why the Fashion Image Is No Longer Still," *Fashion Theory*. Vol. 16 n. 2 (2015): 235-49.

41. Khan, 235-49.

ital Turn, from the rapid diffusion of both desktop and portable computers to the widespread use of smartphones with integrated cameras and touch screens to the explosion of social networking platforms and blogs. Summarising the evolution of the relationship between fashion shows and the media since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to identify three different stages, respectively determined by the changes taking place in the technological sphere: 1) 1999–2009: the Internet, together with the “Digital Turn” and the widespread diffusion of personal computers, encouraged the first experiments with live streaming, together with the first circulation, outside niche contexts, of “narrative videos” to replace the fashion show; 2) 2009/10–2020: the increasing proliferation of social media together with the widespread use of smartphones and, therefore, of screens that have now become ubiquitous, has encouraged the live streaming boom as well as the dissemination of video content; 3) 2020: the crisis caused by the pandemic has accelerated the process of normalising the experiments carried out in the previous phases, taking full advantage of all the features offered by technology. Experiments which will be reviewed in the following sections and which take the parade to a new level of innovation or, better still, transform it into a multilayered communication channel.

## Digital Acceleration of Fashion Communication: From a Necessity to an Opportunity for Experimentation and Creativity

The year 2020 also represented a watershed for fashion, between a *before* that is consolidated, reassuring, manageable. An *after* that is uncertain, unstable, constantly evolving, not only from the point of view of design, creative, production and sales methods but also in terms of the sphere of the communication and the relationship with the consumers of the various brands.

For years now, the whole fashion system has defined communication in the digital sphere as one of the most effective ways of interacting between brands and consumers, often overcoming traditional fashion media and journalists’ intermediation. With 2020, communication has had to speed up, not only in terms of the quantity of content to be conveyed but, above all, in terms of quality, variety, and the search for more innovative and immersive forms of communication. The social distancing imposed by the pandemic has thus defined a new communicative “normality”, which takes on ever-changing forms that do not necessarily replace the previous modes but which sublimate and amplify what can be considered the traditional communicative tools of fashion.

The fashion show, as well as the presentation of the collections, are traditionally the core of fashion communication — the endpoint of the creative process and, at the same time, the starting point for communication and sales strategies — and in this context, they become a real field of experimentation. Since January 2020, fashion weeks, and above all their contents, have been rethought, reworked, redesigned, reassembled, in different forms and, in some cases, totally innovative — if not absolutely, at least for the fashion system — in other cases, recovering unexpected methods and tools that were thought to be outdated and belonging to history. Past, present and future are thus mixed within a process of experimentation, which has seen the various fashion brands and institutions linked to fashion weeks redefine themselves, and redefine their relationship with the market.

In this panorama, and in less than a year, there has been a proliferation of events, more or less isolated, which have defined a new and multi-faceted abacus of communication tools in the hands of fashion creatives. If, until 2020, there were traditionally two modes of presentation consolidated by the system (fashion shows and look-books), with the social distancing imposed by Covid-19, after the first shock, we have witnessed an unprecedented multiplicity of tools and modes for presenting the fashion world and its products.

Although the first response was the more reassuring one of shifting all, or most, of the traditional fashion show presentation methods to the photographic production of look-books — more or less implemented also in the form of short fashion films —, it is only with the second half of the year that a renewed desire to challenge oneself by exploiting the most important and most consolidated resource of the sector becomes central: creativity. Although the drop in sales could not be contained to any great extent, what could and should be contained was the loss of interest and public involvement and customers.

The fashion capitals and their Weeks are expanding in time and space, nominally linked to a physical place, but in fact, come to life on the net. The *here* and *now* of the official calendar still represent the boundaries within which the fashion system moves, a system which, however, at the same time, spreads in space and time, going beyond temporal and geographical boundaries, thus defining an extended calendar and space, which in a certain sense becomes truly global.

The instant understood as the event's time is extended, and precise calendars, times, places — or rather sites or links — are being defined that welcome visitors in different forms and ways, which are no less prestigious. Fashion shows are consolidating as both in-person and remote events, becoming increasingly physical and digital, also “extending the ‘spatial and temporal parameters’ of the fashion show, to accessible instant consumption and social mediatization.”<sup>42</sup> Each event is designed to be experienced primarily, if not exclusively, through social channels. The *mediatization* of fashion has already stimulated brands to conceive communication, and the production of content, in the format of 1080x1920 pixels (or vice versa, depending on the content), i.e. the proportion of the screen of our devices. Everything, in this sense, is now designed to be enjoyed within the social media interface that allows not only to participate but above all to interact and finalize a purchase.

Thus digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat (Burberry previewed their Spring-Summer 2016 collection there) and the more recent Periscope (a live video streaming extension of Twitter) have become legitimate spaces of diffusion of the collections. In this context, the shows are increasingly designed with social media in mind; they have become mediatized events, events produced and staged to be consumed online, on a digital screen. In July 2013, for instance, fashion show producer Alexandre de Bétak explains that the internet ‘has totally changed how we frame what we show, not just visually but also in time. ... even the way I direct the models is affected by where some of the cameras for the webcast are placed’ ... Shows are full of ‘made-for-Instagram moments’, as the Business of Fashion put it, end of the shows ‘tableaus’ having become common ready-to-be-Instagrammed stagings.<sup>43</sup>

From this point of view, it is interesting to consider what has happened over the last year, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, and how the fashion show system has changed and expanded, redefining itself as a method that is no longer stable but constantly evolving and experimenting. This does not only involve the architectural and performance spheres — which are still valid and highly appealing from the point of view of social media — but also extends to new forms of hybrid narration, in which cinema, performing art, digital art and the creation of editorial content combine in different ways to generate new forms of presentation of the collections.

During the last year, a study was carried out to map the different ways of presenting the collections, which nowadays is reductive and partly anachronistic to classify as fashion weeks.

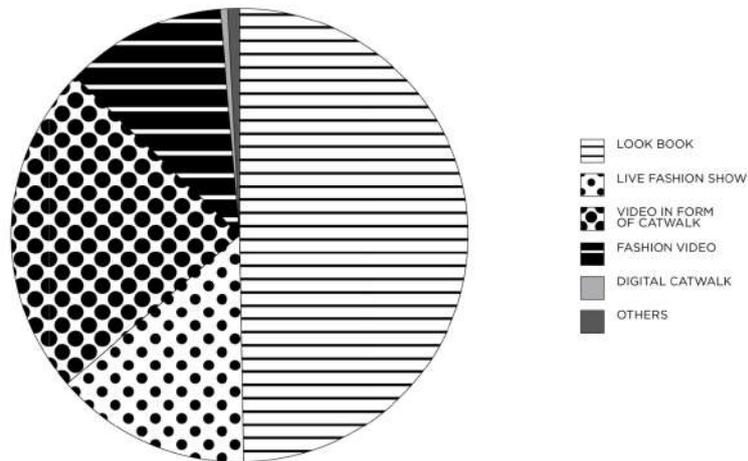
The study considered a total of 8 seasons (Couture Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021, the women's ready-to-wear collections Resort 2021, Pre-Fall 2021, Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021, as well as the men's collections Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021), 270 brands (both women's and men's fashion) and a total of 690 presentations (Fig. 02). The analysis was structured by considering the different fashion weeks communicated through “Vogue Runway”, which with its different editions, covers both consolidated markets and brands of the fashion system and those gravitating outside the traditional circuits and emerging realities. This analysis has resulted in an extraordinarily vast and varied landscape with the most diversified modes and forms of presentation, thus creating a renewed vocabulary of fashion communication, poised between presence and absence (of public and brands), between physical and digital space, between direct and deferred, between tradition and innovation.

42. Tiziana Ferrero-Regis and Marissa Lindquist (eds.), *Staging Fashion: The Fashion Show and Its Spaces* (London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2020)

43. Rocamora, “Mediatization and Digital Media in the Fashion Field”, 6.

**SYNTHESIS OF THE ANALYSIS OF THE MODALITIES OF PRESENTATION CARRIED OUT DURING THE PERIOD OF THE PANDEMIC ON A TOTAL OF 690 EVENTS**

222 WOMEN'S COLLECTIONS S/S 2021, 222 WOMEN'S COLLECTIONS F/W 2021 AND 119 RESORT 2021  
 18 COUTURE COLLECTIONS FALL 2021 AND 18 COUTURE COLLECTIONS SUMMER 2021  
 9 MEN'S COLLECTIONS S/S 2021 AND 82 MEN'S COLLECTIONS F/W 2021



**EVOLUTION OF THE MODALITIES OF PRESENTING A FASHION COLLECTION.**

COMPARISON BETWEEN A MAIN PRE-PANDEMIC SEASON AND THE S/S 2021 AND FW 2021 SEASONS

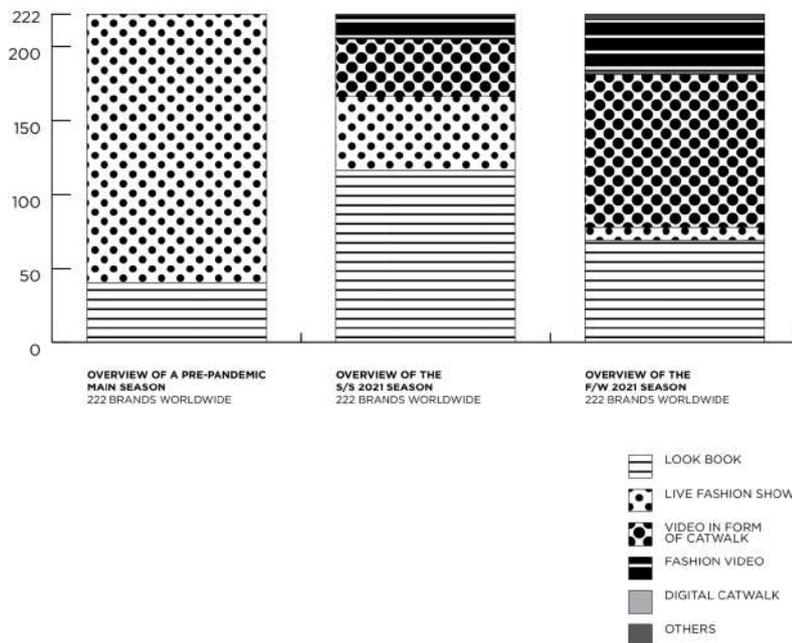


Figure 2: Visual overview of the mapping carried out on a total of 690 presentations (in the period from July 2020 to February 2021) which shows how the panorama of collection presentation methods has expanded and how the fashion show form, whether live or as a video in the form of a fashion show, is still a valid and widely used tool.

Visualisation by the authors

## The Catwalks Will Never Die[?]

In a sense, rethink, resist and adapt were the keywords that defined the reorganization and, in a sense, the questioning of the catwalk and collection presentation system. At the same time, the pandemic necessarily stimulated debate on the value and relevance of the catwalk system. Many actions firmly intended to express signs of resistance and resilience to the contingent situation.

An immediate response came through digital channels with statements and declarations of intent from most of the fashion industry players. They began to question the system as a whole. The Open Letter to the Fashion Industry petition launched online via [forumletter.org](https://forumletter.org) by Dries Van Noten, as well as Alessandro Michele's *Note dal Silenzio* [Notes from the Silence], typewritten posts that appeared on Gucci's Instagram channel during the tightest lockdown, represent actions that draw attention to the need to rethink the entire system from the point of view of product quality and quantity: "current environment although challenging, presents an opportunity for a fundamental and welcome change that will simplify our businesses, making them more environmentally and socially sustainable and ultimately align them more closely with customers' needs."<sup>44</sup> Statements that go in the direction of reconsidering the system and the structure of the collections, not just from the point of view of the method, but somewhat of the quantity of the products, collections and seasons themselves, hoping for new methods of production and communication processes no longer linked to the market, but creativity.



Figure 3: Models walk the runway at the Dior Cruise 2021 fashion show on July 22, 2020 in Lecce. It was one of the first live events to take place after the start of the pandemic and was strongly supported by Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pietro Beccari (at the helm of Dior) as a demonstration of the resistance and resilience of the fashion system, both in terms of production and communication. © Stefania D'Alessandro/WireImage

In contrast, many brands interpret the need to be physically present as a positive sign of resistance, resilience and support for the manufacturing world: this is the direction taken by Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pietro Beccari (at the helm of Dior), who have not given up on the fashion show as a topical moment in the system: "For us, fashion is also emotion, and nothing is more emotional than a fashion show.

44. For further investigation → see <https://forumletter.org/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.



Figure 4: A model walks the runway at the Marco Rambaldi fashion show during the Milan Women's Fashion Week on September 25, 2020 in Milan. In order to allow for the live presence of the public, it has become normal practice to set up fashion shows in urban spaces that allow not only greater distance but also greater sharing of the event between insiders and outsiders. © Pietro D'Aprano/Getty Images

The second reason why we have decided to resume the project [the live fashion show in Lecce in July 2020] is that we want to give a sign of hope to the whole world and indicate a reason for rebirth.<sup>45</sup> Such signals are conveyed by the Cruise 2021 collection fashion show, which takes place open-air (in the cathedral square in Lecce) and with guests in attendance (Fig. 03). Open spaces, be they urban or rural, are increasingly becoming ideal locations to guarantee the proper distance without renouncing the event's emotion. Thus the number of open-air fashion shows designed to be open to an audience in presence, like live performance events to be communicated through digital means, increases.

The Seine thus becomes a long water catwalk on which Balmain, during Paris Haute Couture Week Fall/Winter 2021, organizes an event/show/exhibition/concert called *Balmain's Sur Seine*: a cruise on the Seine, on a boat that hosted the French singer Yseult, a dance performance, and the fashion show/exhibition with models wearing pieces from the Balmain archive (from Pierre Balmain to Erik Mortensen, Oscar de la Renta and, of course, Olivier Rousteing). An event open to the city in primis but has renewed the spotlight of digital users on Paris Fashion Week. Dior and Balmain were echoed by Chloé, who showed on the Palais de Tokyo stairs for the Spring/Summer 2021 collection, and for the Fall/Winter 2021, under the new creative direction of Gabriela Hearst, showed her creations in the empty streets of Saint-Germain-des-Prés; or Rick Owens, who for the Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021 collections opted for the Venice Lido to show off his creations with an increasingly apocalyptic aesthetic; or like two insta-brands<sup>46</sup>: the French designer Jacquemus, whose Spring/Summer 2021 collection was presented on a 600-metre-long catwalk in a wheat field, where the seats for the guests (100 in total) were placed at a distance and isolated from each other, and the Italian designer Marco Rambaldi, whose Spring/Summer 2021 collection was presented in the streets of Milan's Porta Venezia district (Fig. 04).

With the pandemic, new ways have been designed to allow the public to participate in the events, which although "extended", thanks to the inclusiveness of social media, are still subdivided between the exclusivity of the invitation in person and the world of followers: the ritual of the paper invitation, personal and direct, has not lost importance, indeed in an era of forced digitalization, it has assumed even more importance, but also the presence (in any form) of the official guests becomes fundamental: the front rows thus take on a new and increasingly important meaning. The presence (even digital) is even more exhibited, so at Miu Miu during the Spring/Summer 2021 fashion show, the few and selected guests have become an integral part of the set design; the space designed by OMA includes maxi screens in the walls through which the guests observe, as if they were in the front row, the collection and at the same time are seen by the public connected online as well as becoming an integral part of the set design.

Monitors represent a new form of presence, becoming in the Balmain Spring/Summer 2021 fashion show the counterpart to the real audience: the set of the fashion show was designed as an arena divided into two wings, one with the audience in attendance, counterbalanced by rows of monitors for the remote guests (Fig. 05). In the Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2021 fashion show set up inside the Samaritaine department store in Paris, real and digital guests alternated: seats for guests in attendance and columns holding smartphones for guests connected from home. Connected guests and followers on social media also had a different experience from the on-site guests. Space, in fact, was covered with green screens that made the physical space a metaphysical green environment and instead made the space in the digital a multimedia experience with the models and viewers immersed in the cinematic world of scenes from Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*. But digital is not the only solution to this distancing. For the Fall/Winter 2021 collection, Coperni created a drive-in where guests in cars watch the show and at the same time create the setting for the event: the models walk down the runway in an unreal space, designed by the rhythm of the parked cars, which illuminate the models' movements and the show with their headlights (Fig. 06). Thus, the catwalks regain their centrality, thanks to digital communication, reaffirming their effectiveness and expanding their form. The catwalks are implemented with deferred

45. Michele Ciavarella, "Dior: La moda riparte dalla Cruise a Lecce," *Corriere della Sera — Style Magazine*, June 22, 2020, <https://style.corriere.it/moda/dior-la-moda-riparte-dalla-cruise-lecce/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.

46. Alexander Fury, "Jacquemus — fashion's favourite Insta-brand," *Financial Times*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/8f62f38a-a7ac-11e9-90e9-fc4b9d9528b4>. Accessed March 30, 2021.

experiences from the live experience but keep all the formal and performance archetypes of the catwalk concept alive. In each form the shows preserve their essence of being ‘those moments when there is a sense that nothing after ... will ever be the same’.<sup>47</sup>

## Fashion Shows Are Dead, Long Live Fashion Shows [?]

*Faux show, virtual show, défilé or runway experience* are some of the neologisms that have been created over the last year, new words defining new hybrid forms of fashion shows. Where the restrictions of the pandemic have allowed it, the form of the live show has been maintained, with or without guests present, while where restrictions have not allowed it — or where brands, for security reasons, have not considered it effective — new forms of presentation have been opted for, which we could define as a crasis between fashion show and fashion film, or even a *runway experience*.

Traditional and innovative presentation types are included in the various fashion weeks’ official calendars but actually, take place elsewhere and at different times. Thus Valentino remains officially in the Paris Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2021 week, but shows in the Sala Grande of the Galleria Colonna in Rome, or such as Miu Miu, which, also officially in the Paris Fashion Week calendar, shows in Cortina with a fashion show en Plein air, creating a product halfway between a traditional fashion show and a short film.

Hybrid fashion shows that — while maintaining the traditional form of the more or less linear catwalk on which models walk — borrow the typical languages of cinema and video clips, in which the spectacular nature of the location and filming is combined with a variety of points of view, which tell the story of the garments both as a whole and in detail, emphasizing the models’ faces as well as their expressions. The fashion shows start in the backstage area. In a subjective shot, a cameraman follows the model as she enters the “arena”: the fashion show becomes a mash-up of “institutional” moments and performance moments. This action is only possible with film editing. This “new mobility,”<sup>48</sup> which fashion communication borrows from the language of cinema, fulfils the public’s desire to bring objects — and events — “closer spatially and humanly.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the Balmain Fall/Winter 2021 fashion show is staged in Charles de Gaulle airport’s hangar.<sup>50</sup> The show takes place “at the same time” in four different locations, some real, like the wings of the Air France 777, the landing pad, the interior of the hangar, others digital, like the moon in the opening scene where Olivier Rousteing (artistic director of the fashion house) controls everything, or the luminous catwalk suspended in space, the final part of the journey of “BAL 021”. A video fashion show that, while following a script, with syncopated editing and direction by Valentin Petit, does not lose the catwalk concept, which adapts and changes according to the different parts of the collection. The video-shows introduce a further new element: the credits. In streaming fashion shows, the names of the directors, editors, DJs, digital artists and stylists were rarely declared at the end of the performance. In this new hybrid form, the narrative and presentation methods typical of cinematography are added, not only as a shooting or editing language, but also as a formal element, so in addition to the anticipation for the new collection, for the fashion show location and the performance, there is also the expectation for the new narrative and storytelling that will be presented.

In Chanel’s Fall/Winter 2021 show, the change of photography, between black and white and colour, underlines the two narrative and location themes, from the dichromatic and metaphysical exterior of the

47. John Seabrook, “A Samurai in Paris: Suzy Menkes,” *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2001. Available on line: <http://www.johnseabrook.com/a-samurai-in-paris/>. Accessed January 17, 2021.

48. Lev Manovich, *Il linguaggio dei nuovi media* (Milano: Edizioni Olivares, 2002), 219.

49. Walter Benjamin, *L’opera d’arte nell’epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica. Arte e società di massa* (Torino: Einaudi, 1991 [1966])

50. This type of location in itself is not new — it has already been used by various fashion brands such as Chanel, which in 2015 recreates the lobby of an airport in the Grand Palais, or Armani, which in 2018 showed in a hangar at Milan’s Linate airport — but here it is used, in a way, to its full potential.



Figure 5: The Balmain fashion show during Paris Women's Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2021 on September 30, 2020 in Paris, France. The guests were present in a hybrid form, some in person, others connected online, but attending the fashion show thanks to the digital seating set up scenographically as rows of monitors. The meaning of the front row is thus preserved even in times of social distancing. © Estrop/Getty Images



Figure 6: Models walk the runway during the Coperni show as part of the Paris Fashion Week Womenswear Fall/Winter 2021/2022 on March 04, 2021 in Paris, France. In a time of social distancing and to allow the live presence of guests, the set of the fashion show takes its form thanks to a drive-in in which the cars that host (safely) the guests become at the same time a safe place and an intrinsic element of the scenography. © Francois Durand/Getty Images

rue Princesse to the colourful intimacy of the Chez Castel nightclub in whose typically Parisian interior the models walk as if they were inside Maison's atelier on the rue Chambon.

The locations across the world, which in the pre-Covid period were used mainly for the presentation of pre-collections,<sup>51</sup> now take on a new meaning thanks also to the spectacular nature of the filming, which allows the use of ever more extensive and more scenic spaces, without the problem of visibility of the models by the public, which is absent. Celine (without the accent as per the wishes of Hedi Slimane at the helm of the brand since 2018) shows the Fall/Winter 2021 men's collection on the balustraded terraces of Chambord Castle, the Spring/Summer 2020 collection on the athletics track of the Louis II Stadium in Monaco and the Spring/Summer 2020 men's collection on the race track of the Paul Ricard circuit in the south of France. The absence of an audience becomes a creative stimulus for Demna Gvasalia, at the helm of Balenciaga since 2015, who borrows from gaming the language of the aesthetics of his collections and the methods and setting of the presentations. The Georgian-born designer takes his collections onto digital platforms, creating a real game called *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* for Fall/Winter 2021, and then showing real models in a world of digital avatars, the only spectators who, in a period of social distancing, can "really" take part in a physical event: the fashion show thus truly takes on a phygital form. Digital has rarely been used to its full potential to create environments, characters, audiences and products. In particular, emerging brands have used 100% digital communication approaches to present their collections. Many of these brands have defined these strategies as totally digital presentations, partly due to economic necessity (optimising sample production costs) and partly because of their proximity to a language and approach to communication and its digital virality, familiar to generations from Z onwards. And so, for example, Hanifa, a fashion designer based in Congo, debuted on 22 May 2020 with a completely virtual fashion show presented via her Instagram channel. Digital is the protagonist here. The models were not there. Instead, the clothes moved in a neutral space, following the movements of the human body, which could only be perceived thanks to the garments whose fabrics drew the models' silhouettes.

If, on the one hand, Hanifa defines the digital fashion show as an exclusive communication tool to be conveyed through social media, on the other hand, Simone Rizzo and Loris Messina, who founded their brand Sunnei in 2014, during the Italian lockdown, combined collection design, distribution strategies, sustainable production methods and digital communication into a single action and interface. The 'Canvas' project, presented in July 2020, was conceived as an online platform, which using 3D modelling tools and personalization technologies, creates a multifunctional virtual environment for designing, presenting, promoting, personalizing and communicating the collection: a tool within which digital avatars wear the pieces of the collection in a sort of immaterial sample collection/showroom, within which retailers could digitally modify the shape, fit and materials of a series of pieces from the collection itself. A platform that mixed the real and virtual levels of the creative and production phases was also used as a promotional tool. During the men's fashion week in July 2020, the tool's avatars staged a fashion show choreographed to the rhythm of the *Macarena*, a performance expressed in short videos broadcast both on the brand's official channels and on giant billboards in the streets of Milan.

In this 100% digital environment, only a few have yet moved, including brands such as GCDS, Iceberg and Philipp Plein, which for the presentation of the Spring/Summer 2020 collection, the first, and the Fall/Winter 2021 the other two, created virtual events in which digital and non-digital avatars moved within worlds created in 3D graphics. While these digital actions have implemented public awareness of new or emerging brands, these actions should be read as a form of communication and not as displaying a collection. As Giuliano Calza himself (born in 1989, who together with his brother Giordano founded GCDS in 2015) underlined: however, the avatar show received more than one and a half million views (which for an emerging brand are significant numbers), "when you are on the runway, and you are sitting down you see exactly how a dress moves, that zip how much it shines, that is the real emotion

51. For further investigation → see Valeria Iannilli and Vittorio Linfante, "Nuovi percorsi della moda tra globale e locale. Dai grandi centri alla disseminazione culturale del fashion system," *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol. 9 n. 2 (December 2019): 141-65, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/9966>.

of the catwalk.”<sup>52</sup> Paradoxically, in totally digital visualisations, the clothes disappear, in a certain sense absorbed by the sense of wonder generated by the accuracy and realistic details produced by the software.

In this perspective, it is interesting to point out how the use of digital communication channels has, on the other hand, stimulated the revival of modes and types of presentations that are outdated but which have nevertheless emerged as extremely contemporary, as well as being appreciated by digital users: tools such as Pandora or Théâtre de la Mode thus define the narrations for Dior and Moschino. For the Spring/Summer 2020 Haute Couture collection, Maria Grazia Chiuri commissioned Matteo Garrone to make a short film in which two concierges move through an honorific world, with Pre-Raphaelite references, presenting scale models of the collection to nymph-clients carried in a trunk that recalled the historic atelier at 30 Avenue Montaigne. For Moschino’s Spring/Summer 2021 collection, Jeremy Scott staged a real theatre, a video presented directly by the American-born designer according to the Milan Fashion Week calendar, a fashion show featuring guests (including Anna Wintour and Anna Dello Russo) and models in puppet form. A Moschino-style Théâtre de la Mode with the traditional setting of the ateliers of the 1950s: a retro setting, which also returns in the presentation of Moschino’s Fall/Winter 2021 collection. In this case, however, the models and the location are real and are reminiscent (in the colours, the photography, the looks) of the world of Cukor and his *Women* who moved among the haute couture ateliers (Fig. 07). If Dior and Moschino reinterpret traditional modes of presentation, J.W. Anderson takes up the paper’s physicality.

The Digital for the Irish designer becomes a natural communication channel, in which the online channel must not monopolize or somewhat affect the language of the content. And so the collections designed and presented during the pandemic became more physical than the clothes themselves. They became boxes — real show-in-a-boxes — containing a multiform quantity of objects: fabric samples, the paper pattern (which can also be downloaded, if necessary, online) of one of the main pieces to be able to recreate the garment at home, as well as images of the collection’s looks. A box that also becomes the location for a fashion show with a set to assemble and a cardboard record player to play the event’s soundtrack (Fig. 08). If on the one hand, to paraphrase The Buggles, it was thought that *Digital Killed the Catwalk Star*, in this case, as in music, the exact opposite has come true; on the contrary, Digital has helped to strengthen and indeed made it possible to expand the forms and contents of fashion communication. It is precisely in the contents that fashion defines a new approach in the digital communication fields. It defines strategies that do not end with the fashion show but instead create an authentic and proper schedule with precise programming. Thus Virgil Abloh created an Imaginary TV (<https://imaginary-tv.off---white.com/>), a platform that offers an actual content schedule, which also includes Off-White’s collections (Fig. 09). Imaginary TV represents a digital channel to produce and promote content capable of better defining and narrating the brand’s identity. “With the growing economic impact of social media, fashion brands have morphed from design houses into more hybrid studios that produce both material products and digital content,”<sup>53</sup> not only incorporating the production of videos into their communication strategies but also defining themselves as real 360° content houses: from podcasts to gaming, from tutorials to conferences to amplify brand identity in different forms. And so, the narrative of the brand’s identity for Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons (co-directors of Prada from 2020) is conveyed through debates, interviews and exchanges of ideas that are broadcast immediately after the fashion show, in the form of talk shows (in digital-television format), during which the two creatives share their points of view with students, journalists and professionals from various sectors. Until recently, the punctuality of time and space of fashion shows defined a unique feature of the event. In contemporary times, the concept is extended into a before, during and after, which, thanks to Digital, no longer require a spatial unity. Thanks to digital, local and global events are defined, not only because they are spread globally through communication channels but also because they take place in continuity with each other but in different time zones. According to this approach, Hermès has created a live presentation for the Fall/Winter 2021 collection in three acts and three different locations:

52. Anna Dello Russo’s interview with Giuliano Calza during a live broadcast on the Italian fashion editor’s Instagram channel on May 20, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CPGEycyI1GI/>. Accessed June 4, 2021.

53. Nick Rees-Roberts, “After fashion film: social video and brand content in the influencer economy,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol 19.3: 407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412920964>.

New York (Park Avenue Armory), Paris (Garde Républicaine) and Shanghai (Maison Hermès). A live triptych composed of two ballets and a fashion show, which begins at 8.31 am in New York (2.31 pm in Paris and 9.31 pm in Shanghai) with a prologue choreographed by Madeline Hollander. After seven minutes of performance, the direction moves to Paris, where the actual fashion show comes to life. It continues after eight minutes in Shanghai, concluding the event with a choreography by Gu Jiani.



Figure 7: A model poses in the backstage at the Moschino Fashion Show during the Milan Fashion Week Fall/Winter 2021/2022 on February 25, 2021 in Milan, Italy. The show took the form of a fashion film that, recalling Cukor's *Women*, re-enacted the glamour of the haute couture ateliers of the 1950s. © Handout//Moschino/Getty Images



Figure 8: The first Show-in-a-Box designed by J.W. Anderson for Loewe. A box containing a multiform quantity of objects: fabric samples, the paper pattern (which can also be downloaded, if necessary, online) of one of the main pieces to be able to recreate the garment at home, as well as images of the collection's looks. A box that also becomes the location for a fashion show with a set to assemble and a cardboard record player to play the event's soundtrack. © Loewe



## Conclusions

The analysis carried out reveals the wide range of presentation methods implemented to show and promote the new collection. In this context, fashion shows become also a design field for defining innovative communication tools and strategies. The communication of live fashion shows, already reverberated and amplified through social media, also expands in languages and presentation methods. Fashion shows thus become more and more a platform for experimenting with new, extraordinarily digital and technological languages and recovering “old style” presentation methods and representations such as the Pandora, or the little theatre and the showroom defilé. The digital acceleration, forced by the pandemic, has thus codified the paradigm of the “communicational continuum,”<sup>54</sup> thus defining new approaches in building transmedia narratives “to talk about the brand beyond the runway presentation and advertising campaigns.”<sup>55</sup> Fashion, which in a certain sense, had already understood the potential of what Toffler<sup>56</sup> called ‘the third wave’ of technology — the era of information, space, electronics and the global village — and in the contemporary is riding, with increasing open-mindedness, the fourth wave of technology, that of information, communication, mobile, virtual communities<sup>57</sup> and thus becomes a driving force. A communicatively digital fashion that, however, does not renounce the physicality of bodies in motion, the spectacle of the event through the use of real spaces, often inaccessible, the presence (albeit at a distance) of the public, the need for reality (albeit conveyed through digital devices) that represents the essence of fashion.

Digital, forced by Covid-19, has increasingly allowed the possibility of implementing new multilayered forms of presentation of the collections, which, while not renouncing the physical form, create fashion shows in different forms, modes, times and places. In a context, such as the present one, in which the digital contributes to saturate, and in some cases to flatten, communication, the different forms that the fashion show has taken in the last year of pandemic define a more and more interesting field to investigate, especially given new normality (hopefully more and more imminent) during which it will be possible to understand how much the current digital acceleration is lasting or short-term.

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54. Valérie Jeanne-Perrier, *Internet a Aussi Change la Mode — Quand Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, YouTube, Vine, Periscope, Tumbler & Cie S'affichent Sur le Devant Des Podiums* (Annecy Le Vieux: Editions Kawa, 2016), 26.
  55. Silvano Mendes, “The Instagrammability of the Runway: Architecture, Scenography, and the Spatial Turn in Fashion Communications,” *Fashion Theory* Vol. 25, 2021 – Issue 3: 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1629758>.
  56. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970)
  57. Adam Gazzaley, and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (Cambridge and London: The MIT press, 2016)

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# Phygital Retailing in Fashion. Experiences, Opportunities and Innovation Trajectories

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## Abstract

The digital and technological transformation, whose effects have profoundly influenced the last two decades, and which has recently undergone a sudden acceleration, changed how fashion brands produce, sell and communicate and also how individuals come into contact with fashion, experience, share, and “consume” it. Within this framework, fashion has progressively embraced and incorporated technologies in the retail system opening up to new opportunities in terms of communication and distribution strategies, pushing towards an increased integration between physical and digital systems. In the light of current consumer dynamics, the omnichannel approach is evolving into a phygital one, with the progressive merging of the material and digital dimensions. Retail spaces are undergoing a process of proliferation and integration of channels, multiplication of messages and narratives, increase of services resulting in a new “augmented” scenario. Assuming a design perspective, the paper aims to investigate the nature and the impact of digital transformation in fashion retailing, with a focus on in-store technologies and their relationship with spaces and the customer journey, identifying, starting from the most recent fashion retail concepts, some possible scenarios and innovation trajectories.

**Keywords:** Fashion Retailing; Consumption Scenarios; Omnichannel; Phygital; Design Innovation Trajectories.

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## Introduction

A transformation process characterizes the current competitive context of fashion retail due to a combined effect of social, technological, economic, and cultural processes. The most evident scenarios are the new consumption behaviors,<sup>1</sup> the acceleration of the digitalization of processes,<sup>2</sup> a changing relationship between brand and consumers,<sup>3</sup> between product and consumer,<sup>4</sup> and the emergence of fragmentation and integration of sales channels.<sup>5</sup>

The COVID19 pandemic has accelerated the trends already well underway, with shopping shifting to digital channels. In the eight months of the closure of physical stores, e-commerce's share of fashion sales nearly doubled from 16% to 29% globally, jumping forward equal to six years of growth.<sup>6</sup> E-commerce players, such as Asos, Farfetch Uk, Revolve, and Zalando, have consistently outperformed in 2020. By August, such digital-first players were trading 35 percent higher, on average, than they did in December 2019.<sup>7</sup>

The digital transformation phenomenon has an irreversible impact on the retail sector, drastically transforming its business models,<sup>8</sup> the purchasing process and the development of new sales formats and concepts,<sup>9</sup> increasingly designed leveraging data and analytics to predict footfall, manage assortments and built personalized offerings.<sup>10</sup>

Significant changes in consumer behavior,<sup>11</sup> increasingly oriented towards digital channels and social media, push retailers to rethink their approach to the customer<sup>12</sup> and to invest in design-driven

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6. BOF and McKinsey, "The State of Fashion 2021", 2021 <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Industries/Retail/Our%20Insights/State%20of%20fashion/2021/The-State-of-Fashion-2021-vF.pdf>.
7. BOF, and McKinsey, "The State of Fashion 2021", 2021.
8. Wojciech Piotrowicz and Richard Cuthbertson, "Introduction to the Special Issue Information Technology in Retail: Toward Omnichannel Retailing". *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 18(4) (December 2014): 5-16.
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projects:<sup>13</sup> consumer-centric<sup>14</sup> and oriented to create an integrated and powered shopping experience from technology. This phenomenon leads to continuous innovation processes.

Design becomes a necessary discipline precisely because of its ability to give meaning to that system of production, which today shows its most immaterial part.<sup>15</sup> Design-driven innovation is an incremental innovation, which introduces an extensive network of meanings into the market not only in the form of objects, but also in the form of discourses, expressions, stories, said and written words, visual images, signs, metaphors and places. Design renews the sense of things, it produces new meanings, changes traditions and mentalities. It interprets and adopts the representations of a society and its imagery and, through processes of material and immaterial innovation, produces new ones.<sup>16</sup>

Technological advances offer new and different accessibility to products and services, generating strong strategic and meaningful implications on the format and concept of the physical store.<sup>17</sup> From a business perspective, the increase in information from new digital interactions with customers drives the change. Understanding the customers' buying journeys, capturing and analyzing information drives the purchasing decisions and further alters the business models to align the key sources and competitive strategies with the new channel and supply chain configuration.<sup>18</sup>

The transition from a multi-channel retail process, in which consumers interface with different channels under the same brand but separate from each other, to an omnichannel one, in which the channels are integrated, results in a Seamless Customer Experience. Consumers move seamlessly between the physical and digital touchpoints within a single transaction process and a coherent brand narrative experience.

The rapid diffusion of new technologies such as smartphones, apps, social networks, and the growing importance of in-store technological solutions create new opportunities and challenges for retailers<sup>19</sup> and a new field of design experimentation.<sup>20</sup>

The customer experience is optimized through the synergic management of channels and technologies, favoring design processes capable of organizing, narrating, and objectifying the offer system.

Recent studies indicate how the omnichannel context involves interfacing with a multidimensional system in which it is necessary to consider a series of factors, such as brand familiarity, personalization, perceived value, and availability to technology as factors that influence an omnichannel experience. In a single purchase, consumers use a variety of channels, including social media and mobile apps: nearly 30% follow brands on social media, 75% research online before visiting a store, and 56% use a mobile device for research related to the shopping. Consumers who do online or mobile research are almost

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17. Alexey Krasnov Mikheev, et al., "The Interaction Model within Phygital Environment as an Implementation of the Open Innovation Concept". *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 7 (2) (April 2021): 114
18. Marco Savastano, Riccardo Barnabei and Francesco Ricotta, "Going Online While Purchasing Offline: an Explorative Analysis of Omnichannel Shopping Behaviour in Retail Settings". *Proceedings of International Marketing Trends Conference*. J. C. Andrani and U. Collesei, Venezia - Isola di San Servolo, January 21-23, 2016.
19. Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson, "Introduction", 2014.
20. Valeria M. Iannilli, Antonella V. Penati and Alessandra Spagnoli, "Re-Thinking the Design Role: Experimenting New Narrative & Rhetoric Design Methods", *The Design After - Proceedings of the Cumulus Conference 2019* Bogotà, Colombia. 438-448.

twice as likely to use mobile technology while shopping in the shop.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the interaction between multiple points of contact improves the overall customer experience.<sup>22</sup>

In this scenario, alongside digital transformation, we observe how 85% of retail sales still take place in the physical store,<sup>23</sup> underlining how the physical store would continue to play a vibrant role, an essential contact point for generating compelling brand experiences.

Creating an *optimal experience*<sup>24</sup> remains a central purpose for companies, especially with regard to “made in” goods.<sup>25</sup> Recognition of the centrality of the experiential value in building relationships between consumer and company guides the strategic choices of those digital-native brands (Warby Parker, Bonobo, Amazon, Glossier, etc.), shifting part of their strategies to the physical channel. The new “phygital” shop integrates the physical experience with the virtual one, providing an “augmented” experience.

In this context, many questions arise on the role and transformation of the physical retail space in the omnichannel experience<sup>26</sup> and a changed consumer scenario. And also, about how the store experience is transformed when it is enhanced by digital technologies<sup>27</sup> and how design can intervene in the process of “translating” an increasingly integrated and extended customer journey into a technologically equipped physical space.

This study explores the future of the physical store in a context in which all retail customers are now omnichannel and physical retail is called to a new resemantization.

The in-store experience<sup>28</sup> is now augmented by technology, and selling is not just about goods and services but includes participation and co-creation of functions, activities, responsibilities, and experiences.<sup>29</sup> Based on qualitative research conducted on case studies, the article aims to conduct exploratory research on the innovation trajectories of the physical shop in its transformation into phygital retail with a selection of emerging consumer scenarios.

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21. Deloitte, “The omnichannel opportunity: unlocking the power of the connected”, 2014 <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consumer-business/unlocking-the-power-of-the-connected-consumer.pdf>.
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  25. Valeria M. Iannilli, “Retailing Made in Italy: An Evolutionary Reading towards Emerging Paradigms”. *Fashion Practice. Fashion Made in Italy Special Issue*. p. 201-220, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (now Taylor and Francis), 2014.
  26. Alexander and Kent, “Change in Technology-Enabled”, 2020; Alexander and Blazquez Cano. “Store of the Future”, 2020.
  27. Francesca Bonetti and Perry Patsy, “A Review of Consumer-Facing Digital Technologies Across Different Types of Fashion Store Formats”. *Advanced Fashion Technology and Operations Management*, ed. Alessandra Vecchi 137–63. IGI Global, 2017.
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  29. Ulrich Beck, *I rischi della libertà. L'individuo nell'epoca della globalizzazione*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2001; C. K. Prahalad, and Ramaswamy Venkat. *The Future of Competition: Co-creating Unique Value with Customers*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, (2004a); C. K. Prahalad, and Ramaswamy Venkat. “Co-Creation Experiences: The Next Practice in Value Creation”, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(3) (2004b): 5-14; Lusch and Vargo. “Service-Dominant Logic”, 2006; Stephen L. Vargo, and Robert F. Lusch, “Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing”, *Journal of Marketing*, 68(1) (January 2004): 1-18; Arnould and Thompson, “Consumer Culture Theory”, 2005.

To achieve this aim, the paper proceeds along two lines: on the one hand, it frames the store in its relationship with the brand and the market context, investigating its role, experiences, and services in a consumer context profoundly modified by digital transformation and globalization processes. On the other hand, it tries to trace some trajectories of innovation of the role of the store in the broader omnichannel architecture.

## Customer-Experience Evolution

### From Product Oriented to Store Centrality

Creating a customer experience as a competitive lever<sup>30</sup> gives the environmental context a central role in activating meaningful experiences.<sup>31</sup> Environmental stimulations acquire motivation in their ability to provide specific responses; they initiate a complex sequence of behavioral responses by approaching and extending contact with the stimulation, benefiting from it, or by moving away and avoiding it. Thus, perception is in a holistic context where it is considered an active and creative process that goes beyond the simple data captured by sight and hearing. People participate in reality through their organic constitution and their physiological and psychological activity.<sup>32</sup> The interest in generating an emotional and experiential interaction between products and consumers in business has deep roots. Since the first studies on persuasion processes,<sup>33</sup> purchase motivations,<sup>34</sup> or desire strategy,<sup>35</sup> research into purchasing behavior and motivations evolved from focusing on products and advertising<sup>36</sup> to a more excellent orientation towards purchasing activities.<sup>37</sup> While the research of Tauber<sup>38</sup> highlighted the existence of extra-economic motivations for shopping, recognizing the central role of the shop, it is with Kotler that the store's environment and atmosphere are recognized as an instrument capable of influencing consumers during their purchasing activities. Atmospherics is defined by Kotler, as "the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability."<sup>39</sup>

Despite the limitations of this seminal research,<sup>40</sup> there is now a growing interest in those environmental factors that can influence consumer perception and behavior. According to Tai and Fung,<sup>41</sup> from a methodological point of view, it is possible to distinguish between contributions that have analyzed

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30. Christian Homburg, Danijel Jozić and Christina Kuehnl, "Customer experience management: Toward implementing an evolving marketing concept", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 45(1) (August 2015): 377-401; Peter C. Verhoef, et al. "Customer experience creation: determinants, dynamics and management strategies". *Journal of Retail*, 85 (1) (2009), pp. 31-41; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, "Co-creation Experiences", 2004a.
  31. Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 1999.
  32. Iannilli, *Fashion Retail*, 2010.
  33. Clyde Miller, *The Process of Persuasion*, Crown Publisher, New York, 1946.
  34. Ernst Dichter, "What are the Real Reasons People Buy". *Sales Management*, 74 (Feb 1955): 36-89
  35. Ernst Dichter, *The Strategy of Desire*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960.
  36. Pierre Martineau, *Motivation in advertising*, Mc Grow-Hill, New York, 1957.
  37. Edward M. Tauber, "Why do people shop". *Journal of Marketing*, 36(4) (October 1972): 46-49; Kotler, "Atmospherics", 1974.
  38. Tauber, "Why do people shop", 1972.
  39. Kotler. "Atmospherics", 1974, p.50.
  40. Robert J. Donovan and John R. Rossiter, "Store atmosphere: an environmental psychology approach". *Journal of Retailing*, 58 (1) (Spring 1982): 34-57; Julie Baker, Michael Levy, and Dhruv Grewal. "An experimental approach to making retail store environmental decisions". *Journal of Retailing*, 68 (Winter 1992): 445-460.
  41. Susan Tai, and Agnes Fung, "Application of an Environmental Psychology Model to In-Store Buying Behavior", *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, 7 (4) (1997): 311-337.

the emotional impact on consumer behavior from single variables such as music,<sup>42</sup> scent,<sup>43</sup> and color<sup>44</sup> to those that have emphasized the more comprehensive and integrated, holistic aspect. In particular, from a holistic point of view, a further distinction can be made between studies that adopted a methodological approach *without model-based investigation* and those that adopted a *model-based investigation*. The first approach recognizes that sensory information from the environment affects cognitive and affective states, influencing buyer behavior<sup>45</sup> and purchase decisions.<sup>46</sup> The second approach is based on contributions from environmental psychology and uses the PAD model of Mehrabian and Russell.<sup>47</sup> The PAD model, based on the cognitive Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, describes and measures emotional states. PAD uses three numerical dimensions, *pleasure*, *arousal*, and *dominance*, to represent all emotions. The central idea is that physical environments influence people through their emotional impact.<sup>48</sup> This model has significantly contributed to understanding the relationship between the shop environment and consumer behavior by showing that the emotional states experienced by the individual within the physical shop significantly influence purchasing behavior.

Holbrook and Hirschman<sup>49</sup> propose a phenomenological approach in which experience is conceived as a flow of “fantasies, feelings and fun” that interprets consumption as a “primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses and aesthetic criteria.”<sup>50</sup> The involvement of new disciplines, such as neurophysiology, biophysics, and design, has expanded the knowledge of perceptual and cognitive phenomena concerning sensory stimulation. The “emotional dimension” was analyzed from the point of view of consumption processes,<sup>51</sup> the relationship between sensory stimulation and storage mechanisms,<sup>52</sup> as a context for achieving an immersive experience,<sup>53</sup> and as an intangible variable equal to the functional ones.<sup>54</sup> With the recognition of *experiential marketing*<sup>55</sup> and the *economics of experience*,<sup>56</sup> the corporate “product” evolves to include communication, services, and experiences as an economic value, and the physical store takes on a new role. No longer a ‘container’ of goods and information on brands and products, but a complex space capable of representing the natural physical extension of the brand and communicating its identity, personality and values to the market.

The strategic value of the physical store is also related to the new branding strategies, less and less linked to the functional and symbolic values of individual products, and more and more oriented towards the

42. Laurette Dube, Jean-Charles Chebat and Sylvie Morin. “The effects of background music on consumers desire to affiliate in buyer-seller interactions”. *Psychology & Marketing*, 12(4) (Jul 1995): 305-319.
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50. Holbrook and Hirschman, “The Experiential Aspects of Consumption”, 1982, p.132
51. Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Barbara B. Stern, “The Roles of Emotion in Consumer Research”. *Advances in Consumer Research* 26 (1) (1999): 4-11.
52. Joseph E. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain. The Mysterious Underpinning of Emotional Life*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.
53. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, *Optimal Experience*, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow*, 1999.
54. Donald A. Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. Basic Books, 2005.
55. Schmitt, *Experiential Marketing*, 1999.
56. Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 1999.

diffusion of a “brand universe”<sup>57</sup> with which to activate relational processes with the market.<sup>58</sup> At the end of the 90s, the role of the physical store changed radically; it progressively loses its original logistics function, transforming itself into a privileged channel of services, communication and interaction with consumers. The fashion industry finds its place within the new globally competitive market by increasing design, creativity, and experience as defining elements while assigning a central role to branding strategy. The fashion industry implements retail store innovation to display and represent the value system underlying brand policies. The new brand realm is a physical store located in the most influential fashion capitals on the new map of global geographies. Concept stores, flagship stores, pop-up stores represent the place where the brand finds full expression, but above all, the place for creating those emotional, narrative, and experiential relationships linked to the brand image.<sup>59</sup>

Nowadays, consumption choices become a sharing of values and range over the different scenarios proposed, not only as an offer of material goods or products but also as contexts capable of involving new consumers in collaborative and cooperative activities and experiences.<sup>60</sup>

### From Store Centrality to Phygital Realm

The digital revolution not only transforms tools but initiates the creation of new cultural and operational practices. High technology is combined with mature technologies, but also with craftsmanship. Industrial production is supported by as many small-scale productions where makers and additive manufacturing promote new entrepreneurship.<sup>61</sup>

Digital transformation impacts on the social context, in daily life, in urban and territorial transformations, in social relations and in new ways of living space. A landscape that, starting from postmodernity, reaches contemporaneity and assumes a *fluid* conformation<sup>62</sup> and *global flows*.<sup>63</sup> The cultural and economic scenario favored by the new digital networks now allows small businesses and micro-productions to enter a market that was previously inaccessible to them. Anthropological, ethnographic, sociological, semiotic, historical and artistic research, as well as and design-driven research become a potential vector for implementing the cultural and significant innovation that characterizes the fashion product, today at the center of hybridization, contamination, and new interpretations.<sup>64</sup> Digital technology triggers sensitive and relational connections between present and past, stories and images, and, again, between ordinary and extraordinary. Industry 4.0 of Smart Manufacturing and omnichannel architectures becomes light, ethical and sustainable. The objects are now enhanced and enabled by technology; they are smart and responsive objects, made intelligent by the experimental application of advanced sensors and capable of interacting with personalization and user profiling applications through the Internet.

In this context, the retail industry also finds opportunities for experimentation and development. From the first e-retailing experiences<sup>65</sup> intended to complement a physical store to the advent of

57. Jean-Noël Kapferer and Jean-Claude Thoenig, *La marque*. McGraw Hill, Paris, 1992

58. David A. Aaker, *Managing Brand Equity*. The Free Press, New York, 1991.

59. Andrea Semprini, *La marca. Dal prodotto al mercato, dal mercato alla società*. Milano: Lupetti, 1996.

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61. Valeria M. Iannilli and Alessandra Spagnoli (eds), *Smart Living between cultures and practices. Una prospettiva design oriented*. FIRENZE: Mandragora, 2019.

62. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000.

63. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

64. Paola Bertola et al., “Connecting identities. How traditional fashion know-how promotes social innovation”. In *Sharing Cultures* 2017. Proceedings of 5th International Conference on Intangible Heritage, p. 69-76. Barcelos: Green Line Institute for sustainable development, 2017.

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m-commerce,<sup>66</sup> which amplifies the ubiquity of the retail experience for the end consumer and changes the in-store experience itself, we arrive at new forms of omnichannel retail. Omnichannel builds new relationships, participation, and cooperation where the protagonist is often the “creative class.”<sup>67</sup> These are the thinkers, leaders, innovators, influencers, and entrepreneurs who are pushing the cultural and commercial envelope, developing, designing and marketing the newest products and services. This depicted scenario constitutes a form of “cooperative brain” as anticipated by Levy.<sup>68</sup>

Thanks to digitalization, consumers are more likely to influence not only sales but production processes. The survival of enterprises can no longer be based exclusively on accumulating profit; rather, it must also be based on creating social value (*Societing*).<sup>69</sup> Within this new perspective, the activity of companies (and consumers) and their branding strategies are no longer addressed to purely marketing their products and services; rather, they aim to impact society at large, with all of the consequences that this entails.<sup>70</sup> The spread of new technologies, such as smart mobile devices capable of being supported by additional tools, contactless technologies such as Radio-Frequency Identification (RFID), Quick Response (QR) codes, Near Field Communication (NFC) and Beacons. But also, the current rapid growth of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), mobile technologies, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and the Internet of Things (IoT) is totally changing the relationship between consumer and business by altering the retail landscape again. If creating a recognizable shopping experience remains the core of consumers’ expectations and company strategies, we are seeing the amplification of the instruments through which the players of economic exchange can create lasting relationships. Fashion retailers are increasingly adopting in-store technologies<sup>71</sup> contributing to a shopping experience more connected to the provision of services, in order to support the circularity of the customer journey in the omnichannel experience. Technology in-store enacts added value,<sup>72</sup> speeds up service and cutting costs,<sup>73</sup> as well as contributing to the integration of channels.<sup>74</sup> The rapid diffusion of smartphones, helped by the expansion of wireless networks, has offered a new and different accessibility to products and services<sup>75</sup> with strong repercussions also on the design of traditional retail spaces.<sup>76</sup>

The new retail ecosystem integrates new digital technology that are essential for the triggering of new interactive practices. The new sales venues, becoming increasingly places of continuity between inside and outside, between private and public and between real and virtual, reconfigure the sense of the new smart city. New digital technologies and related design strategies allow new retail stores to integrate both physical and virtual spaces,<sup>77</sup> where socialization, interaction, and co-creation of consumption experi-

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tification of UK fashion retailer use of websites”, *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 32 (8) (August 2004): 386-393.

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73. Bonetti and Perry, “A review”, 2017.
74. Verhoef, et al, “Customer experience creation”, 2009.
75. Zhuo Zhang, “Innovation in Retail: Impact of Mobile Phone on Consumer Behavior”. *Proceedings of 15th International Marketing Trends Conference 2016*, Venice.
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77. Signe. M. Madsen and Ann Petermans. “Exploring the system of digitised retail design—flattening the ontology”, *Journal*

ence's value with other users become the element enhancing a shopping experience that goes beyond the traditional in-store product sale. The integration of the digital dimension and the physical retail space increases the opportunities of creating relationships with customers, also thanks Big Data. Technology favors transparency, authenticity and ethics; for example, thanks to RFID smart label, it allows to trace the value chains putting the consumer in a position to make informed choices.

Nowadays customer experience transcends the store walls in combinations of digital and physical;<sup>78</sup> customers don't think in channels, they expect authentic brand experiences that allow them to move seamlessly between e-commerce and brick-and-mortar shopping. The Omni-Channel Ecosystem shifts the relationship between consumer and business not so much on individual touchpoints, but directly with the brand.<sup>79</sup>

In this context, the physical store takes on a new centrality. It becomes "phygital". The phygital store is a technology enabled combination of resources: a store capable of integrating technology with the in-store experience and generating and managing information, relationships, desires, aspirations, and choices in the form of Big Data. Analysis of consumer shopping behavioral data can help improve shop management and design to improve consumer engagement and experience.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the ability to use data is the key to launching new retail innovation processes in which the recognition of complexity itself becomes the space for a new design. Phygital stores take advantage of the favorable variables of the physical ones (in-store experience and experimentation, desire to touch and feel, Halo effect, building legitimacy, giving credibility and authenticity to the brand, building brand awareness, involving loyal fans and talking to them and obtaining real feedback, links with the territory and heritage) and those provided by digital technology (market identification, trend forecasting analysis, acquisition of in-depth consumer data, both qualitative and quantitative, implementation of in-store video analytics to map where consumers spend most of their time and use this information to position both product lines and staff, help in analyzing and understanding how consumers engage with brands, measuring the impact of influencers, improving cross-selling, creating highly personalized product, service and communication campaigns). The new scenario shows a physical store completely integrated with the digital one, but above all an omnichannel strategy, offering a seamless shopping experience.

## In-store Technologies in Fashion Retailing

Nowadays, retail spaces are transformed, multiplying the channels and opportunities for contact with consumers, activating new strategies for transferring the intangible value of the fashion product and, at the same time, contributing to the "shaping" of new networks of "significant moments": a constellation of (physical and digital) spaces, occasions and episodes which, when put into relation, constitute the armor of the contemporary value creation and distribution strategy.<sup>81</sup>

The transition from multi-channel to omnichannel represented a real paradigm shift in the industry:<sup>82</sup> omnichannel retail highlighted the multiplication of channels by which brands, and retailers, come into contact with consumers and identified the seamless shopping experience as a fundamental requirement

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79. Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson, "Introduction", 2014.

80. Sarah Murray, "Data analytics is on trend with fashion houses". *Financial Times*, 5 October 2016, cit. in Silva, Emmanuel S., Hassani, Hossein and Madsen, Dag Ø. "Big Data in fashion: transforming the retail sector". *Journal of Business Strategy*, 41(4) (July 2020) 0275-6668.

81. Michael A. Merz, Yi He and Stephen L. Vargo, "The Evolving Brand Logic: A Service-Dominant Logic Perspective". *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 37, no. 3 (1 September 2009): 328-44.

82. Peter C. Verhoef, P. K. Kannan and J. Jeffrey Inman, "From Multi-Channel Retailing to Omni-Channel Retailing: Introduction to the Special Issue on Multi-Channel Retailing". *Journal of Retailing, Multi-Channel Retailing*, 91, no. 2 (1 June 2015): 174-81.

of the retail strategies of the last decade.<sup>83</sup> By putting consumer behavior at the center, the shopping experience has been “extended” and holistically intercepted by channels that are not limited to the traditional retail channels (physical stores and online stores) but have also included social media, branded applications, mobile devices, gaming platforms and more.<sup>84</sup> The subsequent shift to the phygital dimension underlines an increasing focus on the integration of physical and digital that aims to go beyond “seamlessness” towards a hybrid dimension where the actual space is “augmented” by digital content and connections and, conversely, the digital dimension is linked, duplicated and enriched with the materiality of the actual.<sup>85</sup>

In this context, the physical store takes on a new and different centrality,<sup>86</sup> becoming part of a broader and more connected experience and confirming itself as the place of convergence of multiple touchpoints.<sup>87</sup> From a design perspective it becomes crucial to investigate how the store experience is transformed when it is augmented by digital technologies and how design may intervene in the process of “translating” an increasingly integrated and extended customer journey into a technologically equipped physical space.

Within this framework, design participates in a process of facilitating interactions between retail space and consumer, and in-store technologies represent significant touchpoints in the interplay between fashion brand experience and consumer behavior. In-store technologies - different devices through which the consumer can directly interact - are particularly significant in retailing and widely accepted in fashion.<sup>88</sup> Contextualizing technologies in fashion retailing<sup>89</sup> allow to define their role in a context, that of fashion, within which the brand’s narrative dimension and the cultural impact of the product system significantly influence the dynamics of interaction with the consumer. Following a re-elaboration of the most recent classification of in-store technologies,<sup>90</sup> they can be divided into categories according to their role and function: *transactional technologies*; *informational technologies*, able to provide knowledge about brand, products, and services; *supportive technologies*, oriented to build the customer service ecosystem through the customer experience; and *entertainment technologies*, able to amplify the sensorial, emotional, and relational experiences in the mixed dimension of the physical+digital integration.

The following technologies, from the most mature and widely acquired in retail to the most recent ones, show, through the support of applied examples, how they have been integrated in fashion retailing and

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83. Darrell K. Rigby, “The Future of Shopping”. *Harvard Business Review*, 1 December 2011. <https://hbr.org/2011/12/the-future-of-shopping>; Dhruv Grewal, Anne L. Roggeveen, and Jens Nordfält. “The Future of Retailing”. *Journal of Retailing*, The Future of Retailing, 93, no. 1 (1 March 2017): 1–6.
84. Alexander and Blazquez Cano, “Store of the Future”, 2020; Norbert Beck and David Rygl. “Categorization of Multiple Channel Retailing in Multi-, Cross-, and Omni-Channel Retailing for Retailers and Retailing”. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 27 (1 November 2015): 170–78; Verhoef et. al., 2015; Jie Zhang, et al. “Crafting Integrated Multi-channel Retailing Strategies”. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Special Issue on “Emerging Perspectives on Marketing in a Multichannel and Multimedia Retailing Environment”, 24, no. 2 (1 May 2010): 168–80.
85. Bethan Alexander and Karinna Nobbs. “Multi-Sensory Fashion Retail Experiences: The Impact of Sound, Smell, Sight and Touch on Consumer Based Brand Equity”. In *Global Branding: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice*, 39–62. IGI Global, 2020; Bethan Alexander and Daniela Olivares Alvarado. “Convergence of Physical and Virtual Retail Spaces: The Influence of Technology on Consumer In-Store Experience”. In *Advanced Fashion Technology and Operations Management*, ed. Alessandra Vecchi (IGI Global, 2017), 191–219. Kate Armstrong, and Charlotte Rutter. “Exploring the Enigma of the Happiness Construct in Phygital Fashion Experiences”. In *Advanced Fashion Technology and Operations Management*, ed. Alessandra Vecchi, 220–33. IGI Global, 2017.
86. Siregar and Kent. “Consumer Experience”, 2019.
87. Alexander and Cano, 2020; Karine Picot-Coupey, Elodie Huré, and Lauren Piveteau. “Channel Design to Enrich Customers’ Shopping Experiences: Synchronizing Clicks with Bricks in an Omni-Channel Perspective - the Direct Optic Case”. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management* 44, no. 3 (2016): 336.
88. Pantano and Vannucci, “Who Is Innovating?”, 2019.
89. Bethan Alexander and Anthony Kent, “Tracking Technology Diffusion In-Store: A Fashion Retail Perspective”. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* (1 January 2021); Bonetti and Perry. “A Review”, 2017; Siregar and Kent. “Consumer Experience”, 2019.
90. Alexander and Cano, 2020; Eleonora Pantano, et al. “Does Innovation-Oriented Lead to Retail Industry Growth? Empirical Evidence from Patent Analysis”. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 34 (1 January 2017): 88–94.

how they could enable different customer-centric scenarios.

Smart check-out and click and collect are rapidly spreading and, through the convergence of various technologies, allow to disrupt the traditional inventory model and the physical check-out lane. These advanced transactional systems relocate the search, purchase, pick-up and return of products to a variety of channels and intercept the consumer in multiple places and times. For example, Nike's Speed Shop combines the online shopping behavior and convenience with the offline retail experience: an entire section of the New York flagship store is dedicated to customers who book products online and need to try them on before buying;<sup>91</sup> thanks to this approach and in addition to the speed of purchase operations, customers are guaranteed a customized selection of products regardless of the assortment of the physical shop.

Technologies that amplify brand and product content beyond the boundaries of the physical store to be more and more responsive to the consumer's needs include beacons, QR Codes and IoT systems. While beacon technology is generally used to unidirectionally transfer messages and communications from the brand/retailer to the customer, QR Code systems require voluntary customer interaction and are considered more effective and less invasive.<sup>92</sup> Other tracking technologies based on the IoT system, for example RFID and NFC, can follow the product's lifetime throughout the value chain, from suppliers to retail/communication channels, providing both the brand and the consumer with valuable data.<sup>93</sup> Many brands have already embedded these technologies in their products with tracking purposes, to create interactions or to enhance brand storytelling and customer experience. Burberry, for example, was one of the first to implement the use of RFID within some flagship stores since 2012.<sup>94</sup> Recently, Adidas offers a highly customer-centric retail experience in its new flagship store on London's Oxford Street by intensively adopting some of these technologies, including scanning systems and RFID, with the aim of enhancing the seamless blend between digital and online: fitting rooms featured with RFID mirror technology connect the customer with the brand's entire offering; at the same time the "Hype Wall", a large digital showcase, allows the customer to scan the upcoming "hyped" releases or limited drop products and receive previews and premium content.<sup>95</sup> With the aim of increasing transparency and traceability, MCQ, the label launched by Alexander McQueen, combined NFC technology and blockchain to make the entire life cycle of each garment knowable and accessible at all times, allowing consumers to gain trust and shortening the distance between the different players in the system.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the MYMCQ digital platform, conceived as a collaborative media hub, brings the public closer to a more sustainable way of buying, increasing trust in the authenticity of the products purchased, and contributes to the construction of an active and aware digital community.<sup>97</sup>

Virtual Mirrors and Virtual Fitting Rooms have long been tried and tested in the most tech-advanced fashion stores. The Prada In Store Technology in New York in 2002 was an absolute pioneer in this field and paved the way for the adoption of technology in fashion retailing. Burberry and many others use touch screens to display branded contents while virtual wardrobe gives access to the full collection,

91. Katharine Schwab, "Nike's Huge New Flagship Looks like the Future of Retail". *Fast Company*, 15 November 2018. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90267865/nikes-new-nyc-flagship-looks-like-the-future-of-retail>.

92. Briec Van Tichelen, "The Role and Opportunities of Phygital in the Digital Omni-Channel Strategy", 2019.

93. Bertola and Teunissen, "Fashion 4.0." 2018.

94. Burberry. "RFID". Accessed 10 June 2021. <https://uk.burberry.com/legal-cookies/privacy-policy/rfid/>.

95. Adidas. "Creating the Future for London; Adidas Re-Imagines the Retail Experience with New Oxford Street Flagship Store". Accessed 10 June 2021. <https://www.adidas-group.com/en/media/news-archive/press-releases/2019/creating-future-london-adidas-re-imagines-retail-experience-new/>; Harriet Brown. "First Look: Inside Adidas's "high Street HQ" Flagship". *Drapers*, 24 October 2019. <https://www.drapersonline.com/news/first-look-inside-adidass-high-street-hq-flagship>.

96. Maria Rosaria Iovinella, "Nfc e blockchain, quando la cronistoria di un vestito è racchiusa in un chip". *Wired*, 14 September 2020. <https://www.wired.it/lifestyle/sostenibilita/2020/09/14/temera-everledger-chip-blockchain-nfc/>.

97. Daniel So, "Alexander McQueen Launches MCQ, A Blockchain-Powered Creative Platform". *Highsnobiety*, 16:04:58Z, sec. Style. <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/alexander-mcqueen-launches-mcq/>.

product information, and outfit choices.<sup>98</sup> Touch technology, undoubtedly one of the most familiar, has been used by fashion brands according to their values, messages and sensitivity to provide consumers with very different experiences and services. For example, in 2018 Farfetch and Chanel announced an exclusive multi-year global innovation partnership to develop a range of digital initiatives to deliver a superior consumer experience both online and offline.<sup>99</sup> The new Chanel flagship inaugurated in 2020 is the result of this collaboration and features, among others, high-tech dressing rooms with a connected mirror to display customers' choices, a technology already widely adopted by Farfetch in its Store of the Future. However, as stated by Sandrine Deveaux, executive vice president of future retail at Farfetch "at Chanel, the technology was used for storytelling and customer discovery of collections, while Browns will use the same technology to offer customers a seamless shopping experience."<sup>100</sup>

A further step forward in the progressive integration between physical and digital is represented by digital twins, virtual representations of items, such as things, persons, processes or environments. Today a digital twin, thanks to the maturity of the technologies and infrastructures that support it, guarantees a very high quality and fidelity of reproduction, but above all "contains" a series of data that allow it to be interacted with and monitored. This is why digital twins have the potential to radically change the entire chain of the fashion industry, from design and production to sales and communication. Underpinning this technology, integrated with artificial intelligence and augmented reality systems, are some of the most advanced examples of virtual try-ons such as, among others, the Yoox Mirror launched in 2018 and upgraded the following year.<sup>101</sup> In the field of advanced virtualization in fashion retailing, it is significant to mention experimentations that extend the shopping experience beyond traditional formats by building a bridge between the dimension of the physical store and the classic e-commerce format. Fashion brands such as Ralph Lauren, Christian Dior and Tommy Hilfiger offer immersive and interactive virtual stores that simulate a virtual reality accessible via desktop or mobile.<sup>102</sup> These virtual stores, which, as in the case of Ralph Lauren,<sup>103</sup> are a faithful reproduction of the brand's most iconic stores during the holiday season, allow the consumer to travel around the space and interact with shoppable items on display. It is no coincidence that the spread of these new digital stores coincided with the restrictions due to the pandemic:<sup>104</sup> when brands needed to maintain and reactivate contact with their audience, they experimented with new forms of sensory and emotional immersion, trying to replicate a form of physical and material involvement in the digital dimension.

Finally, Virtual and Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality represent the frontier for an extended shopping experience. AR, in particular, has rapidly gained ground: based on mobile technology, it is widely embraced by the younger generations, who make intensive use of social platforms such as IG, Tik Tok and Snapchat. The first significant application in the area of fashion was made by Gucci in collaboration with Wanna, a tech company specialized in using AR to create 3D models for the digital display of fashion items.<sup>105</sup> The Gucci Ace virtual sneakers are largely aimed at a digitally-native Gen Z audience and look to a future in which experiences - of consumption, but also of entertainment, work and education - will embrace a complete convergence of the physical and digital categories. In the field of

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98. Alexander and Kent, "Change in Technology-Enabled", 2020.

99. Segura, Alfonso, *Fashion Goes Tech: How Technology is Empowering Retail Businesses*, (Independently published, 2021).

100. Kati Chitrakorn, "Inside the New Browns: Farfetch's Store of the Future". *Vogue Business*, 3 April 2021. <https://www.voguebusiness.com/consumers/inside-the-new-browns-london-flagship-farfetch-store-of-the-future>.

101. Alessandra Turra, "Yoox Evolves Its Mirror Functionality to Create Customized Digital Avatars". *WWD*, 4 November 2019. <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/yoox-mirror-digital-avatars-1203361963/>.

102. <https://obsessar.com/>.

103. Ralph Lauren, "Virtual Flagship Stores". Accessed 10 June 2021. <https://www.ralphlauren.co.uk/en/flagship-stores/virtual-store/70701453>.

104. Maghan McDowell, "What to Know about Virtual Stores". *Vogue Business*, 17 November 2020. <https://www.voguebusiness.com/technology/what-to-know-about-virtual-stores>.

105. Kyle Wiggers, "Gucci's IOS App Lets You Try Shoes on Remotely in AR". *VentureBeat*, 26 June 2019. <https://venturebeat.com/2019/06/26/guccis-ios-app-lets-you-try-shoes-on-remotely-in-ar/>.

virtual immersive reality, the start-up InVRsion<sup>106</sup> creates fully virtualized retail spaces where digital objects interact with the user and his/her movements, simulating the experience of a physical shop.<sup>107</sup> Through the use of sensors and a camera or visor, InVRsion works to develop a “full reality” that enhances the consumer’s experience in a dimension as close as possible to physical reality with a particular focus on sensoriality, perception and experiential fluidity. A definition that is very close to the concept of Mixed Reality (or Extended Reality), an augmented reality made more immersive through the use of Virtual Reality elements that are not simply superimposed on the real space but anchored to it to activate particularly dynamic and significant interactions.

Although AR and VR are displaying their potential in recent years and have been widely discussed in retail,<sup>108</sup> in particular in the fashion area,<sup>109</sup> however there’s a lack of studies identifying how they can holistically influence the retailing value chain and what impact they can have on design and strategies in the physical space.

The retail sector has largely embraced the opportunities for innovation offered by digital transformation as a whole, mainly by implementing technologies to improve customer service or operational efficiency’s performances. Technological innovation, which has reached very advanced maturity level, has in fact found different ways and forms of application in the field: digital technologies help to understand consumer needs, provide greater assortment, help shoppers decide, lower cost, increase loyalties, and enhance customer service.<sup>110</sup> These technological applications, however, have often been developed as tools to improve specific consumer’s needs, to engage in a more playful and interactive way with the customer or to smoothen the efficiency of specific knots in the retail chain. More rarely the retail sector has seized the possibilities presented by tech to rethink the value chain in an integrated way,<sup>111</sup> long-term sustainable, and able to redefine new “augmented” and experiential paradigms.

## Fashion retailing emerging scenarios. An experiential phygital perspective

The “augmented” scenario enabled by the digital and technological transformation, far from having standardized the contemporary fashion system, has, on the contrary, fragmented it into an increasing number of singular and particular design opportunities. Digital plays the role of an “invisible enabler,”<sup>112</sup> enabling the creation of products, services and experiences that have complemented, and sometimes replaced, pre-existing ones. Think, for example, to virtual fashion<sup>113</sup> which, in the wake of the improvement of online consumer behavior and on the basis of a reconfiguration of the distribution chain’s

106. <https://www.invrision.com/>.

107. Alessandra Vaccari, Paolo Franzo and Giulia Tonucci, “Mise En Abyrne. L’esperienza Espansa Della Moda Nell’età Della Mixed Reality”. *ZoneModa Journal* 10, no. 2 (22 December 2020): 75–89.

108. Marie Beck and Dominique Crié, “I Virtually Try It ... I Want It! Virtual Fitting Room: A Tool to Increase On-Line and off-Line Exploratory Behavior, Patronage and Purchase Intentions”. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 40 (1 January 2018): 279–86; Philipp A. Rauschnabel, Reto Felix, and Chris Hinsch. “Augmented Reality Marketing: How Mobile AR-Apps Can Improve Brands through Inspiration”. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 49 (1 July 2019): 43–53; Alexandra Rese, Daniel Baier, Andreas Geyer-Schulz, and Stefanie Schreiber. “How Augmented Reality Apps Are Accepted by Consumers: A Comparative Analysis Using Scales and Opinions”. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 124 (1 November 2017): 306–19.

109. Alexander and Kent, “Tracking Technologies”, 2021; Barbara Silvestri. “The Future of Fashion: How the Quest for Digitization and the Use of Artificial Intelligence and Extended Reality Will Reshape the Fashion Industry After COVID-19”. *ZoneModa Journal* 10, no. 2 (22 December 2020): 61–73.

110. Deloitte Insights, “Tech Trends 2019: Beyond the Digital Frontier”, 2019. [https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/br/Documents/technology/DI/\\_TechTrends2019.pdf](https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/br/Documents/technology/DI/_TechTrends2019.pdf).

111. Bertola and Teunissen, “Fashion 4.0”, 2018; Deloitte. “Disruptions in Retail through Digital Transformation”, 2017. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/in/Documents/CIP/in-cip-disruptions-in-retail-noexp.pdf>.

112. Philip Kotler and Giuseppe Stigliano, *Retail 4.0. 10 regole per l’era digitale* (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2018).

113. Christian Allaire, “Would You Spend Real Money on Virtual Clothes?” *Vogue*, 3 August 2020. <https://www.vogue.com/article/tribute-virtual-clothes-digital-fashion>.

model, is carrying out a disintermediation process<sup>114</sup> between the brand and the consumer attempting to challenge not only the material dimension of clothing but also the role of the physical store. Or, at the opposite side of extreme hybridization, to the partnership between The Fabricant and I.T, the Hong Kong-based luxury fashion retailer. The collaboration resulted in the retailer 30th anniversary's virtual collection but above all in 4 pop-up boutiques: tangible spaces displaying only the digital version of the clothing, that can be ordered via app, enabling a multi-way loop between digital and physical, material and immaterial.<sup>115</sup>

Within this mixed and blurred scenario, it no longer really means opposing the two distinct categories of the tangible and the intangible. It is instead necessary to think, and design, from the point of view of a complete fusion of online and offline and no longer of simple integration.

The theoretical implications discussed so far about the consumer experience's omnichannel and phygital evolution and the analysis of in-store technology in fashion retailing and its current applications, provide the groundwork for the identification of possible innovation trajectories in the field of phygital retailing in fashion. Starting from an empirical research, based on the identification and analysis of case studies,<sup>116</sup> an interpretative model is proposed that is able to outline, starting from the most recent and advanced retail concepts, as many consumption scenarios. These scenarios both provide some insights on the current state of the art in fashion retailing and identify some major trends and their impact on the physical fashion stores.

Within this framework, 4 consumption scenarios have been recognized, that are transforming the global landscape and returning as many concepts and sales formats: *Local Service Hubs*; *Emotional Connection*; *Curatorial Approach*; and *Content & Experience Platform*.

## Local Service Hubs

In a customer-centric and service-oriented perspective,<sup>117</sup> which the market for products with a high cultural content, such as fashion, is integrating into its production and distribution chain, fashion brands are experimenting with new formulas capable of combining local and global, distributed and tailor-focused aspects. This is done both with a view to increasing sustainability<sup>118</sup> and to intercept the evolution of current consumer behavior for which a wide range of products, highly customized services, speed and proximity to the consumer are seen as non-alternative concepts.

The phenomenon of local service hubs is part of this scenario: shops capable of adapting to local needs by offering a series of services connected to the largest concept stores of the brands. They are satellite points in the neighborhoods and offer personalized services. Moreover, they show how companies implement the number of touchpoints with their customers from an omnichannel perspective, creating synergy between physical and digital retail space. In such context, the concept of business product includes as an economic value also services and experiences. Starting from the archetypal local shop the new format enters the landscape of everyday life and intertwines deep relationships with its inhabitants.

Nordstrom Local<sup>119</sup> and Trunk Club,<sup>120</sup> the former launched in 2017, the latter acquired a few years

114. Katrijn Gielens and Jan-Benedict E. M. Steenkamp, "Branding in the Era of Digital (Dis)Intermediation". *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Marketing Perspectives on Digital Business Models, 36, no. 3 (1 September 2019): 367–84.

115. <https://www.thefabricant.com/it-hong-kong>.

116. Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009).

117. Lusch and Vargo, "Service-Dominant Logic", 2006.

118. Cosette M. Armstrong et al., "Sustainable Product-Service Systems for Clothing: Exploring Consumer Perceptions of Consumption Alternatives in Finland". *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Special Volume: *Why have "Sustainable Product-Service Systems" not been widely implemented?* 97 (15 June 2015): 30–39.

119. <https://press.nordstrom.com/news-releases/news-release-details/nordstrom-announces-latest-retail-concept-nordstrom-local>.

120. <https://www.trunkclub.com/faq>.

earlier and fully integrated into the brand's distribution strategies in 2020, well envision this "service hub" model that combines physical and digital. Nordstrom Local is a new format retail space with no inventory, able to create synergies between online and physical shopping experience emphasizing its convenience and service-oriented business model. These local hubs offer three core services: fitting and styling guidance, alterations from on-site tailors, and online order pickup and return.<sup>121</sup> The latter is especially helpful for Nordstrom to quickly reinsert merchandise back into its e-commerce inventory. Additionally, Nordstrom Trunk Clubs offer a further opportunity for the brand to get in touch with its customers' needs: thanks to a fully managed style advisor service in the digital channel, customers have the possibility to receive at home carefully selected outfits from professional stylists and, thanks to their mediation, to establish a very personal and trusting relationship with the brand. Furthermore, the services offered in the Trunk Club stores, which previously were a complementary format to the Local stores, have been now relocated into the nearby Nordstrom stores:<sup>122</sup> the company has thus been able to create a dense network of physical and digital touchpoints that are meaningful in their ability to offer consumers a series of services that are as delocalized, customized and close to their needs and consumption behavior as possible.

## Emotional Connection

The second scenario highlights how retail spaces can amplify the emotional variable, a feeling capable of involving the user in a significant way, through a combination of atmospherics<sup>123</sup> and technological innovation. The quest for specific emotional effects evolves towards the holistic concept of "sensorial experience", and design shows the ability to represent, narrate and engage with the user on the cognitive and sensory level. Emphasizing the multi-sensory variables<sup>124</sup> brands can create a new empathy relationship between brand and customers. For fashion companies, creating a memorable purchase experience becomes the main distinguishing factor in a saturated market in continuous evolution. The use of in-store technology to enable an expanded shopping experience has been widely addressed before, but it should be noted that there are still few studies investigating how technology, especially immersive technology such as AR and VR, influences and impacts both consumer behavior and the perception of spaces,<sup>125</sup> and even fewer retail initiatives have pursued such integration.

A project that skillfully combines a highly immersive space, in terms of emotional experience and physical sensoriality, with virtual interactions to achieve an innovative experiential continuum, is the flagship store of the streetwear brand Hipanda in Tokyo, designed by studio Curiosity in 2019.<sup>126</sup> The immersive retail interior combines analogue and digital features and is almost unique in its kind: art, fashion, technology and architecture contribute, in a synergistic, almost director-like way, to offer an "augmented" retail experience, in terms of engagement, immersion and perception. The interiors, characterized by a play of moving lights and mirrors, black and white optical contrasts and artistic sculptures at different scales, constitute a material scenario capable of activating different interactive experiences,

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121. Richard Kestenbaum, "Why The Expansion Of Nordstrom Local Is Important". *Forbes*, 2 May 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardkestenbaum/2019/05/02/nordstrom-local-expansion-saks-neiman-marcus/>.

122. Jamie Grill-Goodman, "Nordstrom Closing All Trunk Club Stores". *RIS News*, 3 June 2020. <https://risnews.com/nordstrom-closing-all-trunk-club-stores>.

123. Kotler, "Atmospherics". 1974.

124. Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 1999; Alexander and Nobbs, "Multi-Sensory Fashion Retail Experiences", 2016.

125. Francesca Bonetti et al., "Augmented Reality in Real Stores: Empirical Evidence from Consumers' Interaction with AR in a Retail Format". In *Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality: The Power of AR and VR for Business*, eds. M. Claudia tom Dieck and Timothy Jung (Progress in IS. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 3–16; Cindy Lombart, Elena Millan, Jean-Marie Normand, Adrien Verhulst, Blandine Labbé-Pinlon, and Guillaume Moreau. "Effects of Physical, Non-Immersive Virtual, and Immersive Virtual Store Environments on Consumers' Perceptions and Purchase Behavior". *Computers in Human Behavior* 110 (September 2020): 1–36.

126. Designboom. "Curiosity Displays Products Using Augmented Reality at Hipanda Streetwear Store in Tokyo", 30 April 2019. <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/curiosity-augmented-reality-hipanda-ghost-house-tokyo-04-30-2019/>.

mainly thanks to AR technology. The bear, symbol of the brand, “live”, moves and interacts with the space and the users in an augmented reality in which the physical space is designed expressly to increase the sensorial potential of the digital, and vice versa. An interaction that begins from the outside, starting with the animation of the façade and continuing, with different narrative forms, in all the rooms of the store. Gwenael Nicolas, founder of the studio, declares that “the world of digital offers limitless possibilities of information, but the real world embraces the senses of human being that create unique experiences which can be appreciated by each individual on its way”<sup>127</sup> emphasizing how this concept investigate and experiment the potential of the so-called “Augmented Experience” and how this cannot be separated from a conscious, integrated design of physical and technological, material and digital dimensions, for a perfect fusion of the two parallel universes.

## Curatorial Approach

Fashion brands profoundly rely on the relationship with the consumer and, on a wider perspective, with the whole society, and they constantly nurture this relationship thanks both to the fashion artifacts in itself that represent a cultural system of meanings,<sup>128</sup> and to their capability to translate and convey these meanings through multiple and interconnective narratives. The contemporary transmedia dimension also offers fashion brands a wide range of channels through which to convey these stories, which, to be effective, must be managed with a curatorial approach to content selection, composition and arrangement. Traditional advertising channels, catwalks, events, social media and online platforms therefore intersect with the physical retail space to build meaningful and highly emotional narrative systems. The role of the physical retail space, which for a long time was opposed to the BTC models of both online retailers and digital native brands, has been transformed, even for the latter, into a new and important opportunity to come into direct contact with the customer.

This is the setting for Showfields, the self-proclaimed “the most interesting store in the world”, an immersive retail experience that combines pop-ups shops for emerging digital brands with a series of cultural and entertainment services and initiatives, such as art exhibitions, theatrical experiences, community events and food-drink hospitality. Showfield envisioned “flipping the formula” by adopting a wholly brand-centric approach rather than hosting space, making it possible for online brands to create a physical shop; this is a transition from a digital to a traditional model, or rather the integration of these same models but, unlike transitions already pioneered by Bonobo, Glossier and others, with a formula that fully develops the editorial concept launched by the Story store in 2011: a space structured like a magazine, changing like an art gallery, and selling products like a store.<sup>129</sup> Showfield enhances this approach by co-creating highly immersive and engaging experiences with the hosted brands by developing dedicated spaces, “theatrical retail-as-performance-art installations” and museum-shop like initiatives for the retailer’s own product display.<sup>130</sup> In addition, it offers a wide range of customer services, such as product testing, events and co-working spaces, that online cannot support, providing consumers with a fluid experience that hybridises the physical with the digital, the sensory experience with online consumption habits.

In addition, the pandemic was an opportunity to integrate a new technological layer into the retailer’s customer experience: the proprietary Magic Wand app, “lets customers interact with nearly every part of the store without touching anything.”<sup>131</sup> The app, through a product scanning system, integrates

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127. FRAME. “A New Japanese Store Uses Light and AR to Tell a (Spooky) Brand Story”. *FRAME*, 15 May 2019. <https://frameweb.com/article/a-new-japanese-store-uses-light-and-ar-to-tell-a-spooky-brand-story/>.

128. Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1983).

129. Lauren Walker, “The New York Concept Store Bringing Editorial to Life Keeps Going from Strength to Strength...” *We Heart*, 11 June 2013. <https://www.we-heart.com/2013/06/11/story-new-york/>.

130. Pamela N. Danziger, “Showfields Imagines A New Kind Of Department Store Combining Retail With Theater”. *Forbes*, 20 September 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pamdanziger/2019/09/20/showfields-imagines-a-new-kind-of-department-store-combining-retail-with-theater/?sh=2fbobb8f6f1b>.

131. Danny Parisi, “With Retail Reopening, Demand for Contactless Technology Is on the Rise”. *Glossy*, 14 July 2020. <https://www.glossy.co/fashion/with-retail-reopening-demand-for-contactless-technology-is-on-the-rise/>.

information, multiplies and increases the narrative potential of the brands, activates a click-and-collect service and much more,<sup>132</sup> stitching together a further experiential fabric that blurs the barriers between brick-and-mortar and online shopping.

## Content & Experience Platform

Online platforms have increased the channels, and therefore the possibilities, for brands to come into direct contact with their customers.<sup>133</sup> They have become places for experimenting with new languages, for delivering wide-ranging and diverse content, and for building up user communities that identify with the brand's values. A founding initiative was the Art of the Trench Coat by Burberry back in 2009, one of the first examples of a call to action specifically aimed at a young audience and integrated into the online social dimension.

The last scenario focuses on the new brand engagement processes direct to Millennials that move with ease within the new IT environment and recognize the social, cultural, and sustainable nature of value creation processes.<sup>134</sup> Millennials are changing the world of retail, they scour the web for product comparisons, reviews, and sharing suggestions before their shopping trip. Their customer journey is a fluid trip among digital and physical places to try, taste, smell, and spend time exploring products and services. Community is central. Stores need to provide areas to cultivate the brand community and the integration of in-store technologies can become an opportunity to connect physical and online networks, restoring physicality to an experience that today takes place mainly online and building new relationships.

Again, Burberry, guided by its well-established tradition of experimenting with innovative technological solutions in all production, distribution and communication processes, opened its first Social Retail Store, in partnership with Tencent, in Shenzhen in 2020.<sup>135</sup> The store pursues a full integration of the physical space with online channels and digital tools: also in this case the concept is specifically aimed at Asian Millennials and Gen Z to allow them to get to know Burberry through a retail experience that can be shared thanks to social networks, in particular WeChat. Alongside the "classic" QR Codes, Burberry has introduced a special WeChat mini-program, thanks to which customers can interact in the shop and carry out various activities: make appointments, learn about the products and get exclusive content, contact customer service and physically interact with customizable fitting rooms, always with the possibility of sharing everything with their contacts. Each interaction, moreover, returns points, a sort of "social currency" that, in the interplay between gaming and premium community, opens the doors to the client for new and always interactive tailored experiences.<sup>136</sup> The store turns out to be a space of exploration that takes interactions from social media and brings them into a physical retail environment and within which a reverse path also takes place: the Trench Experience space, a room designed as an immersive digital space, "unlockable" through interactions with the program, brings Burberry's heritage to life, creating a positive short-circuit between online and offline consumers' community.

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## Conclusions

In the last two decades the fashion system is progressively embracing technological and digital transformation by integrating it into all aspects of the value chain: from design to the production chain, from communication strategies to distribution models. This integration has been enabled, on the one hand, by the maturity that most technologies have reached and, on the other, especially as far as the retail and communication system is concerned, by a shift in consumer behavior. The contemporary consumers' communities appear to be intrinsically transformed by the digital substrate that welcomes them, and, on the other hand, they are increasingly aware of their relevance in being an active part in the engagement process with fashion brands.

In this context, for the retail sector, the transition from omnichannel retailing to the so-called phygital model has confirmed and strengthened the increasingly close interrelationship between the various channels that make up the touchpoints of the shopping experience, to the point of blurring the line between physical and digital. These two categories, in an ever-closer dialogue, are blurring and fading into one another in a fluid and consistent way. Contrary to expectations that saw them clearly succumbing to the power of online markets, physical retail spaces seem to be maintaining their centrality and adapting, albeit rather slowly, their formats and strategies to emerging consumption models. This is a different centrality from the past, which shifts the focus from the product to the service system, to narrative and emotional solutions, to a stronger relationship with consumers who are increasingly "present" on the different channels, aware and willing to be actively involved. However, the retail system, while recognizing the potential of technologies to amplify its role, space and time, has embraced them in a punctual but non-systematic way, rarely able to have deep and transformative impacts throughout the fashion distribution cycle. The proposed scenarios, which recognize the transformation and the rise of new models of consumption, offer an interpretative viewpoint, through the analysis of paradigmatic cases, on how the design of retail spaces has been able to integrate the technological dimension in a significant and valuable way to meet the needs of these emerging models. From a design perspective, these scenarios attempt to identify and trace some trajectories of innovation for the fashion retailing sector and are a first moment of reflection on the impacts of the technological solutions' adoption along the entire retail value chain.

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# Post-Digital Fashion: The Evolution and Creation Cycle

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## Abstract

In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the fashion industry was surprised and quickly had to adapt to digital media. However, the relationship between fashion and the multiplicity of screens is not new. Fashion emerged and took its first steps with Cinema, in Modernity. Although there are times when these two systems are further apart from each other, the alliance survived. To analyse contemporaneity, we take as main reference the studies of Gilles Lipovetsky, and his reflections on aesthetic capitalism. The fashion system has many Western fields of life, including art and technology. In this article we discuss how this relationship of fashion adapts and develops with aesthetic capitalism and post-digital art while we analyse representative artefacts from/about fashion. We propose to put the recent digital fashion artefacts in dialogue with post-digital aesthetics theories, discussing the blurred boundaries between the digital and the post-digital, and proposing the instantiation of a post-digital creation cycle applied to fashion artefacts.

**Keywords:** Post-digital; Fashion; Digital Media Art; Art Creation Cycle.

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## Introduction

Post-digital appeared, initially, related to the critical reflection about the concept of materiality of digital aesthetics, where, however, it is not limited to re-materiality. The daily experience of living in a “digital society” encourages the search for new concepts and experiences to understand and define the present.

In post-digital works/artefacts, creativity overlaps with technology, with a desire to blur the boundaries between the physical and the digital while maintaining a pressing digital/computational aesthetic. With the post-digital, the manual, and the handicraft combined with logic and digital languages, allows the creation of aesthetic discourses with own characteristics that cannot be reduced to the epithet of hybrids.

In contemporary fashion as an institution with a model based on innovation, avant-garde, commercial enterprise, social and media recognition, we find great influences of this system in contemporary art. We take as main reference the studies of Gilles Lipovetsky, and his reflections on aesthetic capitalism. Thus, we can consider that we are facing an art-fashion, or as Lipovetsky designates hypermodern art, an art that aims to express itself, the visual shock, the sensory experience, the bet on the seduction of the senses, and the search for purely aesthetic pleasure (Lipovetsky, 2013).

The presence of fashion artefacts in the contemporary art panorama flourished with the post-digital aesthetics which results from their haptic dimension and their daily-embraced aspects as garments that appeal to the individual and collective imaginary, but above all, considering their easiness to attract a wide audience looking for social criticism and sometimes even revolutionary character. Fashion invades each day contemporary art with its objects that transform themselves into agents that induce critical thinking.

In this article we present a critical analysis of 4 artefacts from/about fashion as post-digital interventive objects, describing their evolution as well as discussing their influence on fashion after a pandemic time. We put the recent digital fashion artefacts in dialogue with post-digital aesthetics theories, discussing the blurred boundaries between the digital and the post-digital, and proposing the instantiation of a post-digital creation cycle applied to fashion artefacts.

## Theoretical Contextualization

### The Virtualization of Fashion – The Convergence Between Fashion and Technology

The concept of *Fashion* is complex and ambiguous:

- (i) Fashion as an industry of clothing, footwear, accessories, and cosmetics, which in addition to the commercial aspect, has an essential and artistic component.
- (ii) Social, economic and cultural phenomenon, characteristic of the West and modernity.
- (iii) Historical and cultural barometer, an indicator of the taste of a given period, may constitute the aesthetic and critical basis of a given historical period.
- (iv) Fashion in its wearable aspect is also a form of expression, a language, a medium that has already led to many “revelations without bloodshed” (Dior quoted in Tcheng, 2014), gains more strength with its multiple media ramifications, inseparable from culture and mass communication (Pereira, 2018).

The fashion phenomenon arose closely linked to modernity, mass culture, and cinema. Cinema provided Fashion with a vast field of action. In fact, with the first stars of Hollywood, Fashion shone in all its splendour, while clothing gained more visibility, fashion designers more fame, and Fashion phenomena, in turn, also contributed to boxing office successes (Seeling, 1999). Fashion served as an inspiration for cinema, and at the same time, it used cinema for its dissemination — a relationship that we still find today but extended to multiple screens, and accentuated in social networks, a phenomenon that Lev Manovich (2019) named after instaganism.

As an art or entertainment industry, cinema was built from a figurative device — the screen. The screen is not just a technical invention but a magical space where the wishes and dreams of a majority, the masses, are projected (Lipovetsky, 2007).

Cinema appears as art free of the weight of the past and, thus, resembles Fashion in its primacy of the present, mainly in 3 fundamental aspects:

- (i) Industry — the search for the most immediate and most tremendous possible commercial success.
- (ii) The continuous launch of new films, or products, in which the latter overlap with the former.
- (iii) The awakening of passing passions for a brief season.

To these characteristics, we can also add the capacity for seduction. Both cinema and Fashion promote seduction, the artificial, and the magic of appearances. Like Fashion, the star is an artificial construction (Lipovetsky, 1987).

Technological development has created new challenges and new possibilities for Fashion, both in terms of production, communication, advertising and commerce, and creativity. Fashion has migrated to digital media in a constantly changing world, where we see as common place posters and catalogues moving to a digital format and have links to augmented virtual reality. Fashion magazines now have an online presence, i.e., the pace of content production and contact with the public has changed. Fashion editorials have also changed, static fashion photographic images have gained movement and sound with fashion films. Blogs, vblogs, social networks, YouTube, and many others appeared and multiplied. Fashion embraced the digital age's technological revolution, spreading through the multiplicity of screens and hybridizing with other artistic and consumer areas.

We understand digital media art as a form of artistic expression produced through technological resources and/or channels of diffusion, previously exclusive to the information and entertainment industry, and that resort to technology as a tool and creative engine for contemporary art production. In other words, digital media art is art produced with the means of its time. Hence, it is probably the form of contemporary artistic creation that best expresses contemporary man's sensitivity and knowledge.

When we analyse digital media art from a post-digital perspective, we find different ways to combine digital and computational technology and aesthetics with physical materials or ways of producing hand-crafts. Technology and digital aesthetics remain a matter, theme, or channel of diffusion, but creativity gains supremacy, testing new ways to increase immersion and interactivity with the public. The proto-interactive conceptual installations are revisited, and new experimenting dimensions appear. Thus, we are facing here an emerging aesthetic inheriting characteristics of the digital, the media and of the materials, along with new challenges in communication, sharing of materials and of the creative cycle itself that may become collaborating in the global network of communities of creative persons working in fashion and arts (among others).

## The Impact of Digital Media on Contemporary Fashion

The Covid-19 pandemic caught the Fashion System off guard, even though fashion brands had already realized the impact of digital culture on the global world, however, have had not invested much in new technologies. When in 2020, the world faced the world's restrictions pandemic, the fashion industry has confronted a decline that reached 90% of economic profit (BoF, 2020).

With the state of global emergency and imposed confinement, consumers' lifestyle has changed: social, professional, and leisure activities have moved to the web and its virtual worlds. We have seen major changes in public habits, interests, and consumption. The average consumer started to experience their online presence even more. In the face of tomorrow's uncertainties, the general public began to be more concerned with sustainable well-being and the environmental and social resources of the planet. Fashion reflects contemporary times, and as such, it has had to increase efforts to combine its tangible collections with digital media formats, mixing creative means and processes.

In this online version, fashion weeks have had to reinvent themselves, have become more democratic, targeting both consumers and industry experts. Live events seek to encourage public participation and interactivity and data collection for brands (McDowell, 2020).

With bans on events with many people and severe travel restrictions between countries and counties, fashion shows and world fashion weeks have become online events. In September 2020, New York Fashion Week presented the collections of the designers' brands on two different platforms, NYFW.com and Runway360, if on the one hand, these two platforms ensured digital diversity, yet presented an overlap, or duplication of projects, with similar agendas (McDowell, 2020 A).

According to WGSN (Worth Global Style Network- trend forecasting company) forecasts, in the coming years, we will see an expansion of virtual identities, with photo-realistic avatars capable of accurately simulating facial expressions, movements, and voices; and more significant investment in the development of emotional, sensory experiences in simulated virtual worlds and mixed reality environments (WGSN, 2020).

There is currently an increasing appreciation of “digital craftsmanship” and an increase in fashion brands to develop and commercialize fashion and interior design pieces for the virtual worlds, with the same attention to detail as the tangible pieces, but without implying material resources, opening a new field of possibilities for expression, expansion, and promotion of sustainability (McDowell, 2021).



Figure 1. Leela — The Fabricant Project {The Fabricant, Leela, 2020, <https://www.thefabricant.com/>, copyright: The Fabricant}

In Amsterdam, the Netherlands, several startups have emerged that combine Fashion and Technology, focusing on building a fashion ecosystem that encompasses sustainability, digital transformation, innovation, and disruptive technologies (Kapfunde, 2020). Of this ecosystem, we highlight the fashion company The Fabricant, founded in 2018, dedicated to the manufacture of exclusively digital clothing (The Fabricant, 2021). These projects have creative predecessors such as SHOWstudio and Zeitguised. Photographer Nick Knight founded the SHOWstudio in 2000, London, United Kingdom. SHOWstudio is a digital platform that calls itself Home of Fashion (Khan, 2012) and whose objectives can be summarized in four keywords: process, performance, interactivity, and fashion film (Gindt, 2011). It is a pioneering project for emerging fashion film genres (Evans, 2013). SHOWstudio was born to change the way we receive and perceive Fashion. Knight brought together a multidisciplinary team from different artistic areas such as music, art, architecture, and performance to explore the potential of fashion

film, and investigating through artistic practice, the relationship of Fashion and digital media, looking for ways to involve the fashion consumer through collaborative projects, blogs, and the use of interactive digital technology (Khan, 2012).



Figure 2. Frame of Void Season — Extended 04 Fashion {Zeitguised, Void Season – Extended 04 Fashion, 2018, Zeitguised, copyright: Zeitguised Studio}

Zeitguised, based in Berlin, is a studio founded in 2009 by architect Henrik Mauler and sculptor Jamie Rap and produces videos with textile simulations, exploring the fluid materiality of organic algorithms (Zeitguised, 2021). For Zeitguised, it is a mistake to perceive manual labor as very different from computer-based work, often criticized for appearing reproducible through machines. They consider that this view disregards the boldness and strength of the ideas transformed into programming, algorithms, and system configurations. It is a process that they consider to be completely artistic and frame it as synthetic art (Longstrech, 2016). With origins in architecture, design, and Fashion, these artists explore tangible forms in digital art, animating real (tangible) objects and materials so that they gain a new life on the screen. Working in a completely simulated, 3D space with light software to imitate its incidence, reflections, and the visual qualities of materials and surfaces, the object's photography and filming is simulated in software such as Cinema 4D or Houdini. To evade human perception, leading the viewer to believe that the work displayed on the 2D screen is a recording of something in the tangible world (Moreno, 2016).

## Post-Digital

Post-digital is synonymous with contemporaneity, characterized by digital technology's ubiquity, omnipresent in all aspects of everyday life, expanding the digital. The daily experience of living in a "computational society" encourages the search for new concepts and experiences to understand and define the present.

In the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, we witnessed an accelerated development of technology, with a growing presence in contemporary society's daily life, both concerning social, cultural, and professional life. Adérito Fernandes-Marcos mentioned the current era as "the post-personal computer era," in which digital media are a fundamental part of building and sustaining the information society (Marcos, 2017). The internet and social networks influence contemporary society to the point that authors like Lev Manovich refer to contemporary society as Instagranism (Manovich, 2019) and Luciano Florini reflects on the hyperconnected era, developing the concept of Onlife (Floridi, 2015).

Post-digital can be interpreted as a response to aesthetic capitalism (Lipovetsky, 2013). It is not a rupture, but an evolution, in which creativity overlaps technology, imbricating a desire to blur the boundaries between the physical and the digital, always preserving the digital/computational aesthetics.

Authors such as Hans Ulrich Obrist (2015), consider that the generation of post-digital artists grew with the advent of the internet and computational technology. Naturally, they are influenced by digital, but many do essentially physical work, exploring various tactile materials. These artists oscillate between digital and analogue, with total fluidity, moving freely between disciplines and media formats. Indeed, digital media have changed social interaction but have not entirely replaced immersive physical experiences. Some authors, such as Jonathan Openshaw (Openshaw, 2015), consider that they are felt to be stimulated in digital artefacts. Thus, post-digital rematerialisation allows the appeal to tactile, olfactory, and even taste senses. In addition to exploring sensations, post-digital brings a field of creation and research-oriented to the design of emotions. The material side of the objects of (re) materialized digital medium-art refers us to Erkki Huptamo's theories of haptic art (Huptamo, 2007) and to the ability of these objects to arouse the desire for interaction and, essentially, to stimulate through the gaze the desire to touch, but also to provoke desire in its three emotional dimensions: visceral, behavioural and reflective (Norman, 2004).

In the beginning, the concept of post-digital was associated with the rematerialisation of digital art and with a strategy of these artists to be accepted in the contemporary art milieu, since tangible artefacts are more easily integrated into exhibitions in traditional galleries and have a commercial value better understood by the public. Yet, we are currently seeing the reverse. The (re) materialization of design works and products between different media formats is intensified, adapting to consumers' change and how they live between tangible, virtual, and mixed realities.

As a result of contemporary times, post-digital is strongly influenced by aesthetic capitalism and consequently by the Fashion system. Aesthetic capitalism designates the aestheticization of the economy, the constant search for style and beauty (and instigation) in the construction of images and products with aesthetic-emotional dimensions, including the following main characteristics:

- (i) The growing attention given to sensitivity and the design process, seeking to achieve a stylization of goods and places, the integration of art, the look and affection in consumption.
- (ii) An operation that rationally explores, in a generalized way, the aesthetic-imaginary-emotional dimensions for-profit and the conquest of the market.
- (iii) Undifferentiation of the economic and aesthetic spheres with the hybridization between economics and aesthetics, industry and style, fashion and art, entertainment and culture, commercial and creative, mass culture and high culture.
- (iv) We are facing capitalism based on seduction (based on inducing emotional expectations of consumers) that replaces capitalism based on production (Lipovetsky, 2013).

Post-digital again places materiality and dematerializing artistic practices as new sources of reflection, artistic experimentation and scientific research. The post-digital and the intrinsic transdisciplinarity bring new domains and interpretations in art while simultaneously enhances the creation of new expressions and aesthetic narratives, generating renewed challenges and hypotheses, both formally and in the face of the public's reaction to the treated themes and to fruition scenarios proposed for experimentation.

## Post-Digital Fashion Artefacts

A post-digital fashion artefact is an art object created based on digital/computational aesthetics where Fashion, in its clothing or system aspects, is taken as a theme or support.

The concept of post-digital artefact results from the union of the notion of artwork and of its utilitarian purposes. In this context, we can consider that the artefact is the result of a creative purpose, i.e., to address a specific aesthetic discourse.

Like digital media art artefacts, post-digital fashion artefacts aim to provide an enriching experience of sensorial, emotional, and intellectual enjoyment while exploring technological innovations to create new aesthetic discourses. Post-digital artefacts do not have to be produced exclusively by computational/digital materials. In fact, these post-digital fashion artefacts are mostly hybrid (tangible-offline and virtual-online) (re)materialized in various supports thus adapting to exhibitions on tangible spaces and to exhibitions, which are increasingly in vogue, online.

The emergence of fashion artefacts in the contemporary art panorama flourishes with post-digital aesthetics. Post-digital artefacts question and compel us to rethink how fashion is exhibited in galleries/museums, its place as an artistic object, and the interaction between it and the public. In many cases, they are objects of desire that become agents of induction of critical thinking.

### Analysis of 4 artefacts from/about Fashion



Figure 3. Voguing Mask IG Filter (left) and Chalayan outfit F/W 2019 (right), Hussein Chalayan {Hussein Chalayan, Voguing Mask, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/chalayanstudio>, copyright: Chalayan}

Hussein Chalayan is a creator of fashion and fashion artefacts, describes himself as an immigrant between disciplines: from fashion design, architecture, philosophy, engineering, and anthropology. This creator's work embraces the dualities between art and consumption, fashion and cinema, heritage, and the future. Hussein compares his work to a narrative, a way of telling stories, incorporating different themes, experimenting with new and innovative materials and forms of less conventional forms of expression.

In this fashion artefact, Chalayan used the helmets presented in the sculptural accessories he created for his fashion show in international fashion weeks. Through augmented reality technology, he made them democratic and shareable among the public, making these models three-dimensional filters in augmented reality filters from the social network Instagram. Users of Instagram can thus use the filters, which simulate the 3d pieces, try them on their body, interact with this artefact, photograph themselves and share again on social networks. This artefact allowed Chalayan to turn his accessory into an

expanded fashion artefact and approach the public, interact with him, and test new ways of communicating post-digital.

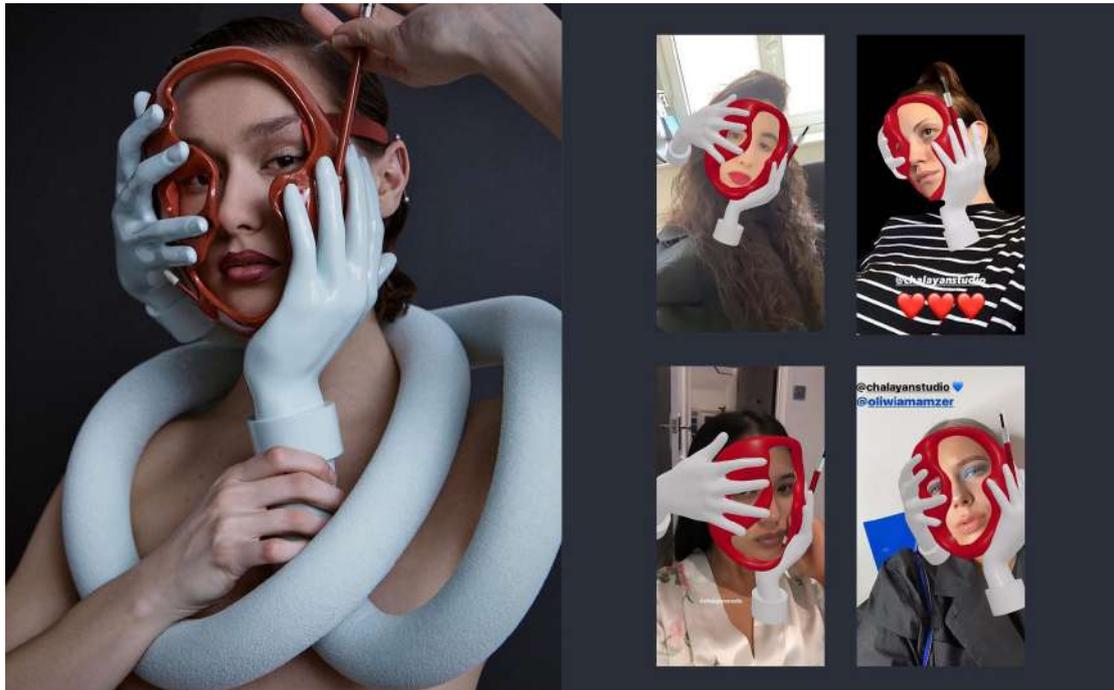


Figure 4. Voguing Mask IG Filter shared on Instagram {Hussein Chalayan, Voguing Mask shared on Instagram, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/chalayanstudio>, copyright: Chalayan}



Figure 5. Nature of a Digital Dream sculpture {Selma Pereira, Nature of a Digital Dream, 2020, source: Selma Eduarda.pt, copyright: Authors}

*Nature of a Digital Dream* is a hybrid installation that combines textile sculpture and augmented reality technology, presented at Artrooms Rome 2019 – International Contemporary Art Fair for Independent Artists. The installation is a sculptural, hybrid rematerialisation that invites viewers to interact and immerse themselves in the fashion artefact.



Figure 6. Details of *Nature of a Digital Dream* sculpture {Selma Pereira, *Nature of a Digital Dream*, 2019, source: Selma Eduarda.pt, copyright: Authors}

This installation reflects the author's view of the relationship between the body, fashion, and the digital/virtual worlds. On tangible sculpture, the body is covered by several textile layers of different origins, and with different textures — layers of smooth, banal, and even uninteresting fabric, sometimes interrupted by elaborate layers and fabrics that approach scales. Mirrored textile materials perforate the shapes and layers, a member of the sculpture is amputated and violently interconnected by foreign materials with an i-tech appearance.

The digital component consists of an application for mobile devices (which the public could download for free through Google Play), where information about the concept of the piece, the making of the creation of the installation, and augmented reality can be found, in which the user, when pointing at the sculpture, sees the video-art component of the piece.



Figure 7. Al-Andaluz Textil: art installation (left) and frame of video projection (right) {Selma Pereira, Al-AndaluzTextil, 2017, source: Selma Eduarda. pt, copyright: Authors}

The installation was developed for the XIX International Biennial of Art of Cerveira, in Vila Nova de Cerveira, Portugal, with the theme *From pop-art to trans-avant-garde, appropriations of popular art*. The concept of appropriation served as a motto for reflecting on contemporary culture, and the lived aesthetic capitalism, the processes of creation and dissemination in the digital age.

*Al-Andaluz Têxtil* is made up of a white textile sculpture and a video (mapped video projection) that covers the textile object and expands through the surrounding exhibition space.

The installation *Al-Andaluz Têxtil* was exhibited for the first time in Silves, Portugal, in 2014. In 2017, the author revisited this installation. Moreover, this time, returning to the textile fragments, she appropriated the patterns, thinking about the fashion images that surround us in daily life, and using the techniques of the organic narrative of the fashion films, she created a video that wears the textile object, transporting it to other dimensions and materialities.

In *Al-Andaluz Têxtil* the intention is clearly to provide an experience of post-digital enjoyment, where the transparency/ubiquity of digital is sought explicitly by the video's superimposition element wearing the textile object. The installation combines two issues specific to post-digital: the materiality of the tangible textile object vs. the re-materialization of these textiles through the projected cinema language; and the forms of appropriation in digital culture: the appropriation of textile techniques and patterns materialized in the textile object and the appropriation of cinema images to create an audio-visual composition of video art.

The use of textile materials (fabrics) as the material of choice — even when the fabric materializes only on the screen or in the projection (as in the installation *Al-Andaluz Têxtil*), arouses the desire to touch, to know its texture, to feel the material, experience the reaction to touching and movement. The fabrics, by themselves or represented in different media, are suitable for haptic art.

Haptic vision and visual touch are characteristics/trends already present in the “traditional” figurative art. The concept of haptic visuality implies the transposition of the qualities of touch to the vision domain through a bodily operation, which involves the eyes and the brain, but the hands may not be part (except as a projection of the imaginary).



Figure 8. Virus (2012), Valentim Quaresma {Valentim Quaresma, Virus, 2012, source: Valentim Quaresma, Copyright: Valentim Quaresma}

Valentim Quaresma (1970-Lisbon, Portugal) is a multidisciplinary artist with a primary focus on contemporary jewellery, sculpture, and, in recent years, also in fashion. He sees contemporary jewellery as a form of expression and fashion as beauty. To Valentim Quaresma, he is more interested in the discovery and upcycling of different materials than technology. In his atelier, they only have the necessary technology; he continues to produce his pieces in a handmade way, with care to detail but making little use of noble materials.

Quaresma is clearly influenced by the artist Maiko Takeda's post-digitality, whose work is marked by works of contemporary jewellery in everyday materials, which explore the connection between nature vs. artificial and aura vs. digital. Takeda's pieces are close to digital, without containing any electronic device (Takeda, 2021)

Since 2012, Valentim Quaresma has presented his collections in all editions of ModaLisboa and shows his pieces with a more sculptural nature in individual exhibitions, such as *Apocalypse*, at Palácio da Ajuda, in 2019. Digital culture and aesthetics serve him as inspiration in the themes of his collections and the very concept and forms of the author's sculptural pieces.

His sculptural jewellery pieces lead us to a futuristic universe, close to science fiction with cyborgs, machines of the future, and strangely beautiful prostheses.

In this pandemic and uncertain time, Valentim Quaresma is disappointed by the little, if any, acceptance of fashion as art, by the entities that support the arts, and by the Portuguese Ministry of Culture. The artist warns that more attention is needed to the 'creative industries', born and developed in the fusion of culture and creativity — strategic competitive factors for almost all economic activities of goods and services, especially in consumer markets' more dynamic end. "In the case of fashion, it does not exist for the Ministry of Culture, especially for DGArtes [General Directorate for the Arts]. I would say that fashion is an orphan in culture in Portugal." (interview with V. Quaresma in A.Murcho (2021)

## The multidisciplinary present in post-digital artefacts

Since the 1990s and 2000s, fashion began to be seen in academia from an interdisciplinary perspective. The theme begins to emerge with different expressions such as fashion studies and fashion-ology (Godart, 2010). In recent years, fashion has become an important research topic in social and cultural theory, the focus of many analyses that try to understand the phenomenon of fashion in contemporary times.

Fashion is now seen as a proper investigative area for understanding various social and cultural issues, from production and consumption practices to political identities. Fashion Studies have gradually developed, using methodologies from many other disciplines, such as history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and media studies, among many others (Rocamora, 2015).

When analysing post-digital fashion artefacts, we are faced with a complex and transdisciplinary contemporary fashion—a fashion, or art-fashion, influenced by what Lipovetsky (2016) called hyper fashion. Hyperfashion is art that intends to be the expression of itself, the appeal to sensory experience and immediate senses, betting on seduction in the search for aesthetic pleasure.

This art-fashion is the result of contemporary art influenced by the fashion system, in which the artistic merged with the commercial and with fashion. In agreement with Lipovetsky's (2016) thinking, many museums and contemporary art institutions started to organize themselves according to a "spectacle logic", betting on playfulness, in exhibitions that appeal to theatricality, illusion, seduction, enticement, playful and light pleasure.

If we look at post-digital art from this point of view, we find dimensions common to the fashion system:

- (i) Phenomenon: socio-cultural phenomenon capable of acting as a barometer of a society at a given time. Reflects society, taste, media and technology its time, date of creation and production.

- (ii) Trans-aesthetics: concept by Gilles Lipovetsky (2016) to refer to the contemporaneity in which the economic and aesthetic spheres have hybridized into a hyper art.
- (iii) Ephemeral: fashion, although it has a tangible body — in garments and accessories — is ephemeral about fashion trends, the imposition of renewal, and rapid disuse. In digital media-art we find this characteristic in the ephemerality of objects, primarily immaterial and their digital essence. But also, in need to update the computational equipment, make upgrades of the software and hardware, which is a short time become obsolete, for the enjoyment and creation of digital media art.
- (iv) Media: the fashion system is, since its origin — in modern times, intrinsically linked to media culture, consumer society, materialistic, with the digital age it expanded through digital media.
- (v) Performative: whether it is the fashion presentations at the shows or on the screen, fashion reinforces its presence before the public, using performative dimensions brought through cinematographic, theatrical, scenic, narrative languages, with different types of sensory and experimental complexities. The advent of the internet has transformed classic fashion shows into global shows, with millions of spectators around the world participating in real-time, making the show a form of digital spectacle.
- (vi) Criticism: fashion is a form of expression, a language, a medium that, being “masses”, can carry out “revolutions without bloodshed”, as has been shown throughout history. Fashion can boost cultural, world trends, renew ways of being and do, and to subvert aesthetic orientations.
- (vii) Desire: the fashion system exploits desire. The desire is aroused in the viewer through the look, a desire to obtain, for personal gratification through consumption, a desire for belonging, individualization, and social distinction. Exploration of the aesthetic-emotional characteristics of objects to appeal to the senses and arouse desire in the viewer.
- (viii) Immersion: the spectator also immerses himself in fashion, driven by desire, seduction and through the dream, the viewer enters the narrative built by the fashion brand.
- (ix) Spectator-participant-user: the fashion system, in recent years, has worked on to encourage the public to participate and actively collaborate with their projects: responding, contributing creatively, communicating and/or evaluating the results.
- (x) Palpable: the fashion piece, even when it only materializes on the screen, causes the fabric to be touched, the desire to know its texture, feel the material, appreciate its “fit”, its reaction to touch, and to movement. Textile materials, per se or represented in various media, are conducive to haptic art.
- (xi) Emotional: Fashion causes us visceral emotions, concerning its ability to provoke passing passions; behavioural, in the pleasure of acquisition and effectiveness of use; or reflective, about self-image, its self-representation to the desire to belong to a group/society, to the distinction; personal satisfaction, the message it conveys and the memories it awakens.
- (xii) Memories: Fashion pieces, whether in the wardrobe of your home or when displayed in a museum, awaken memories of times, situations, bodies, places ... they tell the individual story of those who wore them but also of the moment and the society in which they were inserted. Its construction, the fibers that compose it, the techniques with which it was executed, its ornamentation are characteristics of a determined time, society, group, thus being part of the collective memory. (Carvalho, Pereira & Marcos, 2017; Pereira, 2018).

## The post-digital creation cycle applied to fashion artefacts

Artistic practice can be seen to enhance the understanding of knowledge, so research based on artistic practice appears as an alternative to current research methodologies and methods. It is not an investigation about art, but an investigation based on the artistic practice itself (Sullivan, 2010).

Marcos, in 2017, defended that the creation process in digital art often depends on collaboration between artists and a team of programmers, technicians, scientists, designers, among others, involved in a multidisciplinary work process in fields such as art, science, technology, design, psychology. (Marcos, 2017).

In this context, Marcos (2017) diagrammed a creation cycle in digital media art based mainly on the design of the artefact's message (or experience) and its development, in a process in which digital media are always present. This creation process is different from the methodology commonly adopted by design, in which the process is focused on solving a problem, which dictates the guiding thread of the entire process. In this creation cycle, systematization aims to enhance the final artefact, providing a significant experience of enjoyment and aesthetic contemplation while materializing the artefact.

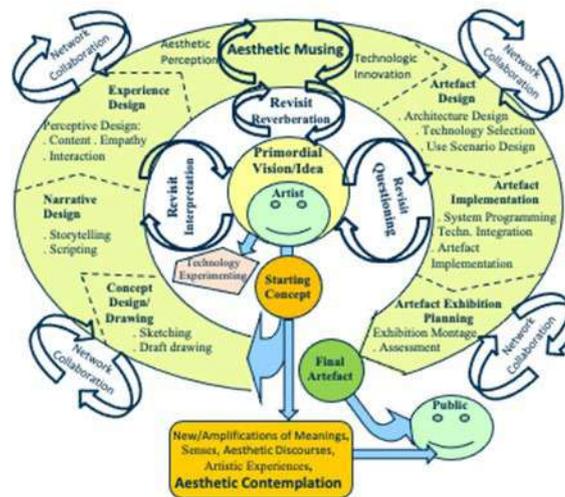


Figure 9. The creation cycle in digital (computer) art {Adérito Fernandes-Marcos, 2017, source: Marcos(2017), Copyright: Adérito Fernandes-Marcos}

Given the characteristics of post-digital, intensified with the network experience in these pandemic times, the exhibitions tend to become hybrids (working in the physical space and online), making it urgent to rethink and, in some cases, adapt, the artistic creation process.

When developing artefacts that will be enjoyed in the tangible space and on the viewer's personal computer screen, it is essential to plan this difference in support (can be seen as canvas) and experiences since the beginning of the creative cycle. In several cases, audio-visual records of the artefacts are presented in the virtual exhibitions, where the spectator's experience when watching the video of the artefact is much more limited, both in terms of interaction or immersion, as well as aesthetic emotion when compared to contact with the artefact in physical space.

In this context, we propose the post-digital creation cycle, where network collaboration with multidisciplinary teams intensifies, given the differences in support, materials, and disciplines inherent to this hybrid character of artefacts (Pereira & Marcos, 2020).

This cycle maintains the initial concept as the "starting point" of the cycle. From then on, the artist, alone or in collaboration with other artists/researchers, begins to design and build concepts, entering a non-linear process, which takes him/her to the final artefact/installation, but which will not end there, will continue through production theory, scientific publications and communications about the artefact produced but also about the creative process itself.

The process from the aesthetic meditation phase is divided into two simultaneous, synchronous, and constantly communicating sub-cycles, the development of the artefact to be displayed in the tangible space and the development of the artefact for online/virtual presentation.

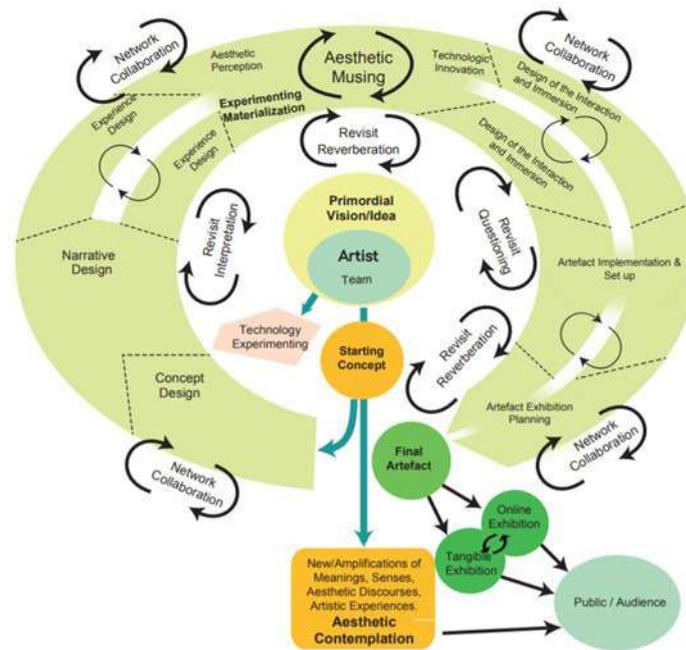


Figure 10. The creation cycle in post-digital art {Authors, 2021, Source: Authors, Copyright: Authors}

## Concluding remarks

Aesthetic capitalism united, breaking boundaries and extrapolating the logic of fashion far beyond the sphere of consumption. Areas of study as history, heritage, and safeguarding collective identity and memory are also influenced positively and negatively by fashion and world culture. They have become fashionable, added value to enhance art, culture, new products, artefacts, and experiences.

The fashion pieces tell, simultaneously, the individual story (of those who produced and wore them) and the collective story (of the time and society), but they are also a form of creative expression, where the creator/designer expressed a concept and/or message, and the consumer interpreted it by dressing and matching it with other pieces. We can consider fashion a means of communication and an artistic medium capable of reaching a vast audience.

Fashion, long before the digital age, already contained the dimensions of criticism. To quote Lipovetsky (1987): fashion “allows the widening of public discussion, greater autonomy of thoughts and subjective existences, it is the supreme agent of individualistic dynamics in different manifestations”.

With this paper, we intend to contribute to the discussion of the convergence of fashion with art and technology, highlighting the influence of post-digital aesthetics on fashion, and, consequently, of the fashion system on post-digital artistic production. We also intend to contribute to discussing the still diffuse theory of the boundaries between the digital and the post-digital, taking as an example 4 artefacts analysed in this article.

We can analyse the creation cycle in post-digital art for fashion artefacts' point of view: these are artefacts with artistic intentions and not just be commercial or marketing. Most of these artefacts are tangible, but even when they assume immaterial shapes, they often simulate fabrics or wearable pieces (although the human body may not be represented, as in the example of the Zeitguised, Fig.2). Therefore, as represented in the creation cycle in post-digital art, in fashion artefacts' creative process has as its starting point the artist's vision/concept and developed by the artists(s) and multidisciplinary teams.

Most of these artefacts have material supports (textile sculptures, art installations, or others), but in-

creasingly they are complemented by (or are total) digital/virtual rematerialisations. Taking the previous analysed artefacts as example, the Chalayan artifact (Fig. 3 to 6), the material artefact presented at the Chalayan F/W 2019 Fashion Show (Fig. 4), is rematerialized (Fig 3) and later implemented in the filters for the Instagram (Fig. 5 and 6), making it interactive and allowing a broader audience to know and enjoy it.

In the *Al-Andaluz Têxtil* artefact, the tangible and virtual components were created simultaneously to complement the virtual instance (Fig. 11 and 12). In the *Nature of a digital dream* artefact (Figs 7 and 8), the process of creating the material and virtual component was thought from the beginning, but in this artefact the virtual component was planned in order to continue the tangible artefact after the (presential) exposure ends. The *Virus* artefact (Fig. 13) is just a tangible object, in which its virtualization took place later through photographic recording.

In future investigations we will continue to analyze the boundaries between the digital and the post-digital, drawing mainly on our experience in artistic practice on/about fashion.

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# Out of the Boardroom and into the Showroom: Shifting the Brand Digital Conversation from Emotional Response to Awareness

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## Abstract

In the contemporary digital environment, brands are modelling their communication strategies on values typical of the corporate world and thus creating a widened narrative which transforms emotional storytelling into something more oriented towards authenticity, reputation and ethics. An insight into where your jeans were packaged or the tags on your trainers were made, a glimpse inside the factories where raw materials are transformed into products, a guide to every step of the process by which fishing nets recovered at sea are recycled into items of clothing — these are just a few examples of what today might be termed “project storytelling”: manufacturing information as narrative, sustainability in action to sidestep accusations of greenwashing. Brands are becoming more and more aware of the need to present a transparent creative process in all its phases, as well as to involve the consumer in the dialogue. In this brave new world, there are many admirable examples of brands at which the traditional rhetoric of the fashion narrative (more closely linked to aspirational and purely aesthetic imaginaries) has given way to a total honesty and a commitment to customers and, above all, younger generations, who are ever more concerned with questions of ecology, inclusivity and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Transparency; Awareness; Brand Activism; Purpose Marketing; Augmented Denotation.

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## Introduction

An insight into how raw fabric is transformed into a T-shirt (Pangaia), a glimpse into where your trainers are created (Veja), or a guide to every step of the process by which fishing nets recovered at sea are recycled into items of clothing, making valuable use of waste material (Ecoalf) — these are just a few examples of what might be termed “project storytelling”: manufacturing details as narrative, sustainability in action. Brands narration focuses increasingly on transparency — revealing the process of creation in all its phases — and involving the consumer as a participant. Corporate social responsibility<sup>1</sup> has taken its place at the heart of communications and customer relations. In this brave new world, which had already emerged substantially pre-Covid 19, there are many admirable examples of DTC (direct-to-consumer)<sup>2</sup> brands at which the typical rhetoric of the fashion story (more closely linked to aspirational and purely aesthetic imaginaries) has given way to a total honesty and a commitment to their customers and to the new generations. It gives prominence to the smallest of suppliers and sheds light on the innermost workings of the production process to ensure that value is spread throughout the supply chain. As they erase the differences between B2B and B2C in a digital narrative that, today more than ever, is H2H (human-to-human),<sup>3</sup> not only DTC brands<sup>4</sup> but also companies are placing new notions of authenticity in the foreground. “Made in” culture has thus become an important part of company websites, official social media, newsletters, and all available channels of communications, as further progress is made towards a new concept of storytelling.

With the aim of tracing the new aesthetic-narrative modalities of transparency, this essay will focus on specific case studies that in recent years have experienced very high growth (both economic and in terms of prominence) and have become key to any discourse on these new forms of corporate authenticity.<sup>5</sup> The communication of each brands on official websites and social channels was analysed through a narrative and visual approach. Similarly, the analysis of companies such as Reda, Desserto, Piñatex and Rifò focused on their communication practices on official sites and social media, mainly analysing copywriting texts and the aesthetics of the photographs. The analysis was therefore of a narrative, visual type, focusing on the style that the brands seek to create. Working on identities on a visual level, the proposed cases shine a new light on the relationship between the construction of meaning and the crucial question of authenticity, which on several levels shapes both the private and public discourse of individuals on social media; now it also shapes the behaviour of companies and brands. In doing so, the coordinates are set for further interpretations of this new aesthetic, stemming from broader reflection on the theme of authenticity as the heart of contemporary philosophical and political ethics.

## The pursuit of transparency

The profound cultural, social, economic, and political changes of our times are generating a significant paradigm shift in the creation and affirmation of new fashion identities. The interdependence of new expressions of project design and creativity and the events of the historical moment in which we find

1. Ryan Honeyman, Tiffany Jana, and Rose Marcario, *The B Corp Handbook: How You Can Use Business As a Force for Good*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Pub., 2018)
2. “The New Four Ps of DTC Marketing,” *The Business of Fashion*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/case-studies/marketing-pr/the-new-four-ps-of-dtc-marketing-download-the-case-study>.
3. Santina Giannone and Marisandra Lizzi, *Comunicare human to human. Dai valore alla tua azienda attraverso purpose marketing e brand journalism* (Flaccovio Dario, 2020); Bryan Kramer, *There is No B2B or B2C. It's Human to Human: #H2H* (Waldorf Pub., 2017)
4. Small and medium-sized independent brands with a truly global reach which have cut out the middleman completely and owe their rise to sales online and through social media. BoF Team, “A New Playbook for DTC Brands,” *The Business of Fashion*, 10 February 2021, sec. Video, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/videos/marketing-pr/a-new-playbook-for-dtc-brands>.
5. “Pangaia Is The Sustainable Fashion Brand Taking Over Instagram” *L'Officiel France*’ <https://www.lofficielsingapore.com/fashion/pangia-life-size-fashion>; Grace Cook, “How Sustainable Sneaker Brand Veja Went Viral,” *Financial Times*, 11 October 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/69b6e762-e8ee-11e9-a240-3bo65ef5fc55>.

ourselves traces a fascinating and unprecedented relation with the context. Without doubt the most important factor in this profound shift in the global social and cultural equilibrium is digitalisation. There are a series of aspects of this complex phenomenon that have changed the world of fashion at every level: lack of job security — the combined effect of globalisation of the supply chain and crisis in the classic model of production —, the advent of the long tail which flanks the mass market model, the emergence of a mass of markets that satisfy niche global consumer demands, and the intense hybridisation of productive and discursive systems traditionally hailing from different cultural industries (communications, art, fashion and design).<sup>6</sup> Such radical change has profoundly altered the way in which fashion brands have begun to engage with the market, amplifying their identities and industry presence through the web. Not only this, but these changes — added to the equally decisive transition to online user participation — have contributed to the creation of an increasingly switched-on and conscious class of consumers.<sup>7</sup> Growing pursuit of transparency on the part of the consumer has created strong incentives for companies to change the way they first visualise and then develop their entrepreneurship.

This is not just a question of Generation Z; there exist, in fact, various groups of individuals and consumers for whom not only the quality of a product but also the sustainability and transparency initiatives present throughout the entire supply chain are a key factor, essential to the purchasing process.<sup>8</sup> It is a sustainability born of an omni-channel distribution in which the story of the brand becomes a civic narrative, presenting itself as an opportunity for innovation even within classic communications processes. Many of these brands have been conscious from the start that customer relations are now conducted in an environment, such as that of social media, less obviously oriented towards sales and more towards the democratisation of trends and the building of communities. That being said, digital-savvy brands are more than aware of the processes of engagement and gamification that underlie contemporary consumption.<sup>9</sup> In this new landscape and as a consequence of the factors listed above, conversation on the impact of fashion from both an environmental and a social point of view has intensified considerably.<sup>10</sup> However, this dash for green narratives does not always correspond immediately to ecological measures being taken: many articles and studies of the industry complain of regulatory gaps and highlight the grey areas which exist.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, lack of data poses a considerable obstacle to fashion cleaning up its act when it comes to climate change and working conditions.

Sustainability is still rife with murky practices and a rather nebulous definition provides the ideal smoke-screen for the many companies that prefer to settle for the convenience of greenwashing rather than make real efforts to improve. In this still little-charted territory, it is a challenge even for brands with the best of intentions to choose the right suppliers, the right producers of raw materials, and set out on the right track.<sup>12</sup> The ever-growing demand for ethical behaviour is also supported by a range of organisations that raise awareness of more sustainable methods of production among both consumers and companies. Many communications campaigns cite the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Ecoalf focuses its commitment to the safeguarding of the oceans around one of these very goals, as we shall see), as well

6. Vittorio Linfante and Paola Bertola, *A-Z. Il nuovo vocabolario della moda italiana*. Illustrated ed. (Florence: Mandragora, 2015)

7. Consumption at its most switched-on and conscious may arise as a reaction to the overproduction of the fast fashion business model, as a new awareness of an ethical and ecological way of life, or as a means of empowering consumer choice and reestablishing consumption as a sharing of values with a chosen brand. See "Trust Barometer Special Report: Brand Trust in 2020," *Edelman*, accessed 19 March 2021, <https://www.edelman.com/research/brand-trust-2020>.

8. "Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020," *Deloitte*, accessed 19 March 2021, <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>.

9. Corinne Watson, "Direct to Consumer Trends 2021: 3 Brands Winning at DTC," *The BigCommerce Blog*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/dtc-trends/>.

10. Devon Powers, *On Trend: The Business of Forecasting the Future* (Urbana: University of Illinois Pr., 2019)

11. Elena Grinta, "Solo il 12% dei brand fashion a livello internazionale può essere considerato sostenibile | Communication For Good," *Be Intelligent*, accessed 18 March 2021, <https://www.beintelligent.eu/it/solo-il-12-dei-brand-fashion-a-livello-internazionale-puo-essere-considerato-sostenibile/>.

12. Sarah Kent, "Fashion's Greenwashing Problem Begins with Bad Data," *The Business of Fashion*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/sustainability/fashion-sustainability-data-greenwashing>.

as the organisations and foundations (such as Eco-Age, Fashion Revolution and the McArthur Foundation) whose mission it is to plug the gaps in regulation, to publish reports, articles, and management guides<sup>13</sup> which reach the whole industry and not only consumers, and to launch communications campaigns that help to shape this new way of thinking (for example, the #whomademyclothes campaign which was such a crucial forerunner of this trend).

## Telling fact from fiction

“Reality must take over fiction” (Fig.01): so claims a tagline used by the brand Veja to accompany a photo shot in the Amazon rainforest which speaks volumes, the human figures tiny and dwarfed by their surroundings. In a sort of manifesto of the aesthetics of transparency, Veja states:

When you deconstruct a product, and you have a truly transparent approach, reality becomes more fascinating than any advertising fiction or marketing story. And that’s also what we’re trying to prove with VEJA: describing reality is always more interesting than trying to make up stories about your own product.<sup>14</sup>

The urge to describe thus becomes the key to interpreting the new real: refined, essential, augmented but not falsified. As the Business of Fashion (BoF) also states, the imperative of “sorting fact from fiction” is leading to a growing number of companies and initiatives that work to provide full disclosure not only to consumers but also to industry players themselves. And although there is already a lot of talk of blockchains<sup>15</sup> and smart-tagging, here too there is no precise international standard to respect.<sup>16</sup> While blockchain adoption may have some potential benefits — such as improved risk reduction, operational processes, value creation, and retail experience —, use of these technologies is no mean feat for businesses. Since it is only a recent development, its economic, managerial and industrial aspects require study, and this makes companies hesitant to embrace it. Furthermore, discussion of such topics has usually been confined to corporate communications, as a means of safeguarding company assets. In the past, companies — in particular those operating in the fashion and lifestyle sectors — attributed a competitive advantage to supply-chain confidentiality, since guaranteeing the utmost confidentiality both in terms of suppliers and the origin of raw materials ensured the exclusivity and irreplaceability of the product. Today, however, some companies have little idea of how or where the materials used to make their clothes come from. Others collect data from their suppliers, but don’t always disclose it to the public, and when they do, it is rarely standardised so as to allow comparison with competitors. In many cases, exactly what to measure and how remains a point of discussion. Without getting in too deep, what must be underlined here is the extent to which the need for transparency operates on different planes and how this approach is shaping the fashion business at all levels (from infrastructure to

13. 65 NGOs submitted a strategy called Fair & Sustainable Textiles to the European Parliament, which sets out a legal framework to cover all aspects of sustainability in textiles. Cf. WFTO Europe, “Fair & Sustainable Textiles — European Civil Society Strategy,” *WFTO Europe* (blog), 23 April 2020, <https://wfto-europe.org/press-releases/fair-sustainable-textiles-european-civil-society-strategy/>.

14. See <https://project.veja-store.com/en/single/deconstructing>.

15. Born as a means of organising digital information, blockchain technology brings transparency, traceability, adaptability, scalability and flexibility to a system. It not only makes it possible to document each step of the production process, but also to protect the intellectual property of brands/designers. “Tracciabilità 4.0 nel sistema moda fra blockchain ed etichettatura smart,” *Rén collective* (blog), 20 February 2019, <https://recollective.org/blockchain-ed-etichettatura-smart/>; Marco Filocamo, “Blockchain Technology for Fashion: A Future Revolution?” *Fashion Technology Accelerator* (blog), accessed 7 March 2021, <https://www.ftaccelerator.it/blog/blockchain-technology-future-fashion/>.

16. There is a potential application in implementing a blockchain-based traceability system for textile and clothing supply chains. The necessity and concept of a traceability system could also provide some advantages for communications and marketing. See Tarun Kumar Agrawal, Ajay Sharma, and Vijay Kumar, “Blockchain-Based Secured Traceability System for Textile and Clothing Supply Chain,” in *Artificial Intelligence for Fashion Industry in the Big Data Era*, ed. Sébastien Thomassey and Xianyi Zeng, Springer Series in Fashion Business (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 197–208, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0080-6\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0080-6_10).

communications) to bring it closer and closer to the circular economy.<sup>17</sup> One of the key concerns of DTC brands and companies that are forging their own paths to sustainability is to make transparency the cornerstone of their narratives, edging the conversation away from emotional response and towards awareness. While the majority of high-profile brands (luxury, premium) still cling to a more aspirational means of self-representation tied to the classic aesthetic and communicative canons, the brands examined here, having totally cut out the middleman, have bet on another type of narrative. As they embrace this techno-poetic naturalism,<sup>18</sup> their websites and social media are fit to burst with infographics and videos that list and explain all the latest achievements in the field of textile engineering: from infographics on the new avenues opened up by plant-based down jackets (Pangaia, with their patented FLWRDWN) to videos presenting fabrics with images of the places where the raw materials are grown (Veja, Rifò). This all forms part of a narrative that speaks of quality and of valorisation of resources, of entrepreneurship and rich, interconnected local design and manufacturing, of technology, experimentation, and the flexibility of small supply chains, all radically redefining the way in which a particular section of the fashion industry talks about itself. In expressing this alternative mindset, they push the boundaries of their creativity by combining it with ethical credibility. They have in mind a certain profile of the contemporary consumer, who seeks a product not so much to satisfy a specific need but rather to represent a lifestyle.



Figure 1. Sébastien and Ghislain, Amazon, 2016, © Studio VEJA  
<https://project.veja-store.com/en/single/deconstructing>

## Brand activism and artisanship: description and deconstruction

Thanks to the digital, we live in an era of access which only serves to radicalise our innate desire to see things from a different perspective.<sup>19</sup> The expanded narrative which transforms emotive communications into something more oriented towards authenticity, reputation and ethics is rendering brand

17. To understand the system architecture of blockchain-enabled circular supply chain management in the fast fashion industry, cf. Bill Wang et al., "Blockchain-Enabled Circular Supply Chain Management: A System Architecture for Fast Fashion," *Computers in Industry* 123 (1 December 2020): 103324, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compind.2020.103324>.

18. In the world of outdoor technical clothing, Patagonia can be hailed as the founder of this trend. However, we must also bear in mind the unique nature and non-replicability of it as a case study. Patagonia was born of such a special corporate philosophy that its actions, for a long time, attracted no followers. Cf. Yvon Chouinard and Naomi Klein, *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman* (New York: Penguin Group USA, 2016)

19. Deconstructionist practice has always formed part of our culture, especially in relation to consumption.

strategy ever more a manifesto of commitment, driven also by the pressure from society to take sides, to embrace sustainability, and, above all, to wear it on your sleeve. The integration and interdependence of these key factors lies at the heart of the rediscovery of the “artisanal” model, regardless of the size of a company.<sup>20</sup> In pursuit of this new equilibrium and in complete control of their distribution and communications chains, DTC brands radically rethink their narratives<sup>21</sup> and the presentation of the product also often features the making of the product itself. Consider, for example, the case of Rifò, the Tuscan brand that takes its name from the local inflection of the verb *rifare* (“remake”) and so nods towards the dialect of the artisans — the so-called *cenciatori* (“ragmen”) — who invented a method of reusing old garments to produce new yarn more than a century ago.

The same goes for companies. Within a digital culture that thrives on propagation, it was only a matter of time before they, too, began to pick up on these new expressive practices. B2B and B2C, which for a long time operated according to very different communications systems, are now often closely aligned. Where previously corporate narratives spoke not to the public but to stakeholders, the H2H philosophy has brought about enormous change. The historic Italian company Reda<sup>22</sup> takes us on a guided tour of their ranches around the world, as we learn the names of the farms and their locations. Desserto,<sup>23</sup> a Mexican company that produces vegan leather from cactus plants, explains the transformation process to the tiniest detail, as do Piñatex,<sup>24</sup> which creates leather from pineapples, and Orange Fiber,<sup>25</sup> which creates a silky fabric from orange peel.

In this way, the concept of artisanship, understood as an approach to work, fuses with the much more recent concept of brand activism<sup>26</sup> to enact a transformation that steers us from “made in” culture to “who made and how”. If the former concept is useful for understanding the push towards deconstruction — that is, the production-line narrative in which each part is constructed separately allowing for experimentation, and the fundamental principle of the brand is based on combination —, the latter is based on a system of description in which surplus information is of cognitive benefit to the consumer and directs them towards the “purpose”. Of course, not all brands can afford themselves this internal dilation, this exploratory model in which digression into documentary description reveals new things and conveys knowledge.

## Hi-tech naturalism

‘The Truth About Fashion’ is a collaborative and educational project created to help student voices understand fashion and media beyond the most simplified stereotypes. The fashion school’s main goal was to investigate the truth about fashion by delving into how

20. The concepts of artisanal spirit, skill and manner of self-expression should bear no relation to size. In Italy, on the other hand, as Micelli argues (45), supporters of artisans tend to be defenders of small businesses, and this focus on size has caused us to overlook the qualitative aspect of craftsmanship, or rather the way it functions within businesses. Stefano Micelli, *Futuro artigiano: L'innovazione nelle mani degli italiani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011)

21. The fast fashion business model has had a transversal impact on all other models in the industry. The overproduction of high street brands has undoubtedly weakened the entire system for years, forcing many brands to change their idea of market position completely. “Resistance” to fast fashion and its frenzied and polluting model can be found here. See Dana Thomas, *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes* (London: Apollo, 2019); Elizabeth L. Cline, *The Conscious Closet: The Revolutionary Guide to Looking Good While Doing Good* (New York: Plume, 2019); Elizabeth L. Cline, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, (New York, NY: Portfolio, 2013); Marina Spadafora and Luisa Ciuni, *La rivoluzione comincia dal tu* (Milan: Solferino, 2020); Kate Fletcher, Alessandro Castiglioni, and Gianni Romano, *Moda, design e sostenibilità* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2018); Kate Fletcher, *Moda, design e sostenibilità* (Postmedia Books, 2020).

22. See <https://www.reda1865.com/it/>.

23. See <https://desserto.com.mx/>.

24. See <https://www.ananas-anam.com/>.

25. See <http://orangefiber.it/>.

26. Philip Kotler, Christian Sarkar, and Paolo Iabichino, *Brand activism. Dal purpose all'azione*, trans. Sabina Addamiano (Milan: Hoepli, 2020)

the younger generation thinks. The study found that a large majority of young people think authenticity is the most important aspect of the fashion industry. It also found that while this audience admires big brands for their values and long-standing heritage, they're beginning to sway towards newer brands that represent sustainability and education.<sup>27</sup>

One of the brands mentioned in the report is Pangaia, the standard bearer for hi-tech naturalism, ethical and minimalist with a tagline that self-defines as: "A materials science company on a mission to save our environment". Founded by a collective of artists, designers and scientists who research bio-materials and produce athletic-minimalist collections with a very strong ethical, technological and sustainable edge, they aim to "create a global open-source platform for the latest eco-innovations and solutions connecting like-minded individuals and organisations who care about the environment."<sup>28</sup> Their bio-materials range from seaweed fibres and eucalyptus pulp<sup>29</sup> to a fabric infused with mint oil to allow it to stay fresh longer and save thousands of litres of water over the course of its life cycle (Fig.2). They are also involved in research into recycled and upcycled materials (one of their latest collections makes use of regenerated cashmere). A glance at their website and Instagram page reveals the key principles on which this hi-tech naturalism is based to be in-depth study and information. With communications increasingly intertwined with brand journalism, the mix of digital graphic design, information architecture, photography, infographics, and video lends the company a more knowledge-oriented form of storytelling.<sup>30</sup> All this renders Pangaia an "EarthPositive business that gives back more than it takes."<sup>31</sup> Its motto — "Problem-solving science that you can wear" — could equally apply to the brand Veja, for whom the concept of compensation is a pillar of its communication strategy. We need look no further than the homepage to be greeted by the "Project" section, in which the brand's mission is laid out in full. The vertical-scroll narrative of images and text lends further weight to its motto: "Refusing to choose between design and social responsibility."<sup>32</sup> The brandname itself incorporates these aesthetics of the transcendent, the "Transparency" page of their manifesto informing us that:

VEJA is Brazilian for 'look', looking beyond the sneakers, looking at how they're made. How are VEJA's made? How much are labourers paid? How much does an organic cotton producer earn? What are the chemicals used in a pair of VEJA?

A visitor can peruse at leisure their production map, their contracts with cotton producers, their commitment to Fair Trade, their certifications, and their detailing of their B-Corp credentials. Veja and the other DTCs thus become simultaneously "facts of fashion" and "facts of style". In the short mythologies of the eye and the spirit<sup>33</sup> that Jean Marie Floch identified in his analysis of Chanel,<sup>34</sup> he defined fashion and the fact of fashion as corresponding to that pole of identity linked to time, to the figurative dimension, to the flow of the trend. The fact of style, on the other hand, corresponds to the pole of

27. "Polimoda Gives a Voice to New Generations and the Future of Fashion," *HYPEBEAST*, 1 July 2020, <https://hypebeast.com/2020/7/polimoda-research-project-truth-about-fashion>.

28. Gabrielle Leung, "PANGAIA's Seaweed T-Shirts Receive Artistic Makeover by Haroshi," *HYPEBEAST*, 15 October 2019, <https://hypebeast.com/2019/10/pangaia-haroshi-capsule-collection-release-info>.

29. Jack Stanley, "PANGAIA Unveils New Sustainable C-FIBER Material," *HYPEBEAST*, 10 February 2021, <https://hypebeast.com/2021/2/pangaia-c-fiber-sweatshirt-dress-longsleeve-sustainable-details>.

30. Consistency is also revealed in their choice of testimonials. For its "Protect the Species" campaign, the brand found suitable voices in eco-activist and UN Environment Goodwill Ambassador Nadya Hutagalung and Canadian artist Raku Inoue. Gabrielle Leung, "PANGAIA Taps Eco-Activist Nadya Hutagalung for 'Protect the Species' Capsule Collection," *HYPEBEAST*, 24 October 2019, <https://hypebeast.com/2019/10/pangaia-nadya-hutagalung-raku-inoue-protect-the-species-collection-info>.

31. Rachel Besser, "New Fashion Items In Style You Can Shop Here," *Vogue*, 30 January 2021, <https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/new-fashion-arrivals-1-30>.

32. Take the section "The Blindness around CO<sub>2</sub> Emission", laid out as journalistic reportage and providing data and the opportunity to navigate between sources.

33. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition, in a New Translation*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers, Reprint (Hill & Wang Pub, 2013)

34. Jean-Marie Floch, *Visual Identities*, trans. Pierre Van Osselaer and Alec McHoul (London ; New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 2000)

ethics, to the “life project”. The aesthetics these brands create is based on figurative and plastic principles converted into precise narrative structures that establish a symbolic field based on the concept of life project of which Floch’s ethics speak; it is no coincidence that their style is minimalist, new normal, comfy, hardy, essentially basic, and pragmatic but not cold. There is also a thymic component to the aesthetics of transparency. It becomes a political philosophy that moves to address the great challenges of our times in a planned, project-based way. In a society ripe with information, the human project seeks to act ethically, to combine green policies (green, circular and sharing economies) and blue policies (information technology and digital economies), and to nurture a way of living together centred around the quality of our relations and processes, rather than on consumption and things.<sup>35</sup> It is also no coincidence that, by echoing one of Patagonia’s most famous advertising campaigns,<sup>36</sup> Veja dared to break one of the taboos of communications, evoking competition and anti-consumption with the claim: “For us, the most sustainable sneakers are the ones you are wearing. Even if they belong to another brand.” Within the refined communications sphere of “accountability”, others choose to focus their attentions on the oceans (Fig.3).<sup>37</sup> Take the case of Ecoalf, a brand founded in 2009 by Javier Goyeneche, a leading Spanish entrepreneur in the field of sustainability. To the rallying cry of “There is no Planet B”, the brand was born around the idea of recycling various materials, from fishing nets and coffee grounds to used tyres and post-consumer cotton and wool, all geared towards the safeguarding of the oceans. Photos and videos document their project “Upcycling the Oceans,”<sup>38</sup> in which marine litter is collected by the fishing boats that sail the Mediterranean daily.<sup>39</sup> All of their design thinking revolves around these commitments, including the design of their clothing, which adopts the same cosy and pragmatic features discussed earlier (Fig.4). As an example of their product presentation:

We’ve created 8 unique and essential pieces for your wardrobe without compromising the planet’s health. Therefore, each piece of the collection is named after a blend of human and natural elements: Ocean, Aura, Earth, Wind, Fire, Core, Lava and Spirit. Unique because of the natural dyes behind each piece. Made from 100% cellulosic materials of vegetal origin that promote the circular economy. A collection of essentials that are respectful with the planet to empower women in their everyday lives. Each piece is created with the utmost transparency and sustainable materials so you can have durable, genuine, traceable, and high-quality summer basics that are respectful to our planet.<sup>40</sup>

Also in the case of Rifò (Fig.5), which throws the revival of an old tradition into the mix, innovation is essential. Their website and social media promote the recycling of wool fibres by Reverso, a supply chain of local companies that for years have been working to give new life to textile fibres<sup>41</sup> and also involve members of the public in the collection of materials. The language has changed: there is no mention of dreams or aspirations, but rather the principle of responsibility generates a coherence of style, narrative, and the visual.

35. Luciano Floridi, *Il verde e il blu. Idee ingenue per migliorare la politica* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2020)

36. With reference to the advertising campaign “Don’t Buy This Jacket”.

37. Elisa Pervinca Bellini, “Moda e Sostenibilità: l’intervista al founder di Ecoalf,” *Vogue Italia*, accessed 6 March 2021, <https://www.vogue.it/moda/article/moda-sostenibile-intervista-ecoalf-javier-goyeneche-agenda-sviluppo-sostenibile-podcast>.

38. [https://ecoalf.com/en/p/upcycling-the-oceans-15?/\\_adin=0692095637](https://ecoalf.com/en/p/upcycling-the-oceans-15?/_adin=0692095637).

39. Marine litter is collected in special containers and, after sorting, the PET recovered is transformed into polymer and then into yarn. “Ecoalf e Conad Nord Ovest lanciano Uto-Italia,” *La Repubblica*, 13 October 2020, [https://www.repubblica.it/economia/rapporti/osserva-italia/conad/2020/10/13/news/ecoalf\\_e\\_conad\\_nord\\_ovest\\_lanciano\\_uto-italia-270472873/](https://www.repubblica.it/economia/rapporti/osserva-italia/conad/2020/10/13/news/ecoalf_e_conad_nord_ovest_lanciano_uto-italia-270472873/).

40. [https://ecoalf.com/en/p/blanca-padilla-limited-edition-134?/\\_adin=0692095637](https://ecoalf.com/en/p/blanca-padilla-limited-edition-134?/_adin=0692095637).

41. This allows Rifò to give members of the public the opportunity to contribute to a circular economy project, recovering old clothes that would be thrown into general waste, so that they can be transformed into a new raw material in the form of yarn.



Figure 2. PPRMINT™ technology Pangaia's (@thepangaia) Profile on Instagram, 18 November <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHvV3b8ARa3>



Figure 3. Ecoalf Foundation - Ecoalf official website [https://ecoalf.com/en/p/foundation-33?\\_adin=11551547647](https://ecoalf.com/en/p/foundation-33?_adin=11551547647)



Figure 4. Ecoalf by Blanca Padilla - Ecoalf official website  
[https://ecoalf.com/en/p/blanca-padilla-limited-edition-134?\\_adin=1133736124](https://ecoalf.com/en/p/blanca-padilla-limited-edition-134?_adin=1133736124)

### The benefits of a local production



#### FUEL CONSUMPTION REDUCED

We are able to save on fuel consumption during production.



#### AVOIDING OF INTERMEDIARIES

By producing locally we manage to go directly to the source, avoiding intermediaries.



#### LOCAL ECONOMY

We want to support the local economy, promoting the creation of new job opportunities.



#### CUTTING PRICES

All these factors allow us to reduce the final price of our products.

Figure 5. o Miles Fashion <https://rifo-lab.com/en/pages/moda-a-km-o>

## Another form of storytelling is possible

A fashion brand can be said to have four dimensions. First there is the “transcendent”, which pertains to the emotional, the spectacular, and the aspirational. Then there is the “external”, relating to society, culture, cinema, art, design, and music. Brands, especially luxury ones, have always tended to make use of the remaining dimensions — the “surrounding” and the “internal” — for the purposes of heritage storytelling only. Now that they are controlled by the DTC brands themselves, the surrounding and the internal have become, both in a narrative and visual sense, two new ways of shaping brand identity and value proposition. In the tension between the surrounding and the internal, we can observe the rise of a new regime of realism in which classic rhetoric gives way to a narrative technicism based on presentative aesthetics. Let us take the example of photography. As has been noted, advertising photography operates in both “presentative and representative” terms.<sup>42</sup> Photography presents us with the object itself and represents it as a means to achieve a certain emotional state. Beyond the well-known mechanism of denotation/connotation common to all communicative languages, the essential factor involves recognising that this double possibility derives from the realistic, the basic function universally acknowledged in photography. For years, the connotative level seemed at first glance to emerge to counteract the excessive realism exhibited by photography at the denotative level. This contrast with denotative realism led fashion photography to set foot in the realm of the fantastic. It has never simply exploited the realistic, nor the purely representative. The visual and narrative representation of fashion has always sought application in the world of the imaginary. In recent years, this representation has often completely renounced the denotative sphere — that of the direct presentation of the item—to restrict itself to suggesting an aura, an atmosphere, a dream.<sup>43</sup> This often translated into a “distancing from” or a “hiding” of the garment itself. We are now witnessing a transformation: on the horizons of the social and the communicative, new trends in textuality and narration are emerging from a renewed denotative necessity. The aesthetics of transparency thus becomes a narrative/visual practice that seeks to bridge the gulf that, to create for its objects a sense of distance and inaccessibility, fashion has long nurtured. Yet even now the “curtain has been drawn back”, the air of mystery often lingers.

Chiaroscuro, use of black, softly-lit photography and low lighting, high/low angles and close-ups: the first version of the new narrative, which had less to do with an idea of transparency and more with an idea of unveiling, was aimed, once more, at suggesting an atmosphere, a mood, a dream. Think back to the first Louis Vuitton campaigns<sup>44</sup> to put artisans at centre stage,<sup>45</sup> the Dolce & Gabbana shop windows featuring seamstresses at their sewing and the countless other digital campaigns by luxury groups.<sup>46</sup> In these cases, however, the image of the artisan know-how behind the quality product certainly served to highlight a dimension once hidden, but wrapped it even tighter in the mystery of “storytelling”, where the emphasis on the expressive and the figurative took precedence over the content: connotation had also intruded on the field of industrial fashion photography. For luxury brands, the hidden dimension unveiled was a gift: the chance to peek behind the scenes. And though their mode of portraying transparency is evolving,<sup>47</sup> this distance between brand and consumer remains. Still closely tied to spectacu-

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42. Claudio Marra, *Nelle ombre di un sogno. Storia e idee della fotografia di moda*. (Milan: Mondadori Bruno, 2010)

43. Cfr. Marra, 42.

44. “Meet the Artisans: LVMH Fires New Shot in Luxury Marketing War,” *The Business of Fashion*, 14 June 2013, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/meet-the-artisans-lvmh-fires-new-shot-in-luxury-marketing-war>.

45. Jean-Noël Kapferer, “The Artification of Luxury: From Artisans to Artists,” *Business Horizons* 57 (1 May 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2013.12.007>.

46. An interesting example is “Cashmere: The Origin of a Secret”, the documentary shot for Loro Piana by Luc Jacquet, ecologist, director, and winner of an Oscar for “March of the Penguins”. As the title suggests, it favours the aesthetics of unveiling, the opportunity to embark on a journey to an inaccessible and enemy place. <https://cashmere.theoriginofasecret.loropiana.com/it/>.

47. For the presentation of Maison Margiela’s Autumn-Winter 2020 Artisanal collection, John Galliano enlisted the photographer Nick Knight to create a video that would reveal the genesis of the collection: from the discussion of the project to the sketches, to the staff meetings over Zoom. <https://www.showstudio.com/collections/autumn-winter-2020-haute-couture/maison-margiela>.

larisation,<sup>48</sup> the garment remains a narrative object and the brand a desire, the distance bridged through collaborations, leaps from one segment of the market to another, and brand stretching. Yet the prodigious growth of the language of social media, which takes a lot from the languages of photography, cinema, and television, has in some ways overturned the rules of classic fashion representation and brought it closer to the concept of presentation. On the very surface of the brand, on its digital channels, a saturated, stratified space is constructed providing information and ushering in a path towards authenticity that is different from that of historical luxury brands, one linked to the need to behold the invisible. There are two reasons for this: on the one hand, there is the need to keep consumers informed, and, on the other, there is the awareness that the major driving force of consumption comes from wider society. Contemporary brands align themselves with the spirit of the times through a perfect understanding that within these new folds of narrative representation nestle the consumer incentives of our times. In shifting from spectacle to presentation, it is no longer a question of mere aesthetic exploration: we leave more space for the real. With contemporary DTC brands, therefore, we are witnessing attempts to make exploration of the most symbolic imaginary dovetail with pragmatic necessity. They can no longer be built upon fictitious narratives but must act as the counterpart of certain typical corporate values which are then echoed in the running of the company. And so the imperative for valorisation of the invisible — of everything once out of sight and mind of the consumer — finds a powerful technical counterpart in turn in the narrative, in the assembly of communications, and in campaign creation.

Let us think back to the posts dedicated to the fruit peel transformed into trainers (Fig.6) (Pangaia), to the volumes of CO<sub>2</sub> saved (Rifò), to the tons of plastic recovered from the sea (Ecoalf), and to the trees of the Amazon (Veja). The communications of these brands speak to a shortened distance, such that the narrative of the production process becomes a genuine process of signification. The huge success of this new functional, conscious, ethical and sustainable storytelling lies also in this. There is no doubt that the chiaroscuro of the Renaissance workshop (still a staple of luxury campaigns) had this need for openness in mind; however, the new narrative, based by necessity on transparency, must have “augmented denotation” as its guiding aesthetic principle.

The visual appeal of the new aesthetics of transparency derives directly from its clear reference to photography “zero degree”, based on the pure power of realistic denotation, and the also clear limitations of the connotative. Yet it is precisely by focusing all their energies on the zero degree — by presenting themselves as immediate, head-on — that these images are able to display their link to transparency and, moreover, connote transparency and readability. This, too, is a code, one which triggers another type of desire: the dream of a life project where even the very things themselves respect this philosophy. This denotative redemption is the source of a reassuring sense of transparency and truth. Unburdened of the semantic complexity generated by the connotative, these stylistically sophisticated and deeply refined communications are also an exercise in the candour and naturalism required to create an optimal realm of the real and the imaginary, and not “simply” the fantastic.<sup>49</sup>

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48. Marketa Uhlirova, “The Fashion Film and the Photographic,” *Aperture* Fall, no. 216 (August 2014), <http://www.aperture.org/magazine/>. Marketa Uhlirova, “The Fashion-Film Effect,” in *Fashion Media: Past and Present*, ed. Djurdja Bartlett, Agnès Rocamora, and Shaun Cole (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), <http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/fashion-media-9780857853073/>.

49. Claudio Marra, *Nelle ombre di un sogno. Storia e idee della fotografia di moda*. (Milano: Mondadori Bruno, 2010)



Figure 6. Grape Leather Sneakers Pangaia's (@thepangaia) Profile on Instagram, 10 March  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CMP14gsggbw>

## Conclusion

In analysing these cases, we have seen how creativity is increasingly measured in terms of commitment, actions and impact, and how brands modulate their production strategies to allow them to respond simultaneously to the demands of the market and the calls for ethical business. Furthermore, a swerve towards the documentary style has reset the classic equilibrium of the narrative: the result is a modular product, the fruit of a combinatorial system born not of dreams but of responsibility and awareness. What we have defined as the pragmatic function of images works to reduce the atmospheric impact of the brand and shift the focus towards information, thus altering the thymic regime. This profound rewriting of fashion's communications archetypes establishes transparency as the bud from which all new visual metaphors bloom. Where once storytelling made sensibility its protagonist, now the object itself is given voice through its process. The choice to relate how things are made allows us to perceive in this transparency a form of defence to protect ourselves against the risks of globalisation and also from slipping up on our quest for ethical consumption.

One of the challenges of future analysis will therefore be that of turning the spotlight back on the things themselves and relating the strategy of construction of meaning ever more to these new forms of constructing authenticity.

As the semiologist Floch states,<sup>50</sup> every visual identity can be defined as a difference and a permanence. It is a difference in that it ensures company recognition and specificity, while its permanence lies in realising the persistence of the company's industrial, economic and social values. Permanence should not be considered as a simple repetition but as a becoming, with its own oriented logic. The concept of authenticity therefore becomes essential in the broader project of corporate design and brand identity.

50. Jean-Marie Floch, *Visual Identities*, trans. Pierre Van Osselaer and Alec McHoul (London; New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 2000)

The “knowing how a thing is made” places this narrative within the broader concept of deprogramming as a process of liberation, allowing individuals to regain possession of their material culture and to express projectuality. In this way, transparency of narrative aligns itself with the will of consumers who wish to downshift while maintaining the concept of high innovation. The sparkling transparency of some brands is now also a clear tool of internal competition. Promoting such a crystalline narrative renders yours unique value proposition (UVP) flawless and exposes the greenwashing of your competitors.

The notion of authenticity is therefore rediscovered as it was originally conceived, bringing together concern for the self and for others. In future analysis, we should seek to explore the narratives around authenticity as constructed on social media and consider them in relation to early philosophical concepts of “authenticity” as a core ethical principle of modernity.<sup>51</sup> Authenticity is linked to ethics and the new ways in which brands are deciding to embrace activism.

To face the great difficulties ahead and to make sense of the radical changes triggered by the infosphere revolution, there is a need to equip ourselves with data stories,<sup>52</sup> maps for communication,<sup>53</sup> visual journalism, and information architecture that understands how to map our “onlife” lives. As society looks increasingly towards inclusiveness, ethics, sustainability, and other factors that may arise in the years to come, the brand — in complete dialogue with the macro-text of society — will find a way to make them a cornerstone of its narrative and perhaps even stay ahead of the game. And we must do the same. In this essay, we have tried to establish coordinates for future analysis of the communicative style of those brands that embrace transparency and authenticity as a corporate philosophy. As part of a multidisciplinary approach, this could also enrich marketing studies and communication studies that now focus on purpose and activism, leading us to create more complex dynamics of representation better modelled on the contemporary mediascape and dynamics of brand management that are part of increasingly sophisticated and calculated global and multiple narrative strategies.

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51. Georgia Gaden and Delia Dumitrica, “The”Real Deal“: Strategic Authenticity, Politics and Social Media,” *First Monday*, Volume 20, Number 1–5 January 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i1.4985>. For more information on the concept of authenticity, see: Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 1992; Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*, 2009.

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# Sustainable Luxury in South Africa: The Twyg Platform

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## Abstract

This article investigates the digitisation of ethical luxury in South Africa, focusing on the case study of the media company Twyg. Twyg's online platform and social media accounts, particularly Instagram, participate in the production and circulation of a discourse on developmental fashion informed by principles of circularity and respect for diversity. The article discusses the communication strategy that Twyg employs to construct a positive discourse around luxury brands as drivers of a specific South African model of sustainability that pursues quality and craftsmanship, while preserving a local circular economy. The article is based on the author's interviews with Twyg's founder, Jackie May, and on cultural analysis of the materials published on the platform and Instagram channel. The discussion on sustainability builds on luxury studies, slow fashion studies, and the current debate on decolonialism, making a contribution to the literature on digital luxury in the global South. In particular, it expands the study of small independent actors, offering a reading that complements the more mainstream focus on big brands and international stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Slow Fashion; Sustainable Fashion; Digital Fashion Studies; South Africa; Ethical Luxury.

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## Introduction

This article investigates the digitisation of ethical luxury in South Africa via the case of Twyg, a media company supporting sustainable luxury fashion. Since launching in 2019, Twyg has shaped a sustainable fashion culture in the country, building its online platform as a space of information and dialogue on ethical luxury based on principles of slowness, care, and interdependence. From a digital media perspective, Twyg evidences the role of online spaces such as social media in framing the visual and textual production, circulation, and consumption of luxury in an eco-conscious light. The platform presents luxury fashion as a lens to interrogate some of the assumptions of the Western paradigm of sustainability and its application to South Africa's context. It articulates its value in terms of social prosperity, as it fosters inclusivity and agency in a country with acute social disparities, itself implicated in unbalanced relations of power and influence in the context of the global fashion industry. Read in the light of the COVID crisis and of the pressing global need to switch to sustainable living by 2030, Twyg offers a vantage to look at the evolution of discourses of luxury fashion on social media from the global South and the potential for brands to harness it to reframe themselves, and the fashion industry at large, according to principles of inclusivity and sustainability.

## Theoretical context

Sustainability is a key concern in contemporary fashion studies,<sup>1</sup> as the industry is confronted with the need to rethink its model in sustainable terms. The negative footprint of fashion has been widely documented<sup>2</sup> and described as one of the triggers of the Anthropocene.<sup>3</sup> The ecological concern has become even more relevant following the COVID outbreak.<sup>4</sup> Luxury fashion occupies an ambiguous position in this context, as it professes sustainable principles, while utilising an unsustainable business model. Contrasting the constant change and wasteful practices associated with fast fashion, luxury publicises sustainable values of high quality, know-how, slow time, and the preservation of hand-made traditions.<sup>5</sup> These claims identify luxurious style as eco-conscious, aspirational, and accessible only to a restricted community of affluent consumers.

However, for the past thirty years, luxury has been linked to wasteful and extravagant behaviours.<sup>6</sup> This is a result of the “abundant scarcity” marketing model that, since the 1990s, has prioritised increased

1. See, for example, Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen, eds., *Shaping sustainable fashion: Changing the way we make and use clothes* (Routledge, 2012)
2. Kirsi Niinimäki et al., “The environmental price of fast fashion,” *Nature Reviews — Earth & Environment*, Vol. 1 (April 2020): 189–200; Nikolay Anguelov, *The Dirty Side of the Garment Industry: Fast fashion and its negative impact on environment and society* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015); Dana Thomas, *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes* (London: Penguin, 2019)
3. Andrew Brooks et al., “Fashion, Sustainability, and the Anthropocene,” *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 28:3 (2017): 482–504; Alice Payne, “Fashion futuring in the anthropocene: Sustainable fashion as ‘taming’ and ‘rewilding,’” *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 23.1 (2019): 5–23.
4. Sandy Black, “Fashion in a Time of Crisis,” *Fashion Practice — The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, Vol. 12 (2020): 327–330.
5. Jean-Noël Kapferer and Anne Michaut, “Luxury and sustainability: a common future? The match depends on how consumers define luxury,” *Luxury Research Journal*, Vol. 1.1 (2015): 3–17; Patrizia Gazzola et al., “L'economia circolare nella fashion industry, ridurre, riciclare e riutilizzare: alcuni esempi di successo,” *Economia Aziendale Online*, Vol. 11.2 (2020): 165–174; Patrizia Gazzola, Enrica Pavione, and Matteo Dall'Avan, “I differenti significati di sostenibilità per le aziende del lusso e della moda: case studies a confronto,” *Economia Aziendale Online*, Vol. 10.4 (2020): 663–676; Silvia Ranfagni and Emanuele Guercini, “The Face of Culturally Sustainable Luxury: Some Emerging Traits from a Case Study,” in *Sustainable luxury, entrepreneurship, and innovation*, eds Miguel Angel Gardetti and Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018), 1–16, and Miguel Angel Gardetti and Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu, eds., *Sustainable luxury, entrepreneurship, and innovation* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018)
6. Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Patrizia Calefato, *Luxury: Fashion, lifestyle and excess* (A&C Black, 2014) Kindle edition, unpaginated; Frédéric Godart and Sorah Seong, “Is sustainable luxury fashion possible?,” in *Sustainable Luxury: Managing Social and Environmental Performance in Iconic Brands*, eds. Ana Laura Torres and Miguel Angel Gardetti (Greenleaf Publishing, 2014), 12–27.

profits over rarity,<sup>7</sup> making luxury accessible to social groups that were previously excluded from it.<sup>8</sup> This massification has a negative impact on luxury sustainable performance.<sup>9</sup> For haute couture the contradiction is clear, since this sector that preaches timelessness and exclusivity nevertheless follows the wasteful format of seasonal outmodedness.<sup>10</sup> As such, luxury fashion faces the same challenges as its fast counterpart, with the added complication of sustainability being key to its branding. This context, and the current, precarious conditions of the global fashion industry,<sup>11</sup> make sustainable concerns the main priority of luxury brands and their environmental and social externalities timely topics of investigation.<sup>12</sup>

The latter have been discussed by slow fashion scholars and activists, who support the transition to a model that gives environmental well-being precedence over capitalist expansion.<sup>13</sup> For these authors the models of sustainability currently in place in the global fashion industry are not compatible with a green transition,<sup>14</sup> as they preserve its dependence on capital exchange and commodity production.<sup>15</sup> Slow fashion proffers, instead, a radical cultural switch to a new mindset of use and consumption,<sup>16</sup> where emotional connectedness, relationship-making, and creativity replace possession as a framework of activity<sup>17</sup> and agency is returned to disempowered individuals, communities, and economies.<sup>18</sup> Prioritising humanist qualities over economic exchange and growth, and the social value of individual/collective abilities over commodities, slow fashion disengages from the negative externalities caused by global fashion.<sup>19</sup>

This points to another relevant and problematic aspect of luxury fashion, namely the set of social meanings and behaviours that it promotes, which have direct effects on social sustainability. Luxury mediates privilege; its goal being “to create social stratification”<sup>20</sup> and emphasise socio-economic divisions.<sup>21</sup> It has been shown that also online luxury reinforces and emphasises discursive strategies of exclusion that categorise users according to their proximity to communities of privilege.<sup>22</sup> Agnès Rocamora demonstrates that digital luxury platforms enforce discrimination and the maintenance of social hierarchies.<sup>23</sup>

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7. Jean-Noël Kapferer, “Abundant rarity: key to luxury growth,” *Business Horizons*, Vol. 55.5 (2012): 453–462.
  8. Glyn Atwal and Douglas Bryson, *Luxury Brands in Emerging Markets* (New York: Springer, 2014)
  9. Kapferer and Michaut, “Luxury and sustainability: a common future? The match depends on how consumers define luxury.”
  10. Godart and Seong, “Is sustainable luxury fashion possible”, 15.
  11. Taylor Brydges, Monique Retamal, and Mary Hanlon, “Will COVID-19 support the transition to a more sustainable fashion industry?” *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, Vol. 16.1 (2020): 298–308, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1829848>.
  12. Claudia D’Arpizio et al., *Luxury after Covid-19: changed for (the) good* (Bain & Company March 26, 2020)
  13. Kate Fletcher, “Post-growth fashion and the craft of users,” in *Shaping Sustainable Fashion: Changing the way we make and use clothes*, eds. Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen (London and Washington: Earthscan, 2011), 165–176.
  14. Marisa P. De Brito, Valentina Carbone, and Corinne Meunier Blanquart, “Towards a sustainable fashion retail supply chain in Europe: Organisation and performance,” *International journal of production economics*, Vol. 114.2 (2008): 534–553.
  15. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, *Earth logic: Fashion action research plan* (London: The JJ Charitable Trust, 2019)
  16. Fletcher, “Post-growth fashion and the craft of users,” 174.
  17. Francesco Mazzarella, Helen Storey, and Dilys Williams, “Counternarratives Towards Sustainability in Fashion. Scoping an Academic Discourse on Fashion Activism through a Case Study on the Centre for Sustainable Fashion,” *The Design Journal*, Vol. 22 (sup1 2019): 823.
  18. Hazel Clark, “SLOW + FASHION — an Oxymoron — or a Promise for the Future ...?” *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 12.4 (2008): 427–446.
  19. Otto von Busch, “‘A suit, of his own earning’: fashion supremacy and sustainable fashion activism,” in *Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion*, eds. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 275–282.
  20. Kapferer and Michaut, “Luxury and Sustainability: a common future?” 9.
  21. Calefato, *Luxury: Fashion, lifestyle and excess*.
  22. Agnès Rocamora, “Online Luxury: Geographies of Production and Consumption and the Louis Vuitton Website,” *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media*, (2016): 199–220.
  23. Rocamora, “Online Luxury,” 210.

Southern contexts are no exception, although research on the digital promotion of luxury in some markets, particularly in Africa, is still in its early phase.<sup>24</sup>

For example, in a study of Alara Lagos, a store for the ultra-rich in the Nigerian metropolis, Simidele Dosekun analyses the visual production of luxury on the store's Instagram page @AlaraLagos.<sup>25</sup> Dosekun describes luxury as performative and argues that the luxury aesthetic has concrete effects on lifestyle and social behaviour. The visual mediation of aesthetic presentation on Instagram bequeaths glamour and distinction to the fashion items, which extend to the environment and people coming in contact with them. What this entails for the viewers of @AlaraLagos is participating (often only vicariously) in a life of "insouciant play and privilege."<sup>26</sup> In another study, Dosekun and Ndapwa Alweendo contend that black South African women mobilise luxury consumption to counter social exclusion, luxury serving as a means to claim social distinction in a context that marginalises and disempowers this social group.<sup>27</sup> These examples suggest that the model of the hierarchical society is reproduced in the online and offline aesthetics of luxury.

Luxury fashion, therefore, occupies a critical position in the present conversation on sustainability. Its support of sustainable values is in contrast with a business model that keeps in place elitism and waste. At the same time, its digital identity is also evolving to accommodate multiple and often conflicting interpretations that reflect the global and growing citizen engagement with environmentalism.<sup>28</sup> As one of luxury's last "frontier markets,"<sup>29</sup> South Africa is a compelling case study to map luxury's digitisation, adding further layers to the investigations of privilege, elitism, and inequality present in the global conversation on sustainability.

## The case of Twyg

Twyg is a media company launched in 2019. Its mission is raising awareness on the environmental and social impacts of unsustainable fashion in South Africa, while supporting the consolidation of the national fashion industry according to the principle of slow, sustainable development. Its regional focus, digital identity, and ethical foundations make it a compelling case study of luxury digitisation that takes into account the sector's current challenges in the eco-conscious transition.

Twyg began in 2018 as the blog of Jackie May, a Johannesburg-based green activist and former editor, writing about the intersection of environmental issues, consumer behaviour, and social justice. May eventually registered the company and launched its platform in February 2019 to raise awareness and encourage intersectional action for the sustainable transition of South African fashion. Twyg has since grown to be an authoritative voice of the movement, operating online and offline to promote change. Actions include organising events in collaboration with like-minded organisations and hosting the Twyg Sustainable Fashion Awards that, since 2019, have recognised sustainable and ethical actors of the local industry. These initiatives are carried out as part of Twyg's support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12), which stimulates economic progress through balanced production and consumption patterns.<sup>30</sup> Throughout, the company has promoted a conversation on eco-conscious luxury, digitally-mediating connections between citizens and stakeholders and produc-

24. Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun, eds., *African Luxury: Aesthetics and Politics* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2019)

25. Simidele Dosekun, "The Playful and Privileged Africinity of Luxury @AlaraLagos," in *African Luxury*, eds. Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun, 93–106.

26. Dosekun, "The Playful and Privileged Africinity of Luxury @AlaraLagos," 104.

27. Ndapwa Alweendo and Simidele Dosekun, "Luminance and the Moralization of Black Women's Luxury Consumption in South Africa," in *African Luxury*, eds. Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun, 127–138.

28. John Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury 2019)

29. Mehita Iqani, "The last luxury frontier? How global consulting firms discursively construct the African market," in *African Luxury*, eds. Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun, 19–36.

30. "Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns," United Nations, accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/>.

ing a body of work that provides in-depth knowledge of the South African context. The bulk of Twyg's activities takes place online, via content that keeps users informed and engaged with South African fashion's move towards becoming 100% sustainable.

Launched at a moment of expansion of digital and social media penetration in South Africa,<sup>31</sup> Twyg's digital identity includes the platform and profiles on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Instagram is where the company uses creative storytelling, expanding and enhancing the user's engagement with brands and the slow movement. The website is divided into four sections — "Stories", "Awards", "Projects," and "About" — each with subsections containing news about events, campaigns, and the company's education initiatives (like masterclasses and a learning hub for fashion makers).<sup>32</sup> The landing page features a preview of recent "stories" and "projects," complemented with pictures, along with an invitation to subscribe to the company's newsletter, a grid of Instagram's latest posts, and popular articles. The platform's content consists of articles, op-eds, guest posts, book reviews, and interviews about sustainable fashion and South African brands, although foreign ones are also featured.<sup>33</sup> The narrative of sustainability is presented through the editorial choice of topics and guest authors, which focuses the dialogue with users around themes of cultural exchange and socially-oriented behaviours.

To investigate Twygs's online promotional communication, between 1 October, 2020 and 15 March 2021, textual and visual analysis was conducted of the "Fashion" section of the website and the company's Instagram account. Alongside this, the content of events organised by, or featuring, Twyg's editor and the available online literature on the company was analysed. Finally, remote interviews were conducted with May herself. Read in light of Twyg's official endorsement of the SDG agenda and the criticism of its growth-focused approach, the research questions of this paper were: how does Twyg mediate the sustainable conversation? And what role does luxury fashion play in the scenario of an inclusive South African economy? The findings highlight the role of digital media in shaping a positioned, Southern vision of sustainable luxury that addresses the challenge of reconciling growth, equality, and socio-cultural justice.

## Findings

Twyg uses fashion as a critical lens to explore biological and social interdependencies in a national and international context characterised by deep inequalities. May's definition of luxury contains many of the themes that Twyg develops in its digital communication:

A luxury item is something that has been thoughtfully crafted and made to last. It's something that would cost enough money for me to want it to last, for me to respect it. ... I don't like the idea of luxury being exclusive, or of fashion being symbolic of status. I prefer to use the term luxury when referring to something made with intention and with care. So much of the sustainable fashion I love is made by small, independent brands who select their materials carefully, think about the impact of their design practice, and impart beautiful stories through their work. These are the brands we want to promote and support in South Africa. For too long, their work has been drowned out by international fast and luxury brands, and by cheap imports sold by our retailers.<sup>34</sup>

This definition puts Twyg's expression of luxury at a distance from the widespread preference in South

31. Simon Kemp, "Digital 2019: South Africa," *Datareportal*, January 31, 2019, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-south-africa>.

32. On the website readers can connect with and participate in the South African sustainable fashion community, from attending online classes to joining clean-up initiatives and, of course, keeping abreast with the evolution of the sector as national actors develop ways to support the sector's green transition.

33. Other topics include food, places, and beauty.

34. May, personal conversation with the author.

Africa for 'bling' and foreign heritage brands,<sup>35</sup> whose consumption reflects a possession-centered mindset and a disregard for collective advancement.<sup>36</sup> May, instead, frames luxury as a marker of ethical authority and discriminates between profit-driven and community/socially-oriented definitions of value. She emphasises its power to inspire collective change that has interrelated socio-cultural and environmental impacts, not least promoting plurality by embedding local stories in the global conversation.

The Manifesto, the company's mission statement published on the platform, details a holistic vision, where sustainability is achieved by simultaneously fostering environmental and social "regeneration."<sup>37</sup> The "Social" entry reads: "An inter-sectional approach to sustainability is best suited to what we want to achieve: we need to address gender inequality, racism, economic transformation and climate change simultaneously."<sup>38</sup> May contends that these concerns call for creating a local model of sustainability, as the one developed in the advanced economic context of the global North does not fit the reality of a country with a 40% unemployment rate.<sup>39</sup> She speaks of the "conflict of interest" of "promoting slow fashion when many people are hungry"<sup>40</sup> and incorporates it in her editorial practice. "We want to scale back and slow down our hyper consumer society, but we acknowledge that South Africa has to grow its economy on its path to transform the economy. We are interested in how we can grow the economy with sustainable and regenerative practices."<sup>41</sup>

The ethical probing expresses the goal of turning Twyg into a space of critical thinking, where factual content enables the questioning of ideas and assumptions about what sustainable fashion and post-capitalist development *mean* for South Africa. Through the analysis, three key inter-related themes are identified: care, interdependence, and pluriversality.

## Care

Slow fashion advocates a change in system thinking imbued with an ethics of care that rejects functional notions of value, in favour of "a set of practices animated by concerns for others," including other life forms.<sup>42</sup> "Care" is the first keyword of Twyg's Manifesto: "Caring for people and the planet are fundamental to everything we do. In South Africa, we have to pay particular attention to the nexus of human need and environmental risk as we work with partners to promote equity and sustainability."<sup>43</sup> This principle inspires Twyg's communication of sustainability as a worldview and set of practices with positive environmental and social impact. It also grounds the company's work in the socio-economic geography of South Africa, where fashion's positive performance in the past twenty years has driven modest, but steady growth in employment.<sup>44</sup> In the post "Fashion in the time of coronavirus," May situates care in the framework of the emergency scenario unleashed by the pandemic, asking: "How do we support African creatives and fashion designers at the same time as reducing carbon emissions? How

35. Inka Crowsswaite, "Afro Luxe: The Meaning of Luxury in South Africa," in *Luxury Brands in Emerging Markets*, eds. Glyn Atwal and Douglas Bryson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2014), 187–200.

36. Alweendo and Dosekun, "Luminance and the Moralization of Black Women's Luxury Consumption in South Africa."

37. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

38. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

39. Jackie May, "UCRF 'Member of the Month' Jackie May," *Union of Concerned Fashion Researchers*, July 13, 2020, <https://concernedresearchers.org/ucrf-member-of-the-month-jackie-may/>.

40. May, "UCRF 'Member of the Month' Jackie May".

41. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

42. Kate Fletcher, "Other Fashion Systems," in *Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion*, eds. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

43. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

44. See Catherine Del Monte, "Transcript Interview with SACTWU's Etienne Vlok about the retail and textile masterplan," *Twyg*, June 8, 2020, <https://twyg.co.za/transcript-interview-with-sactuws-etienne-vlok-retail-clothing-and-textile-masterplan/>.

do we employ people while we reduce the quantity of clothes produced?”<sup>45</sup> These questions suggest that Twyg views care as implicating the taking and performing of responsibilities and the managing of businesses that address the multiple meanings of luxury value as a positive element for society, culture, and the economy.

To facilitate discussion, care will focus on the content relating to green practices, although care, pluriversity, and interdependence mix and overlap in all of the content. The material (textual, visual, and hypertextual) pertaining to this theme refers to the best practices implemented by luxury designers and brands to limit pollution. These include recycling, reusing, and regenerating, waste reduction, local recruitment, design for longevity, extended producer responsibility, and use of low impact materials. Examples of care-themed posts abound in the platform and on social media. “Circular design” — which develops products for closed loops — also features in the company’s profile description on Instagram, along with “sustainability” and “SDG12,” which is the acronym of Sustainable Development Goal 12. As of 31 March, 2021, “circular design” and “circular economy” are the second and third most-frequent tags on the website. This suggests that the company identifies wastefulness, pollution, and energy inefficiency as three of the most pressing issues to tackle to achieve the shift to an eco-conscious business model, as stated in a post from 6 November, 2020 that summarises the main findings of the Ellen MacArthur report “Vision of a circular economy for fashion.”<sup>46</sup>

The posts tagged “circular design” are case studies of brands and designers from South Africa and, occasionally, elsewhere. They describe the solutions that these actors, who are mostly small and emergent luxury players, implement to reduce their environmental footprint, highlighting their positive impact on the environment and people. Some of these posts appear in the form of interviews, where Twyg’s authors ask designers how they implement sustainability in their practice and business. The interviews are preceded by an introduction that outlines the respondent’s history and alignment with the company’s values, using rhetorical means that celebrate the ingenuity and meanings infused in these practices. The majority of the featured brands apply circular models of waste minimisation, like Research Unit, which reportedly “use every little piece of fabric and leather where [they] can.”<sup>47</sup> Organic and natural materials are often utilised, as with the Simon & Mary heritage millinery that makes hats with biodegradable cactus leather and employs recycled materials for packaging and parts of the manufacturing process.<sup>48</sup> This is the focus of *plasticity.*, an upcycling company based in the Eastern Cape region that makes bespoke vanity and clutch bags out of discarded plastic, featured in a post from 19 June, 2020.<sup>49</sup> Designer Fezokuhle Dimba from Durban, who uses plastic for her handmade garments, was introduced in a post from 8 May, 2020.<sup>50</sup> Contributor Catherine Del Monte describes these as “exciting” and “edgy” examples of circularity that apply the ethic of care to garment and accessory making. This choice of words reflects May’s goal of “changing the understanding of sustainability,” from intimidating to accessible and positively-challenging.<sup>51</sup>

On Instagram, Twyg uses a similar rhetoric to signify inventiveness, determination, and the promise

45. Jackie May, “Fashion in the time of coronavirus,” *Twyg*, March 17, 2020, <https://twyg.co.za/fashion-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>.

46. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, “Vision of a circular economy for fashion,” accessed February 08, 2020, <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/Vision-of-a-circular-economy-for-fashion.pdf>. The work of the British foundation is referenced in several posts, providing a research basis for Twyg’s advocacy. Its reports are included in the “essential resources” of the “Learning Hub”, a section of the website that directs users to external destinations providing educational material on sustainability and sustainable fashion practices.

47. Catherine Del Monte, “Q&A: Research Unit takes a long view on sustainability,” *Twyg*, July 31, 2020, <https://twyg.co.za/qa-research-unit-takes-a-long-view-on-sustainability/>.

48. Catherine Del Monte, “Simon and Mary takes shape with natural fabrics,” *Twyg*, July 13, 2020, <https://twyg.co.za/simon-and-mary-hats-take-shape-with-natural-fabrics/>.

49. Catherine Del Monte, “Q&A with designer Tessa O’Halloran on rethinking plastic waste,” *Twyg*, June 19, 2020, <https://twyg.co.za/qa-with-tessa-ohalloran-who-practices-circular-design-in-the-karoo/>.

50. Catherine Del Monte, “Q&A: Designer Fezokuhle Dimba wants to make the world a better place,” *Twyg*, May 8, 2020, <https://twyg.co.za/qa-designer-fezokuhle-dimba-wants-to-make-the-world-a-better-place/>.

51. May, “The Twyg Manifesto.”

of a better world attached to “caring” brands, and to elicit user engagement. A post published on 8 January, 2021 features a shot from the “Ambo mhlaba” lookbook, promoting designer Gugu Peteni’s Spring/Summer 2020 collection.<sup>52</sup> The image is a low-angle portrait of a bearded and dread-locked young man, standing with his feet wide apart near a metal container. His meditative gaze and straight-backed posture suggest coolness and poise. The inside of the container is shadowed, but we recognise the outline of a wooden table strewn with several implements. The model’s hands are deep in the patterned pockets of an otherwise white wool cape, the geometric design of the lower half of the garment is in warm colours — red, yellow, orange — with long, apricot-hued fringes hanging from the hem. Under the cape, the model wears a knitted azure jumper, jogger jeans, rubber sandals, and what appears like a shopping bag strapped to his chest. The body language and contextual cues of the bag and container’s inside signify purpose and industriousness, values that are indexed also in the post’s caption:

What’s your intention? What are your goals? Are you hoping for life to go back to normal? Are you working towards a better future? Join us in our strive for a sustainable, regenerative and circular economy! Design is leading the way! Eastern Cape designer @gugupeteni uses one of SA’s premier sustainable fibers — mohair — in her work. A natural, animal fibre loved by designers and consumers.<sup>53</sup>

Care-themed posts encourage user discussion on the actors who ensure that positive economic performance yields environmental and social benefits across the whole of the supply chain. Care is the value underpinning the “just transition” that Twyg advocates for fashion as a system in need of a “revolution” that invests not only its business model, but its set of beliefs. Care is thus described as a mode of practicing and consuming fashion and a goal in itself, as the industry is called upon to improve the quality of the relationships that it fosters across species, locales, and cultures.

## Interdependence

The theme of interdependence foregrounds the social value of luxury as an expression of social justice, intersectionality, community resilience, and wellbeing. An Instagram post from 25 January, 2021 features a portrait of African American poet laureate Amanda Gorman. The lower half of the image has the quote “We will rebuild, reconcile and recover” that she pronounced at the inauguration of President Joe Biden. Twyg’s caption reads:

Besides the material suggestions of #reduce #reuse #recycle there are a multitude of social adjustments to be made to ensure we achieve sustainability. This is a small reminder from US poet laureate’s magnificent inauguration poem delivered last week that our approach needs to be an #intersectionalenvironmentalism one.<sup>54</sup>

The caption refers to Twyg’s commitment to supporting actions in fashion that improve social wealth in the post-COVID world.

The reality of South Africa’s deep inequalities is a topic raised in multiple platform posts. Ufrieda Ho writes on 12 August, 2019:

There’s a cappuccino divide — the worlds of those who can fork out for a fair trade cuppa and those who produce or serve up the brew but can’t splurge on foam masquerading as milk. But what if these worlds could collide and not collapse? What if cutting through the froth made it possible to imagine economy and profit not based just on production and sales, and value could be counted in something other than rands and cents?<sup>55</sup>

52. Twyg (@twygmag), “What’s your intention?” January 8, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJyZjhqJYZ7/>.

53. Twyg (@twygmag), “What’s your intention?”

54. Twyg (@twygmag), “We will rebuild, reconcile and recover. Three R’s @amandascgorman,” Instagram photo, January 25, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKebctXp4K4/>.

55. Ufrieda Ho, “The wellbeing economy offers seeds of hope at Victoria Yards,” *Twyg*, August 12, 2019, <https://twyg.co.za/the-wellbeing-economy-offers-seeds-of-hope-at-victoria-yards/>.

Paramount to Twyg's vision is fostering local perspectives, which, while supporting the growth of a local industry, ensure the fair treatment of workers. Designing and consuming ethically-made clothes are presented as forms of quiet activism that enable emancipation and egalitarianism. A post from 18 February, 2021 offers one such example, focusing on the "social activis[m]" of Sindiso Khumalo, the recipient of Twyg's Trans-Seasonal Sustainable Award 2019, who "bring[s] together the political and the aesthetic."<sup>56</sup> Khumalo is an internationally-renowned designer, shortlisted for the prestigious LVMH Prize in 2019. Her organic, hand-painted garments, crafted with old techniques, tell African stories of heritage and female identity. The brand proclaims that it gives equal importance to serving the natural world and "chang[ing] the lives of marginalised people."<sup>57</sup> Khumalo collaborates with organisations that teach skills and uplift marginalised women in several African countries and has created collections inspired by the accomplishments of black female heroes. Twyg's article shares a statement by the designer: "We have to understand that it can't just be about materials. It has to be about your value chain. It has to be about people."<sup>58</sup> For Khumalo, value lies in social abundance and in a woman's right to a good life. Twyg's profile of this designer contributes to building an empathetic discourse of sustainable luxury that presents social responsibility not as a corporate goal, but an expressive mode of socialisation.

Development through self-empowerment and place-making inspire several other posts.<sup>59</sup> For example, on 6 April, 2020 Twyg published an invited contribution by Zola Booi, a fashion designer and ambassador of the National Youth Development Agency. The post promoted Khayelitsha Fashion Week, an event spotlighting community-based designers and fashion enthusiasts from one of Cape Town's biggest townships.<sup>60</sup> The township is known for its high crime rate, but is described as a hub of resilience where fashion making re-positions the collective narrative around an emancipatory and life-affirming set of values. The post describes the fashion week as an opportunity to create agency through practices that draw inspiration from traditional cultures.<sup>61</sup> An Instagram post from 17 March, 2021 follows up on this thread of social regeneration in Khayelitsha. The multiple-image post captures scenes of small clothes and textile shops and their surrounding urban setting.<sup>62</sup> The caption reports the findings of a survey by UNISA Press and Township Entrepreneurs Alliance (TEA) on the impact of COVID on textile and garment businesses in South African townships. It reads: "The survey found that 77% of enterprises reported on an average income below R 5000 per month during lockdown with only 23% of enterprises reported an average income more than R 5000 per month". Following are the hashtags #townshipconomy #clothingandtextiles #SDG12 #Fashion4Development #sustainabledevelopment #sustainableliving #southafrica #afrika #regeneration #recovery #economicrecovery.<sup>63</sup> Through this and other posts, Twyg mediates knowledge about the other side of the "cappuccino divide," where growth is "highly dependent on community engagement," writes Booi.<sup>64</sup>

These examples call attention to the quality of the relations that form around the making and handling

56. Binwe Adebayo, "Sindiso Khumalo uses fashion to tell stories of women's empowerment and global heroes," *Twyg*, February 18, 2021, <https://twyg.co.za/sindiso-khumalo-uses-fashion-to-tell-stories-of-womens-empowerment-and-global-heroes/>.

57. Sindiso Khumalo, Official website, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.sindisokhumalo.com/>.

58. Binwe Adebayo, "Sindiso Khumalo uses fashion to tell stories of women's empowerment and global heroes".

59. For example, the Question & Answer session with Daniel Sher of Good Good Good, a menswear ethical streetwear label, presents the brand as "an agent for transformative social change within the South African clothing industry" committed to sustaining the livelihoods of local people in all the manufacturing process, sharing their resources with other independent brands, and, for their SS2021 collection, supporting young musicians, who received 10% of the sales profit. Questions concerning the socially-sustainable practices of brands and designers appear in the majority of the interviews published on the website.

60. Zola Booi, "Pending: Khatelitsha Fashion Week celebrates Africa fashion heritage," *Twyg*, April 6, 2020, <https://twyg.co.za/pending-khayelitsha-fashion-week-celebrates-african-fashion-heritage/>.

61. Booi, "Pending: Khatelitsha Fashion Week celebrates Africa fashion heritage".

62. Twyg (@twygmag), "About 7% of the formal and informal enterprises in townships are in fashion and textiles," Instagram photo, March 17, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMg88bhpC-g/>.

63. Twyg (@twygmag), "About 7% of the formal and informal enterprises in townships are in fashion and textiles".

64. Booi, "Pending: Khatelitsha Fashion Week celebrates Africa fashion heritage".

of garments, a theme that, as we saw earlier, is at the core of the ethics of slowness. Twyg digitally mediates and re-mediates these relations by enabling critical dialogue online and concrete action in the physical world through initiatives that encourage consumers to make direct, material experience of natural environments and sustainable communities.

## Pluriversality

Twyg is committed to defining luxury as a medium of inclusive development. The concept of “pluriversality” refers to the idea of a “world in which many worlds ... coexist,” where new knowledges and practices are created to supersede the supremacy of the Western epistemology.<sup>65</sup> This theory inspires the movement for decolonialising fashion, a school of thought that influences Twyg’s communication and May’s own practice. Decolonial activists oppose the neocolonial and neocapitalist workings of the global fashion system. They call for the emergence of a plural and non-exploitative landscape of dress systems that can return agency and power to marginalised/disappearing cultures.<sup>66</sup>

In South Africa, scholar-activist Erica de Greef adopts this interpretive lens to advocate for a sustainability paradigm that links development to a radical restructuring of the fashion industry, based on cultural self-determination and plurality. Describing fashion as a “core institution of modernity,” she invites to acknowledge and take action on the mechanisms that have excluded South African cultures of dress from the discourse of fashion.<sup>67</sup> de Greef has been involved with Twyg’s activities since the company’s early days and May acknowledges her work as a source of inspiration.<sup>68</sup> The scholar has developed the theme of pluriversality in multiple events sponsored by the company, including at the “Future of Fashion” symposium held in Johannesburg in 2019, where she presented culturally-sustainable fashion through a decolonial lens.<sup>69</sup> Cultural sustainability is the policy framework developing relationships between cultural producers, workers, and the communities they support, which it posits as drivers of development.<sup>70</sup>

As an industry embedded in unequal relations of power and capitalist redistribution, South African fashion is developing cultural narratives of empowerment and self-assertion that re-center agency away from fashion’s hubs in the Northern hemisphere. Pluriversality and the critique of the Western fashion monoculture are thus embedded in Twyg’s communication of luxury. These emerge particularly in the company’s focus on the hidden stories of marginalised or endangered South African dress cultures. These stories map a South African culture of ecosystem harmony and regeneration that pre-dates Western environmentalist models. During an interview, May discussed the fashion film *Indlela Yethu — Our Way of Being* (2020) directed by Simbi Seam Nkula and produced by Zizipho Ntobongwana, a local entrepreneur committed to decolonising sustainability.<sup>71</sup> The film, screened at the “Future of Fashion” event organised for the 2020 edition of the Awards, interprets sustainability as a value of the South African fashion ecology. Twyg subscribes to this view and directs its efforts at changing the “asso-

65. Walter D. Mignolo, “Foreword. On pluriversality and multipolarity,” in *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 9.

66. Sandra Niessen, “Fashion, its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability,” *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 24.6 (2020): 859–877; Sandra Niessen, “Afterword: Fashion’s Fallacy,” in *Modern Fashion Traditions: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity through Fashion*, eds. M. Angela Jansen and Jennifer Craik (London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 209–217.

67. Toby Slade and M. Angela Jansen, “Letter from the Editors: Decoloniality and Fashion,” *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 24.6 (2020): 813.

68. Jackie May, personal interview with the author, November 2020.

69. Erica de Greef, “Long Read: Fashion, Sustainability and Decoloniality,” *Twyg*, December 7, 2019, <https://twyg.co.za/long-read-fashion-sustainability-and-decoloniality/>.

70. Michael Atwood Mason and Rory Turner, “Cultural Sustainability: A Framework for Relationships, Understanding, and Action,” *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 133.527 (2020), 81–99; David Thorsby, “Culturally sustainable development: theoretical concept or practical policy instrument?,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 23.2 (2017): 133–147.

71. Jackie May, personal conversation with the author.

ciati[on of eco-consciousness] with former colonisers and with the global north,<sup>72</sup> creating knowledge about independent labels to educate users on local histories of eco-consciousness.<sup>73</sup> May says:

While the concept of sustainability seems to be a relatively new concept to many of us living in a largely Western world, many indigenous groups in Africa and across the globe have been living in harmony with the environment for thousands of years. We believe there is much to learn about sustainability, circularity, the shared-economy, sustainable material sourcing and more from these communities who's sustainable practices have stood the test of time.<sup>74</sup>

Twyg's communication amplifies these locally-relevant narratives, supporting sustainable solutions that have meaning and value for these communities. Designer Katekani Moreku is a representative example of this. Moreku was first featured in an article written by May from 7 June, 2019 that describes him as an upcycler who applies the SePulana culture's method of "borrowing elements from other art forms."<sup>75</sup> For his debut collection, presenting mix-and-match styles in a palette of warm colours, Moreku employed scraps of discarded fabric and plastic salvaged from a factory's rubbish bin. The garments' inserts made with plastic bear the material traces of their past life. A second article comments on the relevance of his work for developing a model rooted in local ways of life. The opening line of the post significantly remarks:

In South African indigenous cultures, the surrounding land and resources become part of the people. With a metaphysical connection to the natural world, it is no surprise that Mpumalanga-born Katekani Moreky would bring his culture and surroundings in his signature colorful creations.<sup>76</sup>

The cultural roots of this designer's sustainable praxis hark back to the regenerative culture of SePulana women: "Katekani was exposed to the ways in which local women use sacks, recycled bags and other easily-accessible materials to make otherworldly creations, and ultimately, express their joy."<sup>77</sup> Here, as in the other examples mentioned in the previous sections, the semantic choice imbues sustainable work with qualities of self-fulfilment, resilience, and biophysical harmony that produce cultural capital and social wealth. Describing hand-crafting as a joyful act of bringing "otherworldly" creations to life within the tight circle of a matriarchal society, author Bwine Adebayo envisions the kind of material pleasures that make sustainably-made products luxurious and Moreku's work a red arrow unveiling the possibilities of using culture as a framework for interpreting development.<sup>78</sup>

Twyg describes luxury as a means for disempowered subjects to reclaim agency. This marginal status applies to both South Africa *vis a vis* the global fashion system, and the indigenous actors within the country who have limited freedom to express their dress sknowledge and make a dignified living out of it. Giving priority to people and community over growth and consumerism, and interdependency over alienation, the company's communication of luxury encourages users to act as "guardian[s] of diversity,"<sup>79</sup> implicating fashion in practices of community-making and community-preservation. Mobilising the website and social media to accumulate knowledge on the possibilities of harnessing fashion

72. May, personal conversation with the author.

73. May recognises that she occupies a complex position, that of a "white, South African woman whose cultural heritage stems from [British] colonisers", and claims that it motivates her to call attention to issues of ownership and privilege in the industry to contribute building a more equal system. May, personal conversation with the author, November 2020.

74. May, personal conversation with the author, November 2020.

75. J Jackie May, "Why Upcycling Suits Katekani Moreku's Design Style," *Twyg*, June 7, 2019, <https://twyg.co.za/upcycling-suits-katekani-morekus-design-style/>.

76. Bwine Adebayo, "The student becomes the teacher: Katekani Moreku shows the way with his slow fashion," *Twyg*, February 8, 2021, <https://twyg.co.za/the-student-becomes-the-teacher-katekani-moreku-shows-the-way-with-his-slow-fashion/>.

77. Adebayo, "The student becomes the teacher: Katekani Moreku shows the way with his slow fashion".

78. Thorsby, "Culturally sustainable development: theoretical concept or practical policy instrument?".

79. Fletcher, "Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change," 264.

to push for culturally-sustainable fashion, Twyg emerges as a new type of “luxury authority” shaping modes of digital consumption that align economic development with social change.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusions

Twyg was created to mobilise grassroots consumer activism to encourage an environmentalist and sustainable position for South African fashion. Since its launch in 2019, it has informed users on the negative impact of fast fashion and supported the growth of the independent, slow-fashion scene. It achieves this through researched communication and events that imbue luxury with symbolic values integrating environmentalism, community uplift, and intersectionalism. Throughout, it has situated itself in the international conversation, collaborating with foreign actors to build an understanding of luxury that downplays material value for socially- and culturally-driven prosperity.

This article has analysed Twyg’s communication and digitisation of sustainable luxury fashion in the framework of critical luxury studies and slow fashion studies, which highlight the sector’s contradictory support of sustainable principles and unsustainable business operations. It has shown its social media strategies to inform and educate citizens on independent, eco-conscious luxury fashion options in the specific context of South Africa. Three key themes were identified — Care, Interdependence and Pluriversality — discussed, and explained with examples. The findings demonstrate that Twyg’s slow ethic posits socio-economic growth as an effect of new ways of connecting with the local world that envisions a post-consumerist future where the environment and the economy are integrated. Acting as a signifier of reciprocal engagement and a facilitator of transformational change, ethical luxury is, for Twyg, a site to negotiate power and mediate agency at the intranational and international levels, but also to enjoy pleasure, making a statement with beautiful clothes and accessories.

This article makes a contribution to the literature on the digitisation of ethical luxury in the Global South. In particular, it expands the study of small actors, offering a reading that complements the more mainstream focus on big brands, highlight the role of digital media in shaping a Southern vision of sustainable luxury that strives to reconcile growth, equality, and socio-cultural justice. However, the article is limited to one case study and therefore provides only an introduction to the operations of independent stakeholders in the region. Future research will continue in this direction, analysing other independent voices of sustainable, ethical luxury across the African continent.

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