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# Fashion Communication in the Digital Age

Proceedings of the FACTUM 23  
Conference, Pisa, Italy, 2023

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# Preface

## FACTUM23 Conference Preface

The Conference “FACTUM23—Fashion communication: between tradition and future digital developments” (Pisa, Italy, July 3–5, 2023), is the third event in the series of FACTUM Conferences on Fashion Communication. The first one took place in 2019 in Ascona (Switzerland) and was organized by USI—Università della Svizzera italiana, while the second one was held in 2021 in Pamplona (Spain) and was hosted by the University of Navarra and the ISEM Fashion Business School.

FACTUM23 is hosted by the Department of Civilization and Forms of Knowledge of the University of Pisa (Italy).

The Conference aim is to promote theoretical and empirical interdisciplinary work on how various communication practices impact upon the fashion industry and on societal fashion-related practices and values. In particular, the relation between tradition and innovation, as well as the impact of new technologies, digital media and the Internet will be under scrutiny.

Through FACTUM conferences, the organizers aim at consolidating Fashion Communication as an academic field and establishing an international and interdisciplinary network of related scholars.

In this 2023 edition, 28 papers have been accepted for publication. Full papers as well as research notes went through a rigorous double-blind review process. We greatly appreciate the considerable time put into the organization of the Conference by all the members of FACTUM23 Program Committee, who helped us to ensure high quality of all accepted contributions.

We are sure that these Proceedings will serve as a valuable source of information on the current state of the art in Fashion Communication research; they will also constitute an important step forward in identifying and addressing emerging topics and in outlining a research agenda for the coming years.

Additionally to full papers and research notes, emerging research projects, books presentations, and three keynote speakers enrich the program of FACTUM23:

- Lorenzo Cantoni, USI—Università della Svizzera italiana (Switzerland)
- Antonio Mancinelli, bookzine Carnale (Italy)
- Paula von Wachenfeldt, Stockholm University (Sweden).

A satellite event—the opening of the exhibition “Fashion, Sport & Tourism” at the Museo della Grafica of the University of Pisa and of the Pisa municipality (Italy)—highlights the close relationships among those three domains of human experience, culture, and society.

We would like to take this opportunity also to thank Dr. Tekila Harley Nobile, who provided a very important support in the organization of the event.

We hope you enjoy FACTUM23 and its Proceedings!

Nadzeya Sabatini  
Teresa Sádaba  
Alessandro Tosi  
Veronica Neri  
Lorenzo Cantoni

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# **Social Media and Emerging Technologies in Fashion**



# The Power of Consumers on Social Media: A Case Study of Balenciaga's Crisis Communication

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**Abstract.** The French luxury brand, Balenciaga, recently faced its most important communication crisis. On November 16th 2022, the brand released its holiday gifting campaign featuring children surrounded by sadomasochism-inspired teddy bears/handbags and received immediate backlash from the public, who accused the brand of sexualizing children and promoting pedophilia. The outrage went viral on social media - mainly on Tiktok - with the hashtags #burnbalenciaga and #cancelbalenciaga, which have accumulated more than 300 million views. Balenciaga suffered an incalculable damage on its reputation, having two flagship stores vandalized and a viral online boycott. This investigation follows the case study methodology, by analyzing the timeline of events, the brand's statements and response, the viral effect of the boycott on social media and the ultimate affectations that the brand underwent due to the crisis. The conclusions reveal that on one hand there are some social anethical boundaries that not even well-positioned and beloved brands can afford to cross, and that slow, unclear and unaccountable answers compose a terrible strategy of crisis management, and on the other hand, the power of consumers on social media has gained enough strength to damage brands like Balenciaga.

**Keywords:** Balenciaga · communication crisis · consumer · social media · reputation

## 1 Introduction

Balenciaga, the French luxury brand, has faced the most important crisis of its history. Not only because of the reaction of users on social media but also because of the theme: the firm has been accused of promoting pedophilia and the sexualization of minors. Demna Gvasaglia, Balenciaga's creative director since 2015, has stood out for his controversies in designs and marketing by reaching the limits of what is acceptable [1]. For example, he has sold destroyed old sneakers and luxury bags that looked like chip bags from Lays.

The new controversy has exceeded limits that are difficult to escape unscathed. The accusation of promoting pedophilia and the sexualization of minors with sado-masochistic traits has affected the reputation of the brand and has plunged it into its most important crisis. The spark that ignited the crisis came from Twitter with a tweet

from @shoe0nhead [2], exposing the brand for promoting child pornography. The next day, the tweet appeared on television and spread on social media, especially on TikTok with the hashtags #burnbalenciaga and #cancelbalenciaga, which have accumulated more than 300 million views. The backlash also reached the streets with the vandalization of two flagship stores in Los Angeles and London 3 [1]. The controversy led Balenciaga to an important communication crisis that profoundly damaged the brand's reputation: social media users, media outlets, celebrities and even a lawsuit were involved.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Fashion Crisis Communication

Authors Pearson and Clair [4: 60] define a crisis as “a low probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made quickly”. Additionally, Dubrovski [5: 333] defined a company crisis as a short-term, undesired, unfavorable and critical state in the company, which has derived from both internal and external causes and which directly endangers the further existence and growth of the company. In that sense, crisis management follows two fundamental objectives: firstly stopping adverse trends and handling the crisis situation (survival), and secondly reaching a turning point (redirectioning) and ensuring the foundations for new development. In order to analyze crises in a more detailed manner, Mitroff and Pearson [6] identify seven groups of major crisis events: economic attacks, environmental accidents, occupational health diseases, psycho events (e.g., terrorism, sabotage, product tampering), damage to reputation, informational attacks, and breaks (e.g., recalls, product defects, computer breakdowns).

In the fashion field, the reputation-related crises are the most common, where sometimes economic-related crises can also be involved. As Sábada et al. [7: 10] assure: “In fashion, reputation is a business, an asset as long as it is good. This means that brands that have favorable reputation have more loyal customers that are more dedicated and that buy a broader range of products”. In general terms, reputation is how an organization is perceived by its public and is a crucial resource worthy of protection and concern during a crisis [8]. Since the late 90 s, an organization's reputation is recognized as a valuable asset [9–11]. If we focus on the crises in the fashion sector, the greater ones have originated from social causes: child exploitation in the case of Nike, the collapse of a factory in Bangladesh or the scandal from the factory in Turkey that had not paid its employees [12], all of which have negatively affected the reputation of brands.

Decades ago, traditional crises had other parameters and, since the rise of digital technologies and social media, their pace, scope and impact have multiplied [13], which means that they can quickly go viral.

Prior to social media and digital platforms, fashion brands allowed themselves to use scandals as marketing or promotional strategies, but now they have become a problem that must be managed and that can damage their reputation if not handled effectively [14, 15]. With the presence of social media, crises in fashion brands have significantly increased in the last 5 years. Some of the most relevant have been those of Dolce &

Gabanna, Prada, Uniqlo or H&M for accusations of racism, and Carolina Herrera and Gucci for cultural appropriation [14–16].

Before the pandemic, the most important social media in the fashion industry was Instagram due to its mostly visual nature, which resulted in brands spending great efforts in creativity and image production, creating a place for fans to get inspired and allowing consumers to interact with one another and create communities [17]. Nevertheless, during and after the pandemic, TikTok came into the digital map and stayed. The Chinese social media, TikTok, is the fastest growing app in the post-pandemic era [18]. The format is dynamic and audiovisual, which allows users to post only short videos [19], and the content is focused on entertainment [20]. The target audience of TikTok is teenagers and young adults: 40% of its users vary between the age of 10–19 years [19]. That is why a fashion communication crisis - with a strong target on Generation Z - would have an impact on TikTok. This field of academic research still has scarce literature to review due to its recent appearance. Digital and social media platforms, which act as loudspeakers for committed citizens, require from fashion brands a greater effort to care for different cultures and approaches. It is interesting to observe how fashion “is becoming a place where culture is being discussed, defended, and (re)negotiated among different parties” [16: 120].

## 2.2 Consumer Empowerment on Social Media

The rise of new digital technologies has brought a shift in the dynamics and interactions between brands, consumers and online communities, leading to the empowerment of the digital consumer. Social media platforms, where the traditional communication model has shifted from a one-to-many scheme towards a many-to-many scheme [21], have changed the balance of power between brands and consumers. The evolution of digital technologies has drastically changed the consumers’ wants and needs, who now prefer to interact directly with brands and other consumers, while sharing their opinions and preferences publicly [22]. Designers and brands now face a new digital landscape where the balance of power has tilted towards the consumer, and the sources of information can come from different actors such as customers, competitors, observers, employees and online communities.

User generated content and two-way communication are the most important factors of web 2.0 [22], and have been crucial to the empowerment process of the digital consumers. By creating and participating through comments, reviews, testimonials, videos, texts or animated contents, consumers are capable of influencing the values, attitudes and behaviors of other people in their network. This opportunity of interaction in digital media has been key in how consumers experience empowerment through a wide variety of elements that increase their freedom of choice and action [23]. Furthermore, consumers believe that brands have an important role to play in social conversations in the public sphere, mainly millennials who became by 2020 the most politically active age group on social platforms [24]. As creators and active participants of the digital sphere, consumers have the power to demand, praise and cancel the actions that brands take online and offline. And with such empowerment, online consumers and netizens act as constant *vigilantes* that track every step or misstep of public actors, and are quick to call out anything that doesn’t align with their values.

In that sense, anger is the most viral emotion on the Internet [25] due to its long lasting effect, and can lead to a boycott if the crisis is not managed efficiently. Friedman [26: 97] describes boycotts as attempts of one or more parties to accomplish certain objectives by urging individual consumers to abstain from making specific purchases in the market. In the era of social media, boycotts can also have a profound effect on the reputation of a brand. Online consumers can call for boycotts due to diverse issues, such as racial, environmental, human rights and political matters. The reasons may vary, but the social causes that are supported on the public sphere are usually aligned with fundamental moral and ethical values that most netizens share. In the case of the Balenciaga scandal - and boycott - that is analyzed throughout this paper, the brand overlooked and defied one of the most important social agreements that has been established since the XX century [27]: to protect child rights and safeguard their health, safety and morals.

### 3 Methodology

This research paper was based on the case study methodology under the approach suggested by Robert K. Yin [28: 18], who stated that “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” in order to understand its complexity as a social issue. It focuses on describing, understanding and predicting phenomena regarding processes, organizations, groups, industries [29] and managerial practices, among others.

The investigation initiated with a literature review of crisis management in the fashion industry and the empowerment of social media users in the digital sphere. Subsequently, after an exhaustive research based on secondary sources, the main findings and conclusions of the case study were analyzed and reported. A qualitative analysis regarding the timeline of events, the actors involved, and the communication strategies that were taken during Balenciaga’s scandal composes the main structure of the article, complemented by a quantitative analysis composed by the compilation of social media posts related to the scandal. Specifically, we focused on the mentions of the most replicated hashtags that included the name of the brand - #burnbalenciaga, #cancelbalenciaga, #balenciagascandal, #boycottbalenciaga, #balenciagate and #nomorebalenciaga - in TikTok and Instagram from October 20 to December 20, 2022. As well as an analysis of the brand’s performance in its official TikTok - @abalenciaga - and Instagram - @balenciaga - accounts during the same period of time.

For the quantitative research, Fanpage Karma was used as a monitoring tool to measure likes, comments, shares and interaction/engagement levels [30]. Fanpage Karma converts raw TikTok and Instagram analytics into a report that highlights essential social media utilization and engagement metrics for social media [31].

## 4 Results and Analysis

### 4.1 Balenciaga’s Case Study

On November 16th 2022, Balenciaga released its new holiday gifting campaign featuring children posing in their bedrooms alongside the brand’s products spread like toys. The campaign was shot by Gabriele Galimberti, a photographer recognized for her images

of people surrounded by their collections of personal objects such as toys, guns and medicines. After a few days of unnoticeable reaction from the public, the campaign started generating angry criticism for the images displaying children with the brand's S&M inspired teddy bears, bringing up accusations and comments about Balenciaga sexualizing children.

The backlash grew even more when some social media users found pedophilic messages in another campaign from the brand's Spring/Summer 2023 collection which was published weeks before and showcased Isabelle Huppert in an office scene with a legal document in her bag that coincided with a Supreme Court decision regarding child pornography [32].

On November 21st, the crisis caught fire when a tweet by social media user @shoeonhead that read "*the brand "Balenciaga" just did a uh..... Interesting... Photoshoot for their new products recently which included a very purposely poorly hidden court document about 'virtual child porn'...normal stuff*" went viral with the hashtags #burnbalenciaga and #cancelbalenciaga. Up until January 2023, the publication has obtained 33,500 retweets, 11,200 mentions and 127,000 likes [2].

November 22nd, marked the day when the first media outlet picked up the story. *Fox News* commentator, Tucker Carlson, openly accused the brand of promoting child pornography. So, by the next day, Balenciaga released its first apology - which has now been deleted - that read: "We sincerely apologize for any offense our holiday campaign may have caused. Our plush bear bags should not have been featured with children in this campaign. We apologize for displaying unsettling documents in our campaign" [3]. The brand also announced that it would take legal action against the parties responsible for creating the set.

A few days later, on November 25th, the brand filed a lawsuit for 25 million dollars against North Six Inc. (the campaign's production company) and Nicholas Des Jardins (set designer of the photoshoot). The summons read: "Balenciaga believes that Defendants' inexplicable acts and omissions were malevolent or, at the very least, extraordinarily reckless" [33] and placed all responsibility of the campaign's crisis on the accused. In a statement made by Susan Scafidi of Fordham University's Fashion Law Institute for digital media outlet *Diet Prada*: "Balenciaga filed an immediate, media-worthy lawsuit in order to disavow the campaign in the strongest possible terms and offer the public a different pair of villains in the form of the production company and set designer" [33].

By November 27th, the only celebrity linked to the brand that spoke publicly about the scandal was Kim Kardashian, when she tweeted on her personal account: "I am currently re-evaluating my relationship with the brand, basing it off their willingness to accept accountability for something that should have never happened to begin with - & the actions I am expecting to see them take to protect children" [34]. The next day - after Kim Kardashian's statement - the crisis found its climax with the most Google searches of the words "Balenciaga scandal". The United States, which belongs to Kering's second largest market and generates 34% of its annual income, was the country where most of the searches came from [35].

Indeed, Balenciaga's failure of giving a quick response to the controversy, as well as its initial strategy to portray itself as a victim and place the full blame on the production company and set designer, kindled the anger of the consumers and digital media outlets.

At least two Balenciaga stores - in Los Angeles' Rodeo Drive and London's Bond Street - were vandalized and social media users posted videos destroying the brand's products. As a response, on November 28th, the brand issued a statement admitting "a series of grievous errors for which Balenciaga takes responsibility", and announced ongoing "internal and external investigations" as well as reaching out to "organizations who specialize in child protection and aim at ending child abuse and exploitation" [36].

Finally, on December 2nd, Demna - Balenciaga's creative director - and Cédric Charbit - president and CEO - released separate statements of apology. Demna took responsibility and apologized for "the wrong artistic choice of concept" and stated [37]: "As much as I would sometimes like to provoke a thought through my work, I would NEVER have an intention to do that with such an awful subject as child abuse that I condemn. Period." For his part, Charbit reiterated "my sincere apologies for the offense caused and take my responsibility" [38] and listed an extensive set of actions that the brand would take in order to "learn from our mistakes as an organization", such as new control instances for content validation, a reorganization of their image department, dropping the lawsuit against the third parties involved in the campaign, and donations to organizations that care for children safety.

Since the scandal, Balenciaga has kept a low-profile on social media and public appearances. Demna canceled his appearance in *Business of Fashion's* VOICES 2022 annual gathering and London's Fashion Awards by the British Fashion Council, where he was initially a candidate for Designer of the Year - but was later dropped from the list for the award [39]. Additionally, Balenciaga will not be in the next Haute Couture show in Paris. The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode has released its provisional calendar of the fashion shows that will take place from January 23 to 16, 2023 and Balenciaga is absent [40]. The response of celebrities to the crisis has been discreet. Apart from Kim Kardashian's statement, no other has spoken on their social media. The singer Dua Lipa has dispensed with the Balenciaga outfits for her Future Nostalgia concert tour and the model Bella Hadid deleted a photo of the campaign she did with the brand from her Instagram. On the other hand, the actress Nicole Kidman did not remove the photos of the campaign with Balenciaga on her Instagram account, which caused more than 13,000 comments of criticism [41].

## 4.2 Balenciaga's Performance on Social Media

Creative director, Demna Gvasalia, linked Balenciaga to social media with a strong digital strategy, thus approaching Generation Z to the brand. In a 2018 interview with Highsnobiety, the designer stated that "most of my designs are inspired by the screen" [6]. One day before the publication of the controversial campaign, Balenciaga closed its Twitter account in response to Elon Musk acquiring the company. This was expressed by Demna Gvasaglia on his own Instagram account.

The following tables represent an analysis of the official accounts of Balenciaga on Instagram and TikTok before the crisis (Table 1) and after the crisis (Table 2).

It is striking that after the crisis - which went viral on social media - Balenciaga froze its two most important social media platforms. The brand stopped posting, muted all comments, and didn't speak out. As a consequence, its growth and performance also froze. If we go deeper into Instagram with the number of followers, we can see that they

**Table 1.** Data one month before the crisis: from October 20, 2022 to November 20, 2022

	Followers	Followers's growth	Performance index	Engagement	Total of Reactions
Instagram	14.4 M	0.74%	20%	0.58%	2.2 M
TikTok	3.1 M	6.9%	43%	5.9%	1.2 M

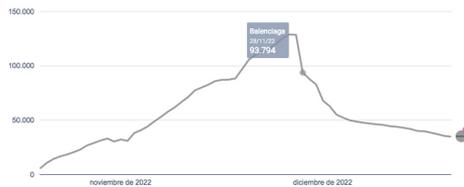
Source: Authors with Fanpage Karma

**Table 2.** Data one month after the crisis: from November 20, 2022 to December 20, 2022

	Followers	Followers's growth	Performance index	Engagement	Total of Reactions
Instagram	14.3 M	-0,43%	2%	0.38%	716.000
TikTok	3.1 M	0%	1%	0.71%	22.000

Source: Authors with Fanpage Karma

lost 100,000 followers after the crisis, and the day they suffered the biggest drop (34,730 less followers) was November 28, 2022 (Fig. 1), which coincides with their last apology and Kim Kardashian's statement from the day before.

**Fig. 1.** Chart of Balenciaga's Instagram followers from October 20 to December 20, 2022. Source: Authors with Fanpage Karma

Although TikTok is the second most important social media for the brand, it is the one with the highest growth in followers (6.9%) and above all, highest engagement (5.9%). The chinese app is the social media platform that is mainly targeted to Gen Z and, for Balenciaga, it was a way to connect with this audience. Even if the crisis started on Twitter, it went viral on TikTok, and it has been the first crisis that a luxury brand has undergone on this platform. For the quantitative research, the views of the most important hashtags have been quantified [42] (Table 3) demonstrating the virality of the brand's cancellation process, the boycott and even the burning of Balenciaga products.

In TikTok, the most viral hashtag was #cancelbalenciaga with more than 280 million views, followed by #boycottbalenciaga with more than 180 million views. There is an interesting hashtag that is #balenciagate, which refers to how the connection between the brand and the sexualization of minors has been uncovered. In total, there are more

than 600 million views of videos on TikTok against Balenciaga. These data measure the magnitude of this unprecedented crisis on TikTok.

**Table 3.** TikTok hashtags

TIKTOK HASHTAGS	Visualizations
#burnbalenciaga	20.7 M
#cancelbalenciaga	286.5 M
#balenciagascandal	63.8 M
#boycottbalenciaga	186 M
#balenciagate	62.7 M
#nomorebalenciaga	6.1 M
Total	626.8 M

Source: Authors from the TikTok website

## 5 Conclusions

Even though Balenciaga, under the direction of Demna Gvasalia since 2015, gained substantial awareness and positioned itself as an interesting and disruptive brand during the past years, the holiday gifting campaign scandal of November - December 2022 proved that there are certain limits that not even beloved and well-positioned brands are allowed to cross. It also demonstrates that a bad response to a communication crisis can cost the reputation of a brand. Balenciaga had a slow and unclear response to the initial backlash that ultimately led to the big crisis. The brand took days to fully address the issue, published several and inconclusive statements - that only made it more viral and media worthy of attention - and failed to assume responsibility.

The brand's reactive strategy was initially a "Deny Response Option", of the scapegoat type: when the crisis manager blames a person or group outside the organization for the crisis [13]. In the case of Balenciaga, the blame was placed on the producer of the campaign and Nicholas Des Jardins, set designer for the photo-shoot. The brand even sued them in court asking for a compensation of 25 million dollars. The public punished the deflective strategy, since no one believed that the brand was not aware of the props used for the campaign. The last apology was a "Deal Response Option" [13], of the apology type. This happens when a manager or spokesperson indicates that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness. It is the most convincing option but Balenciaga took too much time to take it: 7 days after the crisis broke out, when the story was already in the media and viral on social media.

The Balenciaga crisis is an example of consumer empowerment on social media. The brand did not realize that linking a fashion campaign with minors and objects related to sadomasochism or child pornography was going to have such a virulent and negative

reaction on social media. If we add up all the views on TikTok with the hashtags against Balenciaga, it reaches more than 600 million. Balenciaga was used to controversies in the media but not among TikTok users, the social media that was growing the most for them. In this sense, the silence on social media also draws attention. The crisis originated there and they did not know how to manage it properly. Since the crisis, Balenciaga has not published anything on TikTok, and it has restricted the comments on their videos. In the case of Instagram, it has only published a post without comments as well. With these actions, Balenciaga has missed an important opportunity of listening and communicating with its followers.

The crisis is very recent and we still have little perspective to understand the consequences that it will have for Balenciaga: both economically and reputation-wise. We only know that it has plunged the brand into unprecedented silence on its social media platforms and that it will not participate in the next Haute Couture show in Paris in January, 2023 [40].

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# Instagram: Digital Behavior in Luxury Fashion Brands

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**Abstract.** Social media has become an essential brand communication channel for fashion brands through interaction, engagement and personal communication. Instagram is one of the most important social media platforms for communication and marketing for the luxury fashion industry and is a key marketing tool for brand equity, brand loyalty and brand preference. This study examines how luxury fashion brands relate to their consumers on Instagram through seven quantitative variables (engagement, fans, interaction, number of likes, number of comments, number of publications and publications per day) and ten qualitative variables (account description, link analysis, quality of comments, stories, highlights, reels, photos in which they are tagged, feed, texts of publications and integration between Instagram and the webpage). Four luxury brands were selected as case studies: Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Hermes, and Gucci. The results show that luxury fashion brands tend to be somewhat unidirectional in their interaction.

**Keywords:** Instagram · Social Media · Digital Behavior · Luxury · Communication

## 1 Introduction

Social media have become the most effective way to concretise what the connection consumers are looking for in brands should look like. Consumers no longer see the brands as brands but as a connection, expecting a service from the brands, and a way to interact, engage, and communicate [1]. In this sense, we find a perfect parallel between what consumers are looking for in brands - connection - and social networks, which are themselves defined as connection: “Social media are the online means of communication, conveyance, collaboration, and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities, and organizations enhanced by technological capabilities and mobility” [2: 28].

Social media are now one of the most effective ways for brands to connect with consumers, as they offer more than just a means of communication. Chaffé & Smith argue that encouraging interaction and user-generated content is the most essential feature of

these platforms, and using social media as a broadcast-only channel “is a mistake” [3: 225]. Instagram remains one of the most important social media platforms for communication and marketing in the fashion industry. Several researchers have emphasized Instagram’s significance as a key marketing tool for brand equity, loyalty, and preference [4]. Moreover, it is highlighted as a platform that enables collaborations with fashionistas to reinforce strategic brand management [5]. However, one of the most analyzed topics is how Instagram has become an essential social media platform for driving consumer engagement [6].

This study aims to analyze the behavior of luxury brands on Instagram using three approaches: 1) creation and co-creation of valuable content, 2) engagement that fosters and builds community and immersive experiences, and 3) personal communication that improves customer service. To achieve this objective, the study begins by developing a theoretical framework based on the emerging trends in interaction marketing, engagement, and communication in social media, from a broad perspective. Four case studies are conducted to apply the three-pronged approach, which focuses on Instagram, and to analyze the behavior of luxury brands on the platform.

## 2 Social Media Digital Behavior Approach

In social media, the interaction that consumers seek with brands is embodied in the power they increasingly have to create and co-create with brands and the facilities they are presented with to be able to buy through social media. Firstly, in terms of creation, it can be seen from two perspectives. On the one hand, the end consumer who wants to participate in the decision-making process of brands finds social networks as the most suitable place [7]. On the other hand, we are at a time when we are no longer only talking about user generated content or influencer content. What now brings more value to brands and consumers is the development of content creation [8]. This phenomenon has been discussed [9], but the current circumstances, the development of technology, and the advances in enabling creators to monetise their content make it a more interesting reality. Most social networks are introducing features to enable them to monetise their work. According to Hootsuite, “By using creators to tap into these circles where you’re not well known and adding value there, you’ll reach new audiences, build cultural relevance, and learn more about your customers” [10: 12].

The creator economy is powered by passionate individuals who share their interests with an engaged community and generate income from their knowledge and skills. Its strength lies in the ability of these creators to provide content tailored to specific interests or niches. Community commerce offers a space where creators and brands can build high levels of engagement that inspire purchases [11]. Following Scaman in the WARC guide “Creator Economy” of October 2021, it is possible to distinguish between the influencer and content creator.

One grows a social following through an artfully curated life, turning themselves into a palatable canvas in order to attract the attention of relevant brands, who can easily slot into their world of considered, edited, and polished perfection. The other leans into their own talents or a specific topic, creating content that’s entertaining,

educational, or engaging enough to grow a strong and sticky community, which they, in turn, can leverage in numerous ways to turn their followers into their financiers – through tiered access, merch lines, product spin-offs, virtual drops and much more. Put simply, one monetises their audience through brands, the other monetises their audience directly [12: 14].

Among others, TikTok has created the Creator Fund [13]. By collaborating with content creators, brands can offer customers added value, reach new audiences, establish cultural relevance, and gain a deeper understanding of their customers [10: 12]. In addition, some beauty brands are migrating to their own community platforms “shifting focus from the major social media channels to new beta platforms such as Newness and Supergreat” [12: 25].

Social media have become one of the top sources of information about brands, second only to search engines, and particularly in the younger age group, 16–24 years old, it is the first source of information [14]. Regarding ecommerce, it can be said that “social becomes the heart of modern shopping” [10: 29]. Consumers are using social media in all phases of the purchase journey. They use social media to get information, get inspired, research, evaluate brands, and, of course, buy and share their experience. Particularly in fashion, this is understood as an omnichannel fashion consumers’ journey as a highly social experience [15]. Social media are “first and foremost about community: the collective participation of members who together create value” [2: 132]. Socialization of media consumption is thus reflected in the appearance of new intermediaries in the digital environment who act as advisors for other users they influence [21]. Brands’ use of content creators generates, expands, and strengthens these communities around a common interest [16]. Alongside the pleasure of material possession in fashion, there is an emerging “pleasure in the virtual possession of content” [17: 408]. Social media serve as a portal to inspiring worlds, and the act of discovering, exploring, and sharing these worlds provides an emotionally gratifying experience. This virtual journey is not merely a private desire, as users are compelled to express themselves publicly, imbuing their messages with strong emotional content and tone. Luxury brands have astutely capitalized on this phenomenon, creating immersive universes on their websites and social platforms that invite users to dream while awake. These experiences do not necessarily require purchases, but they provide brands with a platform for garnering notoriety and visibility in an oversaturated content environment [17].

Consumers are looking for a personal and close communication with brands. Brands must be transparent and authentic to show a human side and be trustworthy companies. In this sense, social networks have become the right place to achieve this close relationship with consumers. Social networks have always been perfect platforms for customer care. For example, Twitter has been characterized by the service being immediate, convenient, and effective. However, talking about customer care, linked to what consumers are demanding and focused on the possibilities that social media allows. According to Gartner (2021) [18], 60% of all customer service requests will be managed via digital channels by 2023. Therefore, demand for integrating customer care channels is increasing and social networks are taking on an even greater role.

### 3 Methodology

In order to analyze the behavior of luxury brands on Instagram with the three-pronged approach outlined in the previous section, each approach has been associated with a group of variables to be studied.

A double methodology was used to analyze the Instagram performance of four selected brands [19, 20]. First, the Fanpage Karma Social Media Analytic Tool was used to analyze the brands' most significant quantitative Instagram metrics [2] from January 1, 2022, to October 30, 2022. Second, a qualitative analysis was conducted on the behavior of the four brands on the social network during the first week of October 2022 (3–9 October). The analysis was based on ten variables [2, 3, 10], including account description, link analysis, quality of comments, stories, highlights, reels, tagged photos, feed, texts of publications, and integration between Instagram and the webpage (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Variables analyzed. Own elaboration based on Velasco-Molpeceres et al. 2023 and Alberghini et al. 2014

Approach	Variables analyzed	
	Quantitative	Qualitative
CONTENT	N° Highlights Integration between Instagram and the Webpage	Publications Comments Stories topic Reels Photos in which the brand are tagged
COMMUNITY	Number of Likes Number of Comments Number of Publications Publications per day	Comments Likes Highlights topics In the Feed/Posting Panel
PERSONAL COMMUNICATION	Account Description Link Analysis	Account Description Reels Texts of Publications Comments

This study focuses on the digital behavior of luxury brands on Instagram. To this end, four luxury brands were selected as case studies. From the list of “Best Global Brands 2022” compiled by the Interbrand company, the top four luxury brands have been chosen. These four brands were ranked the following positions: Louis Vuitton (14), Chanel (22), Hermes (24) and Gucci (30).

## 4 What Brands are Doing on Instagram to Connect

### 4.1 Louis Vuitton

#### Quantitative Analysis

Louis Vuitton has a total of 859 publications in the analyzed period (January 1, 2022 to October 30, 2022). It uploads an average of 2.9 posts per day. The page performance index is 37%. Engagement amounts to 0.46%. The interaction rate with the posts is 0.16%, with the number of likes amounting to 65,300,000 and the number of comments to 432,000 in the period covered by this analysis. Per publication, the number of organic likes is 76,000, and the organic comments are 503.

#### Qualitative Analysis

*Account Description.* The account description reflects a formal style typical of the brand's identity. The language used is cold and professional. There is no appeal to consumer closeness or use of colloquial language.

*Link Analysis.* The link on the account's homepage covers its commercial aspect and is continuously updated to reflect the brand's active campaigns. It currently redirects to the page of the brand's new collection with Yayoi Kusama. Scrolling down reveals windows related to different collections and iconic bags.

*Quality of Comments.* Consumer feedback and followers' opinions on collections are visible on the feed. Comments are mostly positive, with emoticons showing support for the brand. However, now many comments address the feminist revolution in Iran, seeking awareness and support from the brand and its followers.

*Stories.* The stories showcase the new campaign featuring Liya Kebede and the Capucines. Some stories include a link redirecting to the collection's main page, emphasizing the tool's commercial intent and formality.

*Highlights.* Only one folder in the account feed features stories specifically related to the brand's latest campaign: #LVxYakoiKusama. This campaign can also be found on the website's home page.

*Reels.* The latest reels feature short videos showcasing the current campaign. For example, Louis Vuitton used the tool during fashion week to showcase its participation and new spring/summer collection. The goal is to entertain followers with dynamic content that reflects the brand's identity, showcasing products, fashion shows, collections, and

famous personalities wearing the brand at important events like Ana de Armas on the Venice 2022 festival red carpet.

*Photos in Which They are Tagged.* LV only displays what the brand chooses to showcase in its feed, foregoing the user generated content aspect.

*Feed.* The brand's feed follows a coherent aesthetic divided by collections/themes. During an active campaign or event, the focus is on related content. This is reflected in a predominance of video content during fashion weeks, alternating with carousel images.

*Texts of Publications.* Publications feature accompanying text and product promotion. The brand effectively uses tags to relate celebrities to the brand and abundant hashtags created for the campaign.

*Integration Between Instagram and the Webpage.* LV's website does not reference its instagram account. The only way to access it is through an icon in the "follow us" section of the bottom bar.

## 4.2 Chanel

### Quantitative Analysis

On its Instagram profile, LV has 52,831,623 followers and 34,798,941 likes. They post an average of 2.8 times per day, with a performance of 26% and engagement of 0.23%. Posts are typically shared between noon and midday, with Tuesdays or Fridays being more prominent in the last year. The brand receives the most interaction on Saturday and Thursday mornings. The most used and interacted-with word in the last year has been "Chanel." The brand's hashtag, #ChanelShow, is frequently used, and the hashtag that has received the most feedback is #CHANELFragrance.

### Qualitative Analysis

*Account Description.* Chanel's Instagram account description is notable for its brevity, reflecting the brand's formal style and professional identity. The language used is straightforward and businesslike. The brand changes the account link every time it shares new updates, directing consumers to the appropriate page.

*Link Analysis.* The link in Chanel's Instagram bio directs users to their latest video on their YouTube channel, a collaboration with Pharrell Williams' Black Ambition to launch a mentorship program for black and Latino entrepreneurs. This partnership reflects the brand's commitment to investing in human potential and promoting greater representation in culture and society. By integrating this campaign across its social media platforms and website, Chanel projects a sense of unity and constant updates, positioning itself as an active brand.

*Comments.* Recently, Chanel's posts have received less engagement from their followers, with some only receiving around 40 comments. However, their collaborations with model Jennie have increased the number of comments on their posts. Despite this decrease in engagement, most comments are positive and supportive of the brand. It is

worth noting that there has been an increase in comments regarding the political situation in Iran during the first few days of October, which can be seen as a form of complaint.

*Stories.* The brand's current stories are centered on showcasing new products and collaborations, using a mix of photography and video formats. This approach is common, with frequent updates of this type of content. The stories are often commercial, with direct links and hashtags provided to help followers easily access the brand's offerings. While still inspirational for all, the content is particularly geared toward women.

*Highlights.* Chanel's Instagram account does not have featured stories, highlighting the links in the account description. This encourages users to follow the account to avoid missing any updates and stay up-to-date with the brand's latest moves.

*Reels.* Chanel frequently utilizes reels to promote their new collections with a feminine and timeless style that merges their image with the personality of their founder. This has resulted in a strong and personified brand with human qualities reflected in their advertising.

*Photos in Which They are Tagged.* Chanel does not provide access to its Instagram grid for user-generated content. This suggests that the brand carefully curates its feed and only displays what it intends to showcase, disregarding the user-generated content aspect.

*Feed.* Chanel's feed embodies simplicity and elegance, organized by color, reflecting the brand's strong identity and values of independence, power, freedom, and singular femininity. They showcase products, fashion shows, collections, and videos of famous personalities wearing the brand, like Penelope Cruz in a Chanel dress from the fall-winter 22/23 collection with Chanel's high jewelry pieces. Chanel maintains its heritage while adapting to current trends. Through the buy button on their profile and some posts, Chanel allows easy access to their ecommerce for dynamic and easy purchases of featured products.

*Texts of Publications.* Chanel's posts use text to tell a story and showcase the products featured in the post. They also effectively utilize tags to connect celebrities with the brand and hashtags created by the brand that are relevant to the post.

*Integration Between Instagram and the Webpage.* The homepage has a simple strip at the bottom that links to different social networks, including Instagram. However, the strip only displays the name of the application without any icons, and there are no other network references or posts shown.

### 4.3 Hermès

#### Quantitative Analysis

Hermès has experienced impressive growth in recent months, with an increase of 86,396 followers on Instagram. The brand now boasts a following of 3,163,142 fans on the platform, achieving a high performance rate of 10%, surpassing some competitors. On average, Hermès shares 0.22 posts per day, with the most active time being around 4 pm

daily. This coincides with the peak interaction time, demonstrating the brand's effective use of the social network.

Hermès posts a variety of content, including carousels, videos, images, and reels. However, reels generate the most interaction. The brand's success on Instagram can also be attributed to its extensive use of words and hashtags, with the former being particularly noteworthy. While some of the most commonly used words such as "Hermès," "bag," and "artist" generate significant interaction, this is not always the case with hashtags. Overall, Hermès is performing well on Instagram, thanks to its strategic content and effective use of the platform.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

*Account Description.* Hermès is a contemporary artisan that has been crafting quality goods since 1837. Their Instagram bio is concise and informative, avoiding colloquial language or emotional appeals to followers. While their formal style differs from the content on their feed, their bio accurately describes their brand as a "contemporary artisan," emphasizing their rich history and expertise.

*Link Analysis.* Hermès includes a link to their Instagram account description that directs followers to their website. The link showcases the brand's latest fashion show for the Spring/Summer 2023 season, and features updates and products related to the upcoming season. By continually updating the link, Hermès demonstrates a commitment to keeping their followers informed and engaged.

*Comments.* Hermès' posts receive an average of 100 comments, with the majority being positive and accompanied by supportive emoticons. While the brand does not respond to comments or offer customer service through its account, they receive more feedback when its posts are particularly original. For instance, posts featuring unique drawings or less common videos tend to generate higher engagement.

*Stories.* Hermès uses its Instagram stories to showcase new products in its campaign, utilizing photography and video formats. The brand frequently shares these types of stories, often including direct links and relevant hashtags to facilitate purchasing. The content is characterized by a minimalist and brightly colored aesthetic, with standout drawings that capture attention.

*Highlights.* Hermès' Instagram account features seven distinct highlight folders. The standout among these is the covers, which showcase drawings of the brand's products and other aspects, all featuring an orange color scheme with occasional variations in background color (such as green, yellow, and orange). This lends an air of authenticity and originality to the brand's profile. Additionally, in keeping with Hermès' artistic reputation, the account includes a highlight folder dedicated solely to the brand's most unique drawings (SECRET). Finally, the account features WOMEN and MEN highlight folders, showcasing the brand's items.

*Reels.* Hermès' Reels align with the brand's aesthetics, utilizing bright colors and combining authentic imagery with hand-drawn illustrations. Some of the Reels are particularly inspiring, evoking emotions in the viewer, such as the recent video showcasing the word "Sertir" ("Feel"). In addition to conveying emotion, Hermès also uses this space

to debut new garments, presenting their originality through music, lighting, filters, and editing.

*Photos in Which They are Tagged.* Hermès' Instagram account is focused solely on its feed and does not have an open space for user-generated content. However, the brand's feed is notable for its originality and consistency. Hermès greatly emphasizes color, which is evident throughout the feed. Each campaign has a strong sense of unity, with posts often grouped together in sets of three or related through drawings. Despite this consistency, there are still differences between campaigns, allowing for a sense of differentiation. Hermès executes this aesthetic approach very effectively. The carousels typically consist of two to four photos, and the brand's signature animated designs and vibrant colors create a unique feed that sets it apart from its competitors.

*Texts of Publications.* Hermès' post captions are attention-grabbing and descriptive, often starting with a short sentence to introduce the post. They are carefully crafted to engage the audience and sometimes take the form of short stories that transport followers to another world. This aligns with Hermès' overall brand aesthetic, which is characterized by a dreamy and fantastical vibe. The captions are rich in details but remain engaging and attractive to the audience.

*Integration Between Instagram and the Webpage.* The Hermès website does not include any references to its Instagram account on its homepage except for the logo displayed at the bottom of the page. Clicking on the logo will take you directly to the brand's Instagram account.

## 4.4 Gucci

### Quantitative Analysis

Gucci's Instagram account has amassed a total of 49.4 million followers, with an impressive 2.5 million gained in the past year. The brand's high engagement rate of 0.43% has contributed to this growth, as has its frequency of posting, with an average of 2.65 posts per day. With a performance rate of 36.00%, Gucci is among the top-performing luxury brands on Instagram. The account is active throughout the day, keeping followers engaged with a variety of content including images, carousels, videos, and reels. The use of descriptive and engaging language, such as "presenting," "styling," and "wearing," is also notable. Finally, the most-used hashtag on Gucci's Instagram, #AlessandroMichele, is also the one that generates the most interactions. Overall, Gucci excels on this platform thanks to its consistent and engaging content strategy.

### Qualitative Analysis

*Account Description.* The account's description, "The world of Gucci, as envisioned by Creative Director @alessandro\_michele on.gucci.com/Gucci2022", reflects the brand's formal and professional style. While it may not be particularly approachable or use colloquial language, it does convey a sense of luxury and exclusivity that aligns with the brand's identity.

*Link Analysis.* The account description includes a link to the brand's website, covering its commercial aspect. This link is regularly updated to reflect the latest campaigns

and brand status. Upon clicking the link, followers are presented with a carousel of highlighted elements such as “Gucci 25H Watches,” “Gucci and the Savoy,” “Circular Fashion: An Exclusive Service,” and “Gucci Horsebit 1955.”

*Comments.* Currently, comments on Gucci’s posts can be broadly categorized into two issues. Firstly, positive feedback related to the brand’s internal affairs, such as new product launches and campaigns. In these comments, followers frequently use emoticons, especially hearts, to show their support for the account. Secondly, the comments are also influenced by the ongoing feminist revolution in Iran, with many users including the hashtag created to support the cause.

*Stories.* The brand’s activity on Instagram stories is inconsistent. While some days they upload several stories, there are days when they don’t upload anything. They tend to use videos more often than photos and frequently use hashtags and links. Occasionally, they repost reels or TV content on the account. Additionally, they add titles to each story when featuring photographs from the catwalks.

*Highlights.* Gucci’s Instagram account features an impressive 92 folders highlighting various events, product announcements, and brand news. Each folder has a title that typically includes the brand name, such as “GucciArchive,” “GucciResort,” and “GucciPets,” and some even incorporate relevant hashtags like “#Gucci100,” “#GucciAria,” and “#GucciDiana.” Despite the high number of folders, they are organized in a visually appealing manner that engages followers. However, the brand’s activity on stories is currently low, with uneven frequency and a preference for video over photo format. The use of hashtags and links is prominent in their stories, and they also occasionally reshare reels and TV content. Additionally, the catwalk photographs on their stories feature a title for each story.

*Reels.* Gucci uses short Reels to showcase new products, provide video summaries of runway shows like “The Gucci Twinsburg Fashion Show,” and feature celebrities wearing their garments at various events. For instance, the brand shared a video of Ryan Gosling wearing a suit designed by Alessandro Michele at a Netflix premiere for the film “The Gray Man.”

*Photos in Which They are Tagged.* In the tags, followers can be seen using various Gucci products. In this way, the follower can see Gucci’s user-generated content.

*Feed.* Gucci’s Instagram feed is visually striking due to the amount of information presented in each post. Bright colors and multiple objects are common features in their photos. The brand achieves a cohesive look by applying the same filter that emphasizes saturation. In addition, they often publish several photos or videos in a row, allowing for a clear separation between them. For instance, in a photo shoot with Ryan Gosling, they shared six different posts, and during one of their fashion shows, they uploaded six videos showcasing the outfits worn by attendees. The result is a feed with a distinctive aesthetic coherence.

*Texts of Publications.* The post descriptions on Gucci’s feed are highly informative, often listing the garments featured in the photo. After providing this information, the brand incorporates various hashtags, including those related to the model or

celebrity featured in the post, as well as Gucci's own hashtags. The brand also tags both the model/celebrity and the Gucci designer. In posts introducing new products, Gucci employs capital letters and bullet points to emphasize and visually organize the information.

*Integration Between Instagram and the Webpage.* The website's main page lacks references to Gucci's Instagram content, and user-generated content is not featured. However, a "Follow Us" section displays the brand's logo and the names of its social media accounts. The follower can easily access the corresponding social network pages by clicking on the links.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

After analyzing the four cases, it is evident that the behavior of the brands on Instagram reinforces their communication and marketing strategies based on the approach presented in the theoretical framework.

To summarize, the following table has been included to compare the quantitative data (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Instagram analytics. Own elaboration based on Fanpage Karma data (January 1st–October 31th, 2022).

	Engagement	Fans	Interaction	Number likes	Number comments	Number publ.	Publications per day
Louis Vuitton	0,46%	49.000.000	0,16%	65.300.000	432.000	859	2,9
Chanel	0,23%	52.831.623	0,08%	34.798.941	278.826	830	2,8
Hermès	0,11%	12.317.995	0,10%	3.757.502	30.282	328	1,1
Gucci	0,43%	49.355.906	0,16%	60.754.131	336.932	791	2,65

The table indicates that Louis Vuitton and Gucci have the highest engagement rates among the four selected luxury brands. However, the data suggests no direct relationship between having more followers and a high engagement rate. Instead, a direct relationship exists between the number of interactions (likes and comments) and engagement rate.

Louis Vuitton has a smaller community than Chanel and Hermes, but its followers are more active in commenting on the brand's content. Moreover, Louis Vuitton posts more frequently on Instagram, which is crucial in maintaining the interest and activity of the community. On the other hand, Hermès needs to work on this aspect to match the frequency of its competitors.

Although Gucci is an exception, luxury brands tend to focus on one-way communication and do not usually incorporate user-generated content. While they try to engage users through comments, they typically do not work on tagging consumers. In this sense, they still have an opportunity for improvement in relation to that indicated by Chaffé and

Smith [3], Jin and Ryu [5] and Oliveira and Fernandes [6]. Instead, stories and reels serve as commercial tools to showcase new products and campaigns. These brands ensure that the promotional aspect remains significant and coherent with their brand identity.

The homepage of the brands' websites does not refer to their Instagram posts. The only connection is the logo or name at the bottom of the page or a section called "follow us". Following Tuten and Solomon [2] and Khan [4] these luxury brands could utilize coordinated efforts between their Instagram account and website to strengthen brand values, improve communication coherence, and increase user interaction.

Regarding comments, users not only participate in supportive comments but also engage in current affairs in which the brands take sides, especially on civil rights issues. For example, the protest movement in Iran stood out during the investigated interval, which Louis Vuitton and Gucci explicitly supported.

The brands exhibit disparate behavior concerning the use of featured folders of the highlights. In fact, Chanel does not have any, while Gucci has 92 folders. They should consider making it easier to find stories through highlights, depending on the space occupied by the consumer on the account.

Finally, the brands have a formal tone in their account description but update links to promote specific campaigns. They should further develop the demand for personal and close communication from consumers.

This study demonstrates how Instagram is a strategic marketing tool for content dissemination, but luxury brands use it primarily for one-way communication. Instead, they should take advantage of Instagram's features to generate emotional conversations with millions of consumers and integrate the consumer into the platform and experience.

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# Metartisanry: Fashion, Metaverse, and the Future of Artisanry in Brazil

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**Abstract.** This article reflects on the future of artisanry in the context of the Metaverse in Brazil, considering artisanry relationship with fashion. Hence, the Metaverse is described through NFTs, blockchain, as well as avatars and cyborgs. Then, artisanry, especially in Brazil, and its relationship with fashion in contemporaneity are described. This study aimed to answer the following research question: considering the profile of Brazilian artisans, how would their artisanal production adapt to the Metaverse? To achieve the results, we used bibliographic, descriptive, and qualitative research to analyze the literature and to develop discussions based on distinctive ways of building objects in virtual universes. We concluded that artisans will have to develop interdisciplinary skills linked to computerized technology to remain competitive in the market, added to investments and stimuli from public and private institutions.

**Keywords:** Artisanry · Fashion · Metaverse

## 1 Introduction

Artisanal products are known for their traditional aspects, mostly handmade, which represent a certain culture and result of technical skills employed to the production of creative objects. Artisanry has typologies and categories and constitutes a process imbued with meanings and senses, as can be observed in Indigenous cultures, for example [1].

Based on the historical observation that artisanal products are in the world since the beginning of time, as well as the current observation that the future of humanity is projected into the Metaverse, even though financial and technological access to this virtual universe is more limited for Brazilian artisans, the following question arises: how would the artisanal production adapt to the Metaverse in Brazil?

Thus, the novelty creates a certain concern, both for those who develop products and invest in them and for potential users, since its medium- and long-term effects are uncertain. Therefore, this article reflects on the future of Brazilian artisanry in fashion in the face of the Metaverse scenario, based on the prediction made by international trend reports from 2020 to 2022.

This is a bibliographic, qualitative, and descriptive research. The technical bibliographic procedure allowed the development of the theoretical basis with national and international scientific papers, monographs, and master's theses. After reading the

abstracts of the studies found, the most pertinent were selected and analyzed employing the registration technique.

To this end, this article discusses the fundamentals of the Metaverse, as well as the elements surrounding it, among them: Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), Blockchain, Avatars, and Cyborgs; artisanry is presented in the Brazilian context relating it to fashion. Finally, the discussions are held based on the bibliography studied and on two case studies with different forms of object construction in virtual universes; although the latter did not address the Brazilian context, they showed the lack of studies of this nature in Brazil, corroborating the relevance of the reflection.

Note that this study addresses a new and rising issue that is already disseminated and affects several areas of human life, such as social, cultural, economic, and professional aspects. Therefore, this article may contribute with questions and reflections, indicating possibilities of future practical research to better understand the possible impacts of the Metaverse on fashion, especially relate to artisanry.

## **2 Metaverse, Artisanry, and Fashion**

### **2.1 Metaverse**

When considering the expansion of the Metaverse in society, it can be said that a parallel world has been created in a virtual universe based on the physical reality, with avatars representing each individual who can walk around and interact, trade, attend to events and leisure spaces, socialize, and work [2]. In other words, everyday human life in a virtual version via augmented reality.

The idea and term “Metaverse” emerged in 1992 with science fiction author Neal Stephenson in his book “Snow Crash,” describing Metaverse as an urban life accessed by an optical internet network, also addressing issues of social inequality, centralized control, and incessant propaganda [3]. Metaverse is a word composed of “Meta”: a Greek prefix, meaning post, beyond, or after; and “Verse”: universe. Therefore, it is a universe of post-reality, an environment that combines physical and digital reality [4].

The Metaverse is seen as the future of the Internet, housing its own currencies and economic policy. This new universe can be accessed with virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies, via computers, console games, and smartphones [2]. These access is possible because these technologies allow multisensory interactions with virtual environments, digital objects, and people. The extended reality (XR) system, with high active resolution and a wide field of view that can span 90° to 180° through stereoscopic displays, is able to convey the sense of depth, with separate and little different displays for each eye that replicate vision in physical environments [4].

Since the beginning of the 21st century, online games stand out as the main diffuser of virtual realities, with Second Life, discussed in this article, as sociocultural aspects of game culture have transformed from solitary and antisocial to a new social space, encouraging interactions, collaborations, and connections that go beyond the gaming environment [2].

That said, we must contextualize some important points that make the Metaverse an instigating parallel society and economy: NFTs; Blockchain; Avatars and Cyborgs.

### 2.1.1 Blockchain and NFTs

Blockchain great proposal is the decentralization of data and transactions, in which no intermediation between one person and another (such as banking institutions) is necessary, and there is no monopoly of giant institutions and governments. The term “Blockchain” was first coined by Nakamoto (2018), the creator of the cryptocurrency Bitcoin. According to him, Blockchain works as a type of “general ledger,” in which everything that happens on the network is registered and can be accessed by everyone, but it is an encrypted system so that no one can change or flatter it, making it safer and more promising [5].

In the Blockchain network, a specific type of cryptocurrency has been highlighted: NFTs. They are considered an asset such as property, money, or a piece of art, for example. NFT is unique and cannot be changed between equals (non-fungible), that is, its main characteristic is to be exclusive and easily verified as being true. This means that by virtually acquiring a piece of art, photos, videos, and audios, among others, the individual becomes the owner of a digital asset, facilitating intellectual property issues in the digital environment [6]. Based on these and the following definitions of avatars and cyborgs, we will be able to think about the possibilities of artisanry in the Metaverse from the NFTs as an instrument of possession of artisanal products.

### 2.1.2 Avatars and Cyborgs

An avatar is the virtual representation of a real person within the Metaverse, in which users are represented as they wish and are in control of their Avatars. That is, you can create your digital persona in a way that looks like you or a cartoon, for example [4].

Thus, the cyborg appears. The concept was coined in 1985 in Donna Haraway’s (1944-) essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, in which she suggests that the Cyborg is a fusion between machine and body that interweaves social reality with fiction. A place where there are no boundaries between body and machine, and physical and non-physical become fluid. Dimensions of life such as social, political, and others would be dismantled, making room for concepts that can be reconstructed, creating alternatives to rigid definitions of bodies and ways of life through the rise of technology in everyday life [7].

From Haraway’s concept of Cyborg (1985), Särämäkari and Vänskä propose the term “Cyborg Designer 4.0” to characterize the fluidity and complexity of the fashion designer. The “Cyborg Designer 4.0” would be the symbiosis of a physical and digital artisan, who transposes their tacit knowledge into algorithms and adapts it in an informatic way. That is, the Cyborg Designer 4.0 flows between the physical and the virtual, communicating through visual algorithmic representations [8]. These authors’ definition is a contemporary term for fashion designer 4.0, which is surrounded by new technologies and complex human networks, involving the hominization of computers and the computerization of humans [8]. As we have discussed the novelties and the technological, we now present the intrinsic relationship between artisanry and contemporary fashion.

## 2.2 Artisanry in Brazil and Contemporary Fashion

UNESCO defines an artisanal product as one that is entirely or mostly handmade, with or without the aid of tools or mechanical means, provided that the manual contribution is the most relevant component of the final work; artisanal products are based on their distinctive characteristics that can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally bound, decorative, functional, traditional, symbolic, and religiously and socially significant [9].

Industrial processes have turned artisanal products into museum pieces, rare pieces, or even marketable objects, because useful items can be manufactured quickly and cheaply, going hand in hand with “*progress.*” Artisanry was then configured as one of the forms of cultural identity expression of a people, community, society, group, or individual. For the World Crafts Council, handicrafts are considered any activity that results in finished artifacts, made mainly manually or through traditional or rudimentary processes, with skill, dexterity, quality, and creativity [10].

The *Programa do Artesanato Brasileiro* (Brazilian Artisanry Program – PAB) classifies five categories of artisanal products: 1) Indigenous artisanal products (produced in Indigenous communities, with identity of use, social, and cultural relationship of the people); 2) recycling artisanry (pieces produced with reused raw material); 3) traditional artisanry (expressive artifacts of a group’s culture, being the artisanal product an integral and inseparable part of its uses and customs; it is important for the cultural valorization and preservation of the cultural memory of a community, passed on from generation to generation); 4) cultural reference artisanry (produced from original revisions, preserving the cultural traits, aiming to adapt it to market demands and buyer needs; it is identified as one of the most competitive Brazilian artisanal product); and 5) contemporary-conceptual artisanry (an artifact made as a statement of a lifestyle or cultural affinity, with innovation being the most distinguishable element of this type of artisanal product) [1].

In Brazil, artisanal production is scatter in almost all Brazilian municipalities. However, data from the last IBGE survey conducted in 2014 indicate<sup>1</sup> that from 2006 to 2014 artisanal activities in the country decreased. But especially in fashion-related activities, such as artisanal embroidery production, there was an increase from 75.4% in 2006 to 76.2% in 2014 in municipalities participating in this niche. Weaving also grew from 9.5% in 2006 to 12.9% in 2014 [11]. According to SEBRAE<sup>2</sup>, Brazil has about 8.5 million artisans, mostly women living directly from artisanal production, representing 3% of Brazil’s gross domestic product (GDP) [12].

Historically, “handmade” method was the main tool used to produce clothing, thus configuring artisanry as a craft resource in a period without industrial machines [13]. These were the clothes of the 14th century, during the Renaissance, which creatively and aesthetically expressed the identities of the individuals of European court societies through manual techniques and natural materials. The relationship between artisanry

<sup>1</sup> Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, a public agency linked to the Ministry of Economy, dedicated to mapping and research on Brazilians.

<sup>2</sup> *Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas*, “Support Service for Micro and Small Enterprises,” is a private entity that promotes the competitiveness and sustainable development of micro and small enterprises.

and Western fashion was born. In contemporary times, haute couture has become the main connection between fashion and artisanry, prioritizing tailor-made and handmade by making unique and personalized pieces. It influenced the fashion of countries like Brazil, even with all the existing artisanal diversity. The industrial advances and therefore the technological advances of modernity have made fashion increasingly massive and marketable, from haute couture to ready-to-wear and fast fashion [13].

Contemporary fashion began to contemplate several sociocultural aspects when establishing interpersonal relationships beyond consumer goods, at different levels of communication. Thus, crafts and fashion intrinsically have symbolic, social, and aesthetic values, which express the cultural identity of a given community, group, society, or individual. This intersection can occur in two distinct ways: artisanry inserted in the productive process of a fashion product as a way to add value or an artisanal product as a fashion product [14]. Nowadays, exclusivity and personalization are important factors, in which cultural expression and identity are essential for the marketing of both. Artisanal practices in fashion can be seen in accessories such as handbags made with natural fibers and braids, ornaments such as necklaces, earrings, and bracelets made by hand, and embroidery of hand-applied precious stones on garments, among other examples.

In the digital context, artisanry can incorporate computational processes into its development process. In other words, the union of the tacit skills and knowledge of the artisan with a professional trained for coding the computational and digital processes of artisanry, called a “Symbiotic Craft” [15], as already suggested by Särnkariä and Vänskä (2021) with the concept of Cyborg Designer 4.0. Artisanry is strictly related to design in Brazil, using concepts and practices to add value and innovations in processes, materials, and technology. In this case, artisanal production would be restricted to projects in co-creation with other professionals, since the artisan loses their autonomy in the process of developing a certain artifact for not having skills related to computer codes, programming, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality, among others [15].

In the digital age, a new approach is considered for artisans, in which digital technology is a “new materiality” in artisanry. Technologies are not necessarily replacing the cultural and traditional heritage of artisanry, but adding and enriching cultural expression [16]. Although artisanry has a more sociocultural than marketing aspect, because it is inserted in society and has become a source of income and subsistence for artisans, it has come to adapt to the capitalist model to resist the volatility of the contemporary era.

When considering artisanry as one of the fashion biases, besides being a significant activity in Brazil in the maintenance of cultural heritage and a source of income for more than eight million people, it is necessary to ponder, discuss, and reflect on artisanry in the digital age, facing the advancement of AI, AR, and VR technologies.

### 3 Methods

Based on empirical observations in trend reports from 2020 to 2022, as those from Wunderman Thompson [17], Future Today Institute [18], WGSN [19], and TrendHunter [20] with trend prospection for the next two to four years (2022 to 2024), analyzed during September to October 2022 in the course *Análise e Prospecção de Tendências do Mestrado Profissional em Design de Vestuário e Moda* (“Trend Analysis and Trend

Forecasting in the Professional Master in Apparel and Fashion Design”) (Santa Catarina State University/Brazil), the incidence of the metaverse advancing in various areas of society in all the reports cited was verified.

From this moment on, the possibilities of the virtual universe for the future of artisanry in Brazil were investigated. To this end, the metaverse and its relationships with NFTs, Blockchains, and Avatars and Cyborgs were first researched in Google Scholar with the keyword “metaverse”. Then, the focus was to search fashion in the metaverse, using the keyword “fashion metaverse,” also on the Google Scholar platform, to cover studies from various locations. Mostly, recent studies from the last two years (2020–2022) on the metaverse and fashion in the metaverse were found, searched from October to November 2022. After reading studies abstracts, the most pertinent were selected and analyzed employing the registration technique. The references and sources of the studies found were also analyzed to build this article.

In light of the theoretical references found, discussions and reflections were built qualitatively about the case of Contreras et al. (2022) and the Leitão’s Second Life (2012). The choice of these two studies as the main foundation for this article is justified by the presence of two distinct forms of object construction in virtual universes, found in searches via Google Scholar in the second half of 2022, as reported earlier.

#### 4 The Case Contreras and Second Life

To reflect on the future of artisanry in the new digital molds, the case of monograph “Metartesanía: La artesanía del futuro” by Contreras *et al.* (2022), held in Colombia, was used. The authors propose the interdisciplinarity between artisanry and the metaverse, prioritizing the cultural and identity characteristics of artisanry and bringing it closer to the new growing digital age. This case was important to contextualize the problem addressed in this article and reflect on the Brazilian reality.

According to Contreras *et al.* [3], three main elements that make artisanry in the metaverse a good idea: the dematerialization of the artisanal product (by virtual and augmented reality), the reduction of material costs, and the ease of co-creation among artisans. In summary, the authors propose the creation of a coworking space within the metaverse—where artisans, designers, and users could create, market, and use certain digital artisanal products. In this project, the Qlone 3D scanning tool was used, which allows for bringing the crafts from physical to digital reality.

The proposal was validated by interviewing two artisans and one expert in NFTs, cryptocurrencies, and digital arts, and these were the issues raised: a) re-signifying artisanry as validation for entering the digital world; b) building knowledge together; c) ways to avoid piracy and protect intellectual property; d) the customer buys the artisanry for its signs and meanings; e) the artisanry that was taken or created in the metaverse [3]. Still, in their conclusion, the authors show that the artisans interviewed were willing to create and sell artisanal products in the virtual world, even those who were over 40 years old, and recognized the great potential for sales and buyers that the metaverse can offer; the metaverse can open doors for artisans and new perspectives so that artisanry and added value will not disappear in the contemporary era. According to experts in the economics of the metaverse, the values of a “metartisanal” product can be

higher than real-world values, and it can guarantee intellectual property and anti-piracy. Notably, the study aimed to consider new ways of adaptation to provide more visibility to artisans, an opportunity to create, to have direct relationships with interested customers and knowledge of the process of making these products [3].

Second Life, considered one of the first “metaverse” experiences, is a 3D virtual environment opened to the public in 2003 by the U.S. company Linden Lab. In this environment, it is possible to build objects through prims (short for primitive), which are basic 3D forms aimed at creating a “second life” virtual reality. Therefore, to develop an object in Second Life, the raw material (the basic form) is chosen and modeling techniques are used to shape the object to the avatar’s desire. In the modeling of a prim, the three dimensional axes are used: width, depth, and height; other more advanced tools for more significant changes can also be used [21].

Second Life still exists, but it has lost ground due to negative events such as the deregulation of financial transactions, illicit operations, and crimes. The main difference between Second Life and the Metaverse is the fact that the first is a centralized platform, belonging to a company, with its own and more restricted protocols. The Metaverse, on the other hand, is notable for its decentralization, being an open source digital environment [22]. Regarding acceptance and mass use of the platform, the latest data released by Linden Lab in 2013 shows that in 10 years of Second Life, 36 million accounts were created and about 1 million users were active per month in 2013. There were 2.1 million virtual products created for sale and 1.2 million in daily transactions of virtual goods [23]. This shows the power that the platform had 10 years ago, although the numbers currently do not impress if considering the breadth of social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tiktok. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the search for Second Life on Google doubled and the number of active users per month reached a million once again [24]. These data suggest that the isolation caused by the 2020 pandemic accelerated the social interest in an interactive life in virtual worlds.

Taking Second Life prims as an example, it is possible to imagine the creation of artisanal products within the current metaverse as even more interactive and realistic, fulfilling its aesthetic and utilitarian role, as well as its symbolic values. Thus, the costs of raw materials for the execution of an artisanal product would supposedly be lower than traditional ones [21]. Even though the numbers of active users and registered accounts are not impactful compared to other existing formats, Second Life has proven to be the precursor to the metaverse known to date. Furthermore, prims showed to be a way of constructing artifacts in virtual reality. In this case, the main contribution would be to think about the possible practice of making artisanal products in the digital environment, since no studies that addressed a similar tool for the development of artisanry within current Metaverses were found.

## 5 Conclusion

This article aimed to reflect on the future of artisanry in the Metaverse in Brazil, considering their relationship with fashion. Through current theoretical grounding and empirical data in the primary phase, sourced from trend reports and the Google Scholar database of pertinent literature, the following questions can be indicated: I) the metaverse is predicted to consolidate in the near future, potentializing the craftsmanship as a vector of

traditional and manual aspects in its environment; II) there is a greater number of articles that approach the metaverse in foreign scenario than in Brazil, but even so concepts such as “Metartisanry,” “Cyborg Designer 4.0,” and “Symbiotic Craft” (Brazilian paper, but using foreign examples) have shown to be important to reflect about the future of artisanry in Brazil; III) even if the interaction between artisanry and the metaverse can work in a first moment, the 3D digital universe faces and most probably will face in the 21st century the same socio-cultural, political, and economical adversities of the real life of individuals.

As an answer to the research question, we can think about the artisans of the future as interdisciplinary professionals who need to develop new technical skills to progress in the technological and digital world, or even in a co-creation with programming professionals, information technology, and other areas in a given “metartisanal” project. This means considering that co-creation could lead to the total loss of the artisans’ autonomy in their processes of creation and development, therefore something that should be considered.

Even if the metaverse materializes in mass use by the Brazilian population, it is essential that artisans are able to develop their products for the digital medium, concretely. In Brazil, most artisans are small producers, creative communities, associations, and artisans with poor financial resources and weak support from government and private companies, often residents in distant places, with precarious access to the Internet and lack of the necessary equipment for the development of artisanal products in the virtual world. In this scenario, the Government and private companies should boost and foster as well as encourage the creative economy and artisans, as social and economic inequalities are the backbone of creative economies in Brazil.

Artisanal processes and their signs, whether traditional or not, are complex and should be better observed by contemporary fashion in the Metaverse, valuing Indigenous artisanal knowledge and making, for example. Still, we can consider that a “metartisanry” would assist the preservation of artisanal products as cultural heritage, since the artisanal product would be an NFT, uniquely owned, generating an even greater connection between artisan and consumer. In this respect, the economic importance that artisanry reflects in artisan communities is emphasized. In other words, the “metartisanry” can have a positive impact in this sense, since the commercialization within the metaverse is expressive, especially in fashion items. Finally, a future study could do field research and projects focused on the dialogue between virtual realities, artisanry, and fashion with artisans and creative communities in Brazil to validate the theories addressed in this article.

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# Metaverse and Its Communication. The Future is Here. True or False?

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**Abstract.** This text analyses the metaverse: its definitions and concepts, its meaning and impact; digital art, fashion and their communication; its performance issues, its failures, and criticism. It compares existing metaverse definitions and concepts, evaluates of their advantages and disadvantages, their chance of coming true, their present degree of evolution. Closer looks are dedicated to the influence of a virtual space on art and fashion, their communication and dissemination and to the metaverse failures, problems, and criticism. Not only the metaverse technology, but also its intended innovation of communication, work, education, healthcare, business, products, and social interactions, suffer from performance, quality and security issues. Today, irreconcilable visions of the metaverse coexist: a valuable, socially useful metaverse and a consumer and entertainment metaverse. It is impossible to predict the future, but any virtual world concept will have to solve these critical issues. Not the metaverse, but the greatest crisis of our times (with climate change, pandemic, war, economic crisis) is altering the products and their communication, undermining the luxury, fashion and art sector. It is changing the value of identity and producing a paradigm shift. Something must end, to allow the growth of something new: because change is life.

**Keywords:** Metaverse · Metaverse concepts · Metaverse products and communication · Metaverse failures · Virtual Reality · Imagined futures/realities

## 1 Introduction: Metaverse. Subject and Term Definition

When in November 2021 a student asked me to tell the class more about the metaverse [metaverse is in this text is written in lowercase, like universe] and its communication, I could only answer what I had read in the news. I told them that on 28 October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, speaking at the company's virtual reality conference announced that the group controlling Facebook Inc (FB.O), Whatsapp, Instagram, and Oculus [1] would now be called Meta. This rebrand centred around the development of the metaverse, an integrated immersive ecosystem, in which the barriers between the virtual and real world are seamless, avatars and holograms are used to work, interact and socialize. This metaverse was said to be, the successor to the internet [2]. The company would invest in virtual reality and unite apps and technologies under one new brand sign, which was unveiled at the company's headquarters. The thumbs-up "Like" logo was replaced with a blue infinity shape. On that day, the newly named Meta's shares

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closed 1.5% higher, at \$316.92 [3]. The available information on Meta and the metaverse [4], could however neither answer my, nor my students' countless questions. I decided therefore, to further enquire.

The task set to this research is to study the metaverse, reflect on its meaning and impact, in particular on art and fashion products and on their communication, as well as on the failures, problems and the criticism of the different metaverse concepts.

The method chosen for this enquiry consists in collecting/comparing existing metaverse definitions and concepts, evaluating of their advantages and disadvantages, their chance of coming true, their degree of evolution. Chapter two studies the possible influence of virtual space on art and fashion, their communication and dissemination, all topics of interest to fashion communication. The metaverse's failures, problems, worries and criticism are collected in chapter three. A general scientific literature is still lacking and different research fields study selected metaverse topics, separately. Fashion theory treats themes such as avatar customization, fashion and beauty retailing, or metaverse usability and availability to the fashion industry. Communication theory addresses communication and public relations, digital advertising, team collaboration, remote education, security and privacy problems. Game theory studies network and internet architecture, coded distributed computing, meta-chains and blockchain based frameworks [5].

What is the metaverse? The term was first quoted in 1992 by Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*: "So Hiro's not actually here at all. He is in a computer-generated universe, that his computer is drawing onto his googles and pumping into his earphones. In the lingo, this imaginary place is known as the Metaverse" [6]. The dystopian novel depicts the metaverse as a virtual reality (VR) space that utilises internet, augmented reality (AR), avatars and software agents.

A scientifically agreed upon definition of the metaverse, has yet to be found and there is no scientific acceptance on what the metaverse is [7]. A general scientific literature is still lacking and texts require attention: in regard to dates (what was valid a few weeks ago, might have changed), to the danger of quickly drawing "too simple" conclusions and to applying old explications to new processes. The existing metaverse definitions combine similar terms and elements, in similar ways. The scholarly article *Metaverse beyond the Hype*, presents the definition: "the layer between you and reality," referring to a "3D virtual shared world where all activities can be carried out with the help of augmented and virtual reality services" [8].

Expensive tools are needed to access the metaverse: virtual reality headsets, augmented or extended reality glasses (AR, XR) and haptic gloves. The white, bulky headset for Quest 2, with built-in camera, microphone, eye-displays and visors, costs \$399, while the Meta Quest Pro headset reaches \$1590. [9]. While these tools indispensable to access the 3D space, certainly reflect the latest innovations, the idea behind them, dates back decades. T.G. Zimmerman patented, for instance, his first "sensor-ed" cyber glove in 1982 [10]. The "new" metaverse idea we are presented with is in reality quite "old". Most of the technology, indispensable to immersive worlds, is still being developed, while researchers study its possible impacts in many fields [11].

Let us enquire, in the following chapter, the metaverse and its impact on art and fashion and their communication [12]. Innovative changes arise when creative ideas, which are

simultaneously present in different fields of society, mix in alternative combinations, composing new knowledge, products, practices, and possibly spaces. [13]. They do not always arise when, economy giants invest lots of money in the realization of their goals.

## 2 Metaverse Effect. Digital Art and Fashion and Their Value

When Meta was created, many of its competitors also launched similar initiatives. In May 2021, Microsoft announced a Microsoft-led “enterprise Metaverse,” to be integrated in the Teams platform by 2022 [14]. Likewise computing giant Nvidia declared that “the economy on the Metaverse [would] be larger than the economy in the physical world” with Nvidia’s “at the heart of it”. Gaming giants Unity Technologies and Roblox Corporation had two of their largest-ever initial public offerings, which expressed their metaverse ambitions [15]. In the East, similar initiatives were taken by the largest companies and gaming giants, such as Tencent or Krafton. Alliances were made by governmental institutions and companies in the communication technology sector to launch their own metaverses. Great e-commerce companies, like Alibaba and ByteDance, parent company of the social network TikTok, began to register metaverse trademarks and acquire VR and 3D-related start-ups [16].

This high level of interest resulted in huge financial investments: Microsoft has spent \$70 billion; Google \$39.5 billion; Unity Software \$1.6 billion, and many more companies, including Shopify, Roblox and Qualcomm, also began financially participating [17]. Since the beginning of 2021, Meta alone has spent over \$15 billion. [18]. In 2021, McKinsey estimated that by 2030, the metaverse revenue for e-commerce would amount as much as to \$22.6 trillion, for academic virtual learning to \$270 billion, for advertising to \$206 billion and for gaming to \$125 billion [19].

The suggestion of huge returns and the announced imminence and importance of virtual worlds has led companies, operating in other fields, such as arts or fashion, institutions such as governments and even the catholic church to begin inquiring on possible applications of the metaverse in their specific sectors [20].

For some companies or stakeholders, the draw of the metaverse is its ability to widely exhibit art in a digital format. The Italian Ministry of Culture defines digital art, as the art that “generates works by digitally developing images,” “learns from different fields of art, [...] from photos or [...] from scratch, using the screen of a PC like a canvas, but above all it interacts with different environments, even simulations of virtual reality, combining movement and sound” [21]. At the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, a digital copy (or rather a new Digital Art Work or DAW) of the Tondo Doni by Michelangelo Buonarroti, was offered on sale for €240’000 [22]. For those unable to attend Florence’s Biennale in 2022, the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of the exposed works of art in the metaverse was offered. The simulation did not recreate Palazzo Corsini, but allowed for the participants to virtually encounter, in a large, white room with a central amphitheatre, the winning works of past editions, while the represented AR figures came to life, moving their eyes and mouths. The intent of this simulation was to allow the digital visitors “to get a taste of what an experience in reality would be” [23]. The visitors were therefore invited in the metaverse, to get a taste of the real world. It should be noted that here, inverting the roles, the metaverse is revealed to be a mere imitation of the irreplaceable real experience.

Digital copies of art and digital art works (DAWs), virtual fashion and digital fashion events, differ substantially from their “real” counterparts and answer a different consumer demand. Cultural institutions, virtual fashion brands, art dealers and others who deal with these “products” [24] always communicate their value, because a judgment based on an agreed set of values, establishes these items’ usefulness and legitimacy [25]. When Christie’s sold, on 11 March 2021, in the first public sale of digital-only art, the digital collage “Everyday: The first 5000 days” by Mike Winkelmann, also known as digital artist Beeple, for the stunning sum of over \$69 million [26], the auction house was not only answering an already present demand for digitalized art, but was also declaring this item to be as precious as all the other sold works of art.

The growing e-commerce of digital-only clothing, accessories and fashion is the corresponding answer of the fashion industry to this new demand for “valuable” digital goods and services, and represents an innovative change of the fashion market [27]. In virtual surroundings, rather than buying physical fashion, customers dress their photos in “digital” garments, accessories and jewels, designed by digital-only or by traditional luxury brands, which also present virtual versions of their collections. Louboutin, Balenciaga, Gucci and many Central Saint Martins’ graduates have recently launched digitized collections [28]. This digital fashion, offered by inventive industries, such as XR Couture, The Dematerialised and Dress-X, benefitting of the pandemic-induced e-commerce rise [29], seems a growing category on the market. These virtual fashion platforms accept obviously cryptocurrency also [30]. Many fashion brands also offer virtual gaming attire. Balenciaga created a “skin” for Fortnite, Nike recently bought the RTFKT virtual sneaker brand and Louis Vuitton launched a video game, with collectible non-fungible tokens (NFTs), partially designed by Beeple, for its 200th anniversary. The Gucci’s projection on Roblox of its classic “Gucci Garden” attracted 19 million visitors [31]. Metaverse “fashion” does however not only regard garments, but also other immaterial products, such as new experiences and entertainment [32]. In Decentraland, a digital space, where visitors buy land or construct buildings, fashion experienced its first Metaverse Fashion Week. Brands such as Hogan, Mango, Elie Saab, Philippe Plein and Etro, which for the occasion reinterpreted its iconic sign as *liquid paisley*, showed digital fashion collections as NFTs, on virtual catwalks, allowing also for shopping experiences in pop-up stores, and the attendance of a large variety of parallel events. The future will show if the fashion sector will benefit from digital fashion, virtual catwalks and their new communication [33].

The digital art and fashion sales are provided with a blockchain, to ensure identification and legal ownership [34]. The blockchain is an immutable digital register, which memorizes all financial transactions in a safe, permanent way, shared within an accessible network. On a larger scale blockchains have the potential to transform economic operating models, global economies and social systems. The digital payment, ensuring an item’s exclusive property and copyright, is essential in the art and fashion sector [35].

Digital art and fashion are represented by “non-fungible tokens” (NFTs), stored in the unchangeable blockchains, which identify the virtual artifact’s specifics. By validating its authenticity and uniqueness, the NFTs also establishes each item’s value [36].

Virtual economic transactions, ensured by NFTs and listed in a blockchain, can only be conducted using cryptocurrency, which is untraceable. This allows economic

operations to be carried out with total anonymity. This is a dark flipside of virtual transactions. Hackers blocking vital websites (revenue or governmental agencies, airport websites) demand always for cryptocurrency ransoms, which have a real purchasing power in cities, such as Lugano and Singapore. Bitcoin and Ethereum are the best-known ones, but hundreds of other cryptocurrencies circulate on the web and are used by about 20% of the US population, with a total value of \$2 trillion [37].

### 3 Metaverse Failures, Problems, and Criticism

Despite the hammering communication, on the verge of propaganda, on the alleged financial and social value of the metaverse, the projects did not develop as prospected and were marred with failures, unresolved problems and criticisms. The digital companies' metaverse utopia remains far from reality. To date, Meta spent more than \$15 billion on its metaverse venture, without being able to tell where the money went [38]. In November 2022, Meta was forced to dismiss 11,000 employees or 13% of its staff. The metaverse bet had required too many resources, at a time when economic conditions, geopolitical tensions, and inflation had caused lower revenues, making its realization unbearable [39]. Meta's brand change took place, as the company was battling scrutiny over its algorithms and was blamed for not preventing hate speech and misinformation [40]. Former product manager Frances Haugen testified before the U.S. Senate that Facebook had chosen profit, over user safety, knowing its artificial intelligence systems were insufficient to root out dangerous content [41]. In June 2022, Sheryl Sandberg resigned her post as Meta chief operating officer. Although not responsible for the metaverse, she had been the driving force of Meta's *advertising policy*, which in 2021 accounted for 98% of the company's \$118 billion annual revenue. This policy was implied in heavy allegations of illegal user data user data collection [42]. In fact, in May 2023, Meta was hit by a record European Union privacy fine of \$1.3 billion over its illegal users' data transfers to the US. [43]. The legal dispute over advertisement polices has by no means subsided and illegal user data collection is still an unresolved problem of the big tech metaverse concept [44].

The metaverse technology is also suffering serious quality and *performance issues*. The graphics of Meta's app Horizon Worlds was criticized and widely mocked, as similar to a 1990's video game [45]. Its cartoonish and rudimentary [46] updated avatar version, may be sufficient for gaming, but certainly cannot represent professionals at important meetings, job interviews, or at academical exams [47]. The metaverse "is not taking off" as planned. Leaked internal documents revealed that even Meta's employees do not like to spend time in its metaverse and that the excessive stability issues, and bugs, prevent users from fully experiencing Horizon Worlds [48]. Experts also expressed their disappointment, in a metaverse technology, that they thought to be definitely farther along [49].

Not only the metaverse technology, but also its intended innovation of communication, work, education, healthcare, business, products, and social interactions [50], suffers from serious performance, quality and security issues. *Metaverse communication* has a higher susceptibility to manipulation by interested businesses and the VR headsets record all interactions and can collect far more data for profiling [51]. Additionally, *digitized*

*work* means more worker surveillance [52] and subtracts lots of time from real work priorities. A Wall Street Journal study showed that professionals spend more than half of their working week in meetings, an amount that has, in the last two years, increased by 250%. Other tasks (such as emails, research, collaborations), relegated to the end of the day, subtract time from one's rest periods. The fusion of real and virtual work, turns everything into work, making it increasingly difficult to recover. This is however a peculiar feature of the virtual world: it entices users to remain connected all the time, with worrying consequences for health, efficiency, and anxiety levels [53]. The prospect of a fast-growing digital sector has also created a global underclass of precarious, underpaid "ghost" workers, toiling for ridiculous wages, recruited out of impoverished population bands. These gig workers "impersonate" the still missing features of the imagined virtual systems. Despite their crucial role for safety, content moderators are paid miserably to view every murder, sexual assault or child abuse video, banned from platforms and suffer often from post-traumatic stress disorder [54].

The adoption of more digital work has additionally also an environmental impact as it involves an excessive *energy expenditure*. The needed energy is often bought from poorer countries at lower prices, causing them supply problems, price increases and inflation, that may lead to their system's collapse. A critical point is pollution, which in poor countries is not an issue. The exponential digital consumption of therefore also a sustainability problem for the environment [55].

The metaverse has also a lot of worrying *security issues* and it poses risks to its users both physically and mentally. Users moving in tight spaces with a headset disrupting their vision might fall and get hurt. In safety manuals, they are warned to access virtuality in a "safe play space," and not to forget real-world hazards. Wearing a headset for too long can cause nausea, seizures, blurred vision and should be avoided when tired or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. While it is advised that children, under the age of 13, never use the headsets, New York Times reporter Kash Hill, who spent 24 h in the metaverse, noted however that the virtual world is mostly populated by children [56]. The metaverse is also the "new frontier" for trolling and within its worlds, users are reporting increasing levels of abusive behaviour, to which they are exposed "every seven minutes", with instances of harassment, bullying, presentation of sexual content, racism, threats of violence and grooming of minors [57].

In just one year, all these major problems and issues changed the big tech metaverse concepts and narratives. Enthusiasm about the virtual world subsided. In the big tech CEO's posts, the metaverse is no longer being promoted as the only path to a happy future of flourishing revenues and consumer satisfaction. While Meta attempted to shift its metaverse narrative from a privately ruled, own virtual world, created with no regard to financial losses or user wellbeing, to an inclusive, interconnected space, following "public and private norms," cooperatively created by "industry partners, research institutions, experts" and users, as a "constellation of technologies, platforms, and products," with the intent to "keep people safe" [58], the planned metaverse vision seems to have been abandoned. A post from December 2022 by Andrew Bosworth, Head of Meta's Reality Labs, avoided even mentioning the term metaverse [59], and instead hinted at a consistent shift of emphasis, from virtual to the fostering of an augmented reality. This metaverse has little to do with the idea promoted in 2022. It appears that Meta may

understand that its colossal project does not respond to the present market situation and the consumers' real needs [60].

## 4 Conclusion

This enquiry has reviewed existing metaverse definitions and concepts, has analysed its meaning and impact. It has studied digital art and fashion, and has identified its existing problems and criticism. It has shown that while a vision of a digital world shared by all was sold to the public, the digital companies sustaining its inevitable arrival, invested immense amounts of money in a metaverse concept that was invented to produce more revenue, encourage more consumption and more extensive user data collection for profiling [61]. It was not a fantasy about virtual reality, but about money, power and control. Presented as a novel idea, similar lucrative businesses are already taking place, not in the metaverse, but on gaming platforms, such as Minecraft or Roblox, where the rules and objectives are set by the game. The users, represented by avatars buy, at high costs, digital equipment and virtual items, able to stratify class in the virtual world also [62]. On these platforms, the players create a new world according to their fantasy, with freedoms and rules ignored in the real world. This is not a beautiful idea of a new internet, but a dull game for rich people tired of real life. Pretending to find the future of learning or healthcare by playing Roblox, is similar to faking an understanding of global economy and market changes with Monopoly. It sounds ludicrous, superficial and stupid. Big tech's metaverse dream is a science-fictional construct, that captures a childish, technology fantasy, similar to the one on off-world colonies on Mars, in which you can play to be anyone, do anything, to vanquish foes, regardless of rules, real-world social status or physicality [63]. It is a game for annoyed consumers craving for fun, and disregards humanity's welfare.

Today in scientific and in commercial publications, contrasting, irreconcilable visions of the metaverse coexist and are constantly mixed: a valuable, socially useful metaverse idea is sandwiched with a lucrative, consumer and entertainment metaverse concept. Many ideas and topics are still at an initial, theoretical stage and the indispensable digital tools have yet to be developed, but as long as the concepts remain undefined, all these issues will remain unresolved. The absence of a scientifically recognized general literature and the scarcity of available up-to-date. "new" knowledge on the metaverse are two revealing symptoms of its present indeterminateness.

It is impossible to predict the future and big tech companies, experts and scientists cannot tell if, how or when a metaverse will come true or what it will look like. Should the future include a "real-time rendered 3d virtual world", it will certainly reserve unpredictable surprises [64], that sci-fi dystopias, movies, games, or digital executive's childish fantasies cannot anticipate.

The appearance of any virtual world concept will however have to solve countless critical issues relating to security, trust, privacy, bias, disinformation, surveillance, application of laws, health, digital addiction and the exposure of vulnerable people. It will also have to address the rapidly changing events of our turbulent time: the escalating impact of climate change, an unexpected and persistent global pandemic [65], the breakout of war in Ukraine, and their effects on people and markets [66]. After a pandemic-induced three-

year boom, the tech sector suffered between 2022 and 2023, a strong setback, which resulted in mass job cuts and financial crashes. In 2022, 107'000 jobs were lost from public and private tech companies confronting rising inflation and a tumultuous stock market. Until the end of June 2023, more than 152'094 workers, totalling 259'094, were laid off [67]. Bitcoin, the most popular cryptocurrency, fell below \$16,000 in November 2022, after having been on a downward trajectory throughout the year. High inflation and a living cost crisis had caused investors to reduce their investment risk, by selling their cryptocurrency [68]. Meta and Microsoft saw losses as large as \$7 billion, which caused mass layoffs, and the NASDAQ dropped 30%, wiping a \$7.4 trillion off investors' portfolios [69]. This tech boom decline, caused in 2023 the failure of the Silicon Valley Bank, which insolvent since September 2022, was forced to close on 10 March 2023, followed by other banks, such as the giant Credit Suisse. [70]. The end of 2022 and the start of 2023 marked an unexpected end of tech's upward streak, as the digital sector and its metaverse ambitions, went from soaring, to falling in rapid succession.

To reliably anticipate the future, even our digital future, all these unforeseen events, and the people's ensuing needs, feelings and reactions to those dramatic happenings, would need to be considered. The climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the economic crisis, moved many towards more discreet, understated purchases and to a strong feeling of "needing less". Today not the rise of the metaverse, but this greatest crisis of our times is altering products and their communication, undermining the luxury, fashion and art sector, and is changing the value attributed to identity, producing a paradigm shift [71]. How this paradigm is changing has yet to be established and while we wait for scholarly studies, a renewed reading of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* might be indicated [72]. The virtual worlds are not here yet, but society, its behaviours and identities are changing now, in a way not imaginable in 2022 [73]. Future arrives, one day at a time, and something must end, to allow the growth of something new. Stunning innovations, which will not rise from the metaverse, will be the powerful motors of a beneficial change, because: "Change is not merely necessary to life - it is life" [74].

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# Extended Reality (XR) in the Digital Fashion Landscape

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**Abstract.** The fashion industry is progressively investing in technology, and the benefits of Extended Reality (XR) are not going unnoticed. Despite widespread interest in the topic, the literature is limited and the topic is poorly understood. This study brings XR in fashion to the forefront. Based on a review of several sources (latest news, reports, and literature), it describes the current landscape, presents the advantages and downsides of immersive technologies, and provides useful advice for practitioners. The results suggest that brands can leverage XR to establish close connections with consumers through personalised experiences and compelling stories. Moreover, some of the intricacies of XR are discussed, namely, costs and unresolved technical issues. Crafting meaningful XR experiences requires expertise in multiple domains, adding value to consumers through enhanced features and striving for quality.

**Keywords:** Immersive media · Digital Fashion · Fashion Communication · User Experience Design · Storytelling

## 1 Introduction

The rise of Extended Reality (XR) mirrors the current hyper-connected society, who craves the digital world, expressing an urge to submerge and expand their senses in the frontiers of technology [1]. XR comprises existing immersive technologies, i.e., augmented reality (AR), virtual (VR), and mixed reality (MR) and those who might be created in the future [2]. The term XR is commonly known as immersive media or spatial computing [3].

In the report “The State of Fashion Technology,” The Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company experts mention that it is expected that fashion companies increase technology investment between 3 and 3.5 percent by 2030 [4]. Furthermore, according to Statista [5], the global XR market hit 28 billion U.S dollars in 2021, and by 2028 is predicted to reach over 250 billion. This raises the question: why should fashion brands care about XR?

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Rock Paper Reality—a consulting agency in immersive technologies, suggests that XR can bring several benefits to brands, e.g., enhance recall and recognition, collect data about consumers to improve marketing strategies [6]. Moreover, XR creates opportunities by offering innovative ways to engage with consumers [7]. Despite the benefits, the number of brands and retailers that embraced technology competitively is limited [4].

In literature, there is a growing interest in fashion and the virtual world. Baek et al. [8] conducted a systematic literature review and found that the first publications on the subject started in 2003 and the number significantly increased after 2011, becoming one of the most researched topics in the domain of digital fashion in 2021. In addition, the authors suggest several research avenues. Indeed, XR is constantly evolving and is not yet well understood.

Marketing futurists Hackl and Wolf [9] remarked that sooner or later VR/AR will become mainstream and brands will have to understand what experiences they need. As a result, this study aims to reflect on the landscape of XR in Fashion. It delves into opportunities and obstacles of XR technologies, and offers guidance to practitioners who want to explore them. To investigate the subject, a buzz report was conducted. Buzz report is a design method that helps to develop “a broad understanding of what is currently significant” on a given topic [10, p. 23] by collecting information from several sources. Two researchers captured the latest news, reports, and literature on the subject. Afterwards, the findings were aggregated for group discussions.

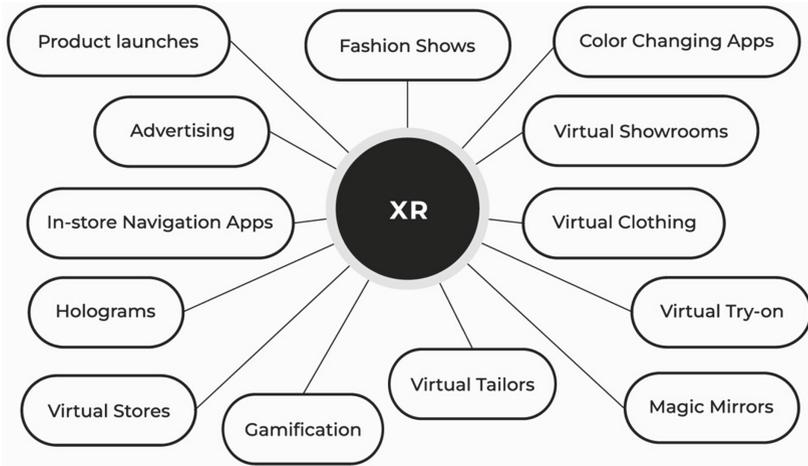
## 2 Extended Reality in Fashion

The computer graphics (CG) artist and XR designer Hillmann [3] remarked that overall, most XR projects are planned for event-driven experiences, such as marketing events, presentations and showcases. The buzz report revealed that companies are using XR for particular purposes. From a marketing perspective, XR has been implemented in product launches, advertising campaigns, and fashion shows. When it comes to brick-and-mortar stores and e-commerce, there is a wide range of practical applications to enhance customer experience, e.g., virtual showrooms, magic mirrors, in-store navigation apps (see Fig. 1).

AR and VR are also disrupting how fashion brands interact with consumers by creating immersive customer experiences and telling their stories innovatively. For instance, consumers can try on clothes virtually according to their preferences [11], and experience virtual rooms in fashion stores [7]. According to Hillmann [3], brand storytelling is a golden opportunity: “To tell a brand’s story in XR means to go beyond the confines of 2D media formats and create a closer, more personalized connection with the user” [3, p.229]. Ultimately, the purpose of storytelling experiences is to change the mindset of people, prompt them to act, in other words, persuasion [12].

Similar to other technologies, XR has benefits and drawbacks. On the bright side, XR unlocks multiple paths to increase brand value. This medium allows to collect comprehensive data of consumers—interactions, interests, product usage, etc. that can be used to refine marketing strategies and provide personalised experiences [9]. The report “The State of Fashion Technology” observes:

“... the aim would be to offer every shopper, or as many as possible at least, individualised service and communications, from recommending products based on their taste when they enter a store, to serving them the most relevant products when they open the brand’s app to sending emails letting them know when items they might like have arrived at a store nearby” [4, p.44].



**Fig. 1.** XR in Fashion.

Although XR provides analytics to help understand consumer behavior, it does not provide the full picture—quantitative methods indicate data to answer “how much” questions, whereas qualitative methods answer “why or how” questions [13]. Research into consumer experience with XR over the last decade focuses on adoption, preferences, and attitudes [8]. Xue et al. [14] add that more research is needed to understand consumers’ desires and needs.

Conversely, XR presents challenges that might avert brands from investing. One of the barriers is the costs associated with implementation, content production, and maintenance [2, 9, 15]. Besides being expensive, there are critical technical issues regarding hardware and software [2, 12]. These issues pose risks because if people do not enjoy the first impression, they might not invest time with the technology in the future [12].

Then, complexity, i.e. “traditional UX design” (web and mobile) has well established practices compared to XR, which “is still the “Wild West” to some degree” because of the broad scope of technologies, tools, and platforms involved [3, p.105]. Furthermore, usability testing of VR applications must be in person if the app is not available remotely, posing challenges when it comes to budget and time [3].

### 3 Recommendations on Marketing, User Experience and Storytelling for XR

Hackl and Wolf [9] described VR/AR as “bright and shiny objects,” and urge companies, brands, and marketers to not get distracted by them. The authors go on arguing that marketing fundamentals should not be dismissed, advocating that immersive experiences should be integrated with a campaign to enhance it, as creating the experience per se is not enough. To prevent distractions, the authors suggest answering questions like: “Is this experience something my target audience would want to do? What do I want my customer to feel? How does it make them feel about my brand?”; “Will this experience augment brand loyalty or increase engagement? How long do I want them to have this experience?”; “How will there be a beginning, middle, and end of the experience? Are there multiple plotline choices along the way?”; among others (see chapter 8 from [9]).

Regarding designing immersive experiences, Hillmann [3] explains that in the beginning there should not be considered technical restrictions when ideating the best solution for users—which in turn, will enable teams to conduct proper research to understand people’s needs. The author also believes that in the prototyping and testing stage, designers need to embrace the possibilities and limitations of a toolset, platform, and framework as this will have significant impact on how users perceive the experience. Despite the variety of devices available, the fundamentals (see Table 1) are the same [3].

In a similar vein, the essence of storytelling stays unchanged regardless of digital, but XR can take stories to a whole other level through branching narratives<sup>1</sup> and exploring levels of intensity that were never experienced before [9, 12]. Bucher [12] notes that it is imperative to establish the objective of the storytelling experience (entertain, inform, or persuade) before ideation. To create narratives successfully, the author further suggests determining who the audience is, and consider it throughout the process: “Envision the person you assume most likely to buy or appreciate your project. Keeping the embodiment of that person in the forefront of your creation process will often be all that is needed in order to craft a successful narrative” [12, p.94].

Hartson and Pyla [16] note that designing for a quality user experience is imperative, given information pervasiveness overload alongside the fact most people are expected to be tech-savvy. According to the authors, technological advances are making us rethink what quality means, supporting that quality products are those that ensure the best user experience, considering technological limitations.

### 4 Discussion

In an era where consumer expectations are high and the competition is tough, brands cannot make mistakes as explained by Applause, a crowd-sourced digital quality testing company [17]. The authors also support that orchestrating outstanding digital experiences requires three ingredients: intuitive interfaces; seamless customer experiences across channels; and features valued by users [17].

<sup>1</sup> “Branching narratives refer to the use of nonlinear story structure that allows users options that progress the story along. Options continue to be offered to users until either each option is given an ending or a series of options eventually leads to the same ending as a series of other options” [12, p.311].

**Table 1.** Core elements of XR Design. Based on Hillmann [3].

Element	Considerations
Comfort and safety	Comfort issues tend to lead to technology rejection; Rapid movements and misperceived distances are common with headsets
Interaction	The way how users are informed on how to interact with objects, e.g. a text pop-up over a drawer saying “Open me.”
Environment and spatial components	Questions related to context: play area, seated vs. standing, orientation assistance touch, etc
Sensory input	Visual clues, audio navigation, as well as haptic feedback using the motion controllers are part of the designer’s toolkit
Engagement	To ensure user engagement: guide the user, eliminate the friction, give incentives, and pave the way for satisfaction and meaningful experiences; use storytelling and gamification; test and prototype
Constraints	Design, impose, and manage constraints; Restrict unnecessary or harmful actions; help with discoverability and feedback
Inclusion, diversity, and accessibility	Consider the user’s situation: physical or mental abilities, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and the sociological impact of the design

Certainly, XR is gaining in popularity and people are eager to try it, but consumers’ interest will not be sustained if brands do not create value with XR experiences. This can prove to be a serious challenge for brands in the attention crisis that we are facing [18]. From Levitt’s et al. [19] point of view, the reason why so many products/services fail is because speed is prioritized, and quality is often disregarded. The author advocates remembering quality over speed and considering the customer experience holistically:

“Building quality isn’t just about technical excellence. It’s also about CX excellence. A crappy interface that doesn’t have tech bugs is still a crappy interface and likely to cause customer dissatisfaction. We must aim for quality in all areas” [19, p.283].

XR experiences raise vexed issues concerning the role of designers in the XR space. Clients can choose to work with companies where there are professionals devoted to both design and coding or opt for “XR ninjas,” who are capable of dealing with problems and use proper tools to deliver final solutions [3]. XR designers have to demonstrate vast knowledge in several domains:

“Next to fundamental understanding of the UX process and XR basics, knowledge of 3D and animation tools, a good understanding of the current state of solutions

(...), and a good understanding of the possibilities and limitations of the various frameworks, visual scripting solutions, and tools, plus the need to keep an eye on the ever-changing XR landscape” [3, p.106].

The know-how required to craft XR experiences and the complexity inherent to the field might lead researchers to rethink how studies are conducted. For example, projects in this field may benefit from cross-functional teams and transdisciplinary approaches, as well as, going beyond technical issues and focusing on consumer experience.

Another aspect to examine is the nature of XR. Hackl and Wolf [9] claim that VR experiences are considered isolating experiences—a premise that might soon be changing with the social nature of the Metaverse<sup>2</sup>. The Business of Fashion [21] mentions that innovating in the metaverse can raise fashion companies’ revenues by more than five percent in the next two to five years (see [22] for a comprehensive account of fashion and the Metaverse).

## 5 Concluding Thoughts

Extended Reality opens up opportunities for fashion companies to engage with consumers. Consequently, brands are increasingly investing in technology and revenue forecasting seems promising. Notwithstanding, when creating XR experiences, brands might encounter barriers and face challenges.

On the one hand, AR/VR enable brands to enhance experiences and explore innovative ways to tell stories, and thus increase brand value. The XR space is also highly measurable and provides marketers with data that can be used to tailor consumer shopping experiences. On the other hand, XR is expensive and the technical issues involved entail risks that might negatively impact consumers’ perceptions. Moreover, designing for XR is more complex than designing for web and mobile environments because it demands more knowledge on diverse subjects.

Some of the recommendations given for those who intend to explore immersive technologies include not getting distracted by technology, conducting research, and imagining the experience with consumers in mind. Achieving digital excellence in XR means adding value and prioritizing quality over time.

To conclude, it is expected that immersive environments will keep evolving, moving towards new paradigms. This paper contributes to our understanding of XR in fashion by outlining themes that can form an agenda for future work. Hopefully, this study will inspire and encourage practitioners and researchers to discover how to maximize XR’s potential.

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<sup>2</sup> “The envisioned future iteration of the internet that is made up of 3D virtual spaces linked within a perceived virtual universe. In a broader sense, it often refers to not just virtual worlds, but the full spectrum of virtual reality, augmented reality and the internet” [20, p.128].

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# A Conceptual Model of Dress Embodiment and Technological Mediation in Digital Fashion

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**Abstract.** Dress is an embodied, physical experience which the touch-deprived sensory affordances of today's screen technologies can only simulate. However, advances in haptic and virtual technologies suggest a re-embodied experience of dress might be possible in increasingly immersive digital fashion environments. These developments are explored through postphenomenology, which posits that technology mediates and co-determines relations between humans and the world, helping to shape the socio-cultural normative and value frameworks within which such phenomena occur. A model is proposed which conceptualizes these developments and serves as an interpretive framework of dress (dis)embodiment and technological mediation in digital fashion.

**Keywords:** digital fashion · technological mediation · dress embodiment · haptics · postphenomenology

## 1 Introduction: Fashion Digitalization

Digitalization has created new venues for fashion consumption and communication [1-4] but it has also mediated [5] and de-materialized [6] the embodied practice of dress [7, 8]. Digital fashion is accessed via personal computer, tablet or smartphone touchscreen interfaces, which afford a limited range of haptic, or active touch, interaction [9]. Hence, clothes are visually accessible online, but cannot be inspected and physically tried on; in fashion e-commerce, hand and on-body touch sensations can only be simulated using audio-visual means [10]. With the exception of finger or tool interaction on a screen the sense of touch is absent.

This tactile gap between the in-person retail experience and fashion e-commerce—and, more dramatically, between in-person and digitally mediated interaction in general [11]—was underscored by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the digitalization of business-to-consumer and business-to-business communications and sales [12-15]. The heightened need to enrich the digital sensorium has spurred investigation in sensory and haptic imagery [16, 17] and interactive visuals providing touch-related stimuli, both in apparel e-commerce and online shopping in general [18-20]. To my best knowledge, however, research into the mediating role played by the technologies

themselves—the ways in which device affordances may co-shape and co-determine the nature and meaning of dress embodiment as it is experienced in digital fashion—is, as argued in Sect. 3, limited. To address this gap, I propose a conceptual model of dress embodiment situated within two extremes, physical to virtual, and analyze it through the lens of postphenomenology, a recent branch of philosophy of technology which builds on both phenomenology and pragmatism [21–23].

## 2 Touch and Dress Embodiment

Touch is an integral part of the multisensory processes which inform our perception of the world [24, 25]. Touch affects emotions, thoughts, and actions, including our clothing choices [26, 27]. Touch is the only bi-directional modality: through touch, humans acquire and transmit information [28]. In fact, what we commonly refer to as the sense of touch is a complex *somatosensory* system distributed in the whole body (as the root *soma*, from the Greek word for body, suggests). Touch is kinesthetic: when pulling on a tight pair of jeans, information travels to the brain regarding the passive and active forces involved. Touch is also tactile: while slipping on a silk blouse, or a wool sweater, on-skin shear effects and thermal qualities are similarly relayed. In fact, touch affects the experience of garments in rich and complex ways, likely impacting psychological processes and behavioral tendencies, as enlatched cognition theory [29]—a line of research in grounded cognition studies—has argued.

Approaching touch from the perspective of fashion theory [30, 31] and fashion communication [1, 32, 33] allows one to reflect on the practice of dress (of donning garments and accessories) as a socially situated act of self-expression which is also a physical, on-body phenomena; and thus, to approach dress as an *embodied* experience, as theorized by J. Entwistle [7, 8]. Fashion, she writes, “is about bodies: it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies” [7] located within social, historical and cultural contexts which define what it means to be dressed. Her approach to fashion is informed by sociology and phenomenology, particularly the writings of Maurice-Merleau Ponty [34], who emphasized the importance of the body’s role in perception and the embodied nature of subjectivity.

Such theoretical grounding further allows us to consider the effects digitalization may have on dress embodiment in *technologically mediated* business and consumer practices made possible by fast-evolving digital technologies. Until recently in the Western world, engagement with dress and fashion began at home, in front of one’s closet, or in a physical store. While retail remains a fundamental aspect of the fashion experience—as exemplified by the resurgence of in-store shopping after COVID-19 [35]—today one can dress virtually and shop electronically for a digital garment made on-demand; even traditional retail venues may incorporate such technologically-driven customer journeys [36]. The time and place of an embodied experience of dress, actively touched and felt on the body—and the perceptual, emotional, and cognitive effects it produces—has shifted together with technological innovation. From physical venues to immersive environments, digital technologies mediate, help shape and *co-determine* the experience and practice of dress and of fashion in general.

In order to explore this concept, the next section provides a succinct overview of technological mediation as theorized by postphenomenology.

### 3 Postphenomenology and Technological Mediation

Postphenomenology is a philosophy of technology which builds on the legacies of pragmatism and phenomenology. It was first introduced by American philosopher Don Ihde [37] and is increasingly being adopted as a method for investigating science and technology. Postphenomenology studies the nature of relations between human beings and technological artefacts, and the mediating role technology and technological innovation play in these relations. Postphenomenology does not focus on technology or technologies per se, but on the way “artefacts shape the relation between humans and the world” [38], both hermeneutically and existentially. As postphenomenology theorist Peter-Paul Verbeek (<https://ppverbeek.org/>) explains:

*From a hermeneutical perspective, artifacts mediate human experience by transforming perceptions and interpretive frameworks, helping to shape the way in which human beings encounter reality [...] From an existential perspective, artifacts mediate human existence by giving concrete shape to their behavior and the social context of their existence [39].*

By approaching technology through artifacts, the postphenomenological perspective “offers a rich and variegated picture of technology” which, unlike classical philosophy of technology, “does justice to its ambivalent status” [39]. Technologies *co-constitute* the subjectivity of users and the objectivity of the world these users experience: “subject and object are no pre-given entities, but get constituted in the technologically mediated relations that exist between them” [23]. Ultimately, technologies and technological developments are “mediators of human experiences and practices” [23].

To illustrate these concepts, authors Rosenberger & Verbeek discuss the example of the ultrasound, which “constitutes the unborn child as a potential patient and the expecting parents as those who are responsible for the health condition of their child” and thus, helps shape the parent-child relationship [23] but may also impact the normative and ethical frameworks concerned with the life of the fetus. To bring such concepts closer to the realm of digital fashion, let us consider the case of a consumer (the subject) whose relation to a fashionable garment (the object) she or he desires is—to some extent—shaped by the digital technology which mediates its experience; for example, a smartphone and the e-commerce site accessed by means of it. In this relation, technology affords a digital representation of the item’s physical counterpart, and the consumer must interpret a physical dress experience which is screened (quite literally) by the technology. Whilst the consumer’s emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes will likely be affected by this, so will relations between him or her and the fashion provider, as well as the normative and ethical frameworks concerned with fashion production and consumption. The frameworks may be, for example, the norms and regulations governing processes and structures of ecommerce platforms, but also the values and meanings attached to concepts such as fashion sustainability [40, 41] or to notions of privacy and security in digital fashion [42]. “Agency,” as Rosenberg & Verbeek write, “is not an exclusively human property anymore: it takes shape in complicated interactions between human and non-human entities” [23].

As mentioned, a fundamental aspect of the postphenomenological perspective “is its focus on case studies of concrete human-technology relations to technologies” [23] such as imaging technologies, implants, mobile devices, and robotics. In the specific field of fashion, postphenomenology has been applied to the study of electronic wearables in fashion design [38] and augmented reality [43]. This suggests it is a suitable method to analyze the shifting states of dress embodiment in fashion contexts, increasingly mediated by digital technologies, and to conceptualize the implications this evolving phenomenon may have for businesses and consumer relations. Or, to paraphrase the title of Verbeek’s seminal book *What Things Do* [22], to investigate what technologies *do* to the embodied experience of dress in digital fashion.

In the next section we will address this question by discussing dress (dis)embodiment in the increasingly digitized, “real to virtual” experiences available to digital fashion consumers today.

## 4 Technological Mediation of Dress Embodiment

In a seminal paper by Milgram & Kishino [44] and Milgram & Colquhoun [45] the authors propose a taxonomy of real and virtual display integration intended to provide a terminology for the then “nascent fields” [45] of augmented and virtual reality. The authors begin their discussion by illustrating two parallel concepts. The first is a model of reality and of virtuality, positioned at opposite ends of a continuum. In the second model, which runs parallel to the first, the authors situate different technologies, based on the extent to which “knowledge is present in the computer about the world being presented” [45] and thus, the extent to which this world is modelled, or rendered<sup>1</sup>, by the technologies in question. The authors then elaborate on the kinds of data and data juxtapositions needed to achieve such renderings, and provide a taxonomy which differentiates between them. Flavián et al. recently [47] expanded Milgram & Kishino’s model, proposing a more detailed version of the overlapping real to virtual states within the continuum, the types of technologies used, their degree of embodiment with regards to the user (from external to implanted devices) and their impact on the customer experience. Hence, for the purpose of this discussion, the reality to virtuality continuum concept provides a useful trajectory onto which we can situate consumers’ dress (dis)embodiment experience in digital fashion, and the technologies which mediate, help to shape, and co-determine both the experience and its significance.

### 4.1 Dress Dis-embodiment in Digital Relations

The digital fashion experience accessible to most consumers today can be situated somewhere in the middle of the reality to virtuality continuum, as discussed above. Devices commonly used to access the web, such as computers, tablets, and smartphones, afford limited touch sensation beyond vibration and pulse effects. The three-dimensional, material, textural properties of dress—conveniently at hand when a garment is physically

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the continuum is an engineering construct. Hence, it does not imply virtuality to be any less “real” than reality. For a discussion see Vial [46].

present—are represented behind a flat (to date) glass screen; they exist beyond the reach of touch and feel, their physical nature accessible via the visual sense only. Thus, the haptic and kinesthetic qualities of a garment represented digitally cannot readily be understood as they would be in a real (physical) setting, where the garment can be handled and worn on the body. In digital fashion, dress is, de-facto, *dis-embodied*.

However, the powerful electronics embedded in today's digital devices also enable rich two-dimensional—and even three-dimensional—audio-visual stimuli *suggestive* of embodiment. Thus, a fashion website which promotes and sells physical goods will most likely include standard features and functionalities purposely designed to convey useful information regarding the materiality of these items, from product components to bodily fit. Most fashion websites feature evocative haptic images, still and moving, of garments (either real or digitally rendered) worn on models (either real or avatars), accompanied by high-resolution zoom-in functionalities. These images are usually accompanied by textual product descriptions, and in some cases, narratives describing product use and customer comments providing hints on wearability, fit and on-body feel [48]. Additional features may include suggestive augmented reality applications which enable the projection of garments onto users' bodies, or VTOs—virtual try-on applications. Depending on the type of application, VTOs may leverage customers' sizing data, or even self-scanned body data, to suggest properly fitting garments draped on digital humans (or avatars) whose body types are similar to the customer's own [42].

Such embodiment narratives can also be found on digital-first websites and AI-generated fashion projects. Digital outfits commercialized by online venues such as DressX ([www.dressx.com](http://www.dressx.com)), Dematerialised ([www.thedematerialised.com](http://www.thedematerialised.com)) or The Fabricant ([www.thefabricant.com](http://www.thefabricant.com)) are created using 3D design software [49] and promoted as a way to fashionably (and often, fantastically) dress one's avatar in different online venues, from social media to gaming; or, to sustainably shop for garments which will be produced on-demand with either commonplace or advanced bio-materials [50]. Recently, fashion looks created using generative AI programs such as DALL-E brought forth unexpected [51], albeit controversial [52] new ways to embody dress.

To the viewer, the rich visual information gleaned from the applications described above, and the devices used to access them, may indeed *suggest, or help imagine*, embodied dress states. As discussed in perception literature, sensory marketing, grounded cognition theory and neuroscience, visual stimuli may trigger sensory integration and substitution mechanisms [53], mental simulation [54, 55], and re-enactment [56] processes, and evoke knowledge accrued through the viewer's past experiences with physical garments. Hence, by means of a device's primarily *visual* affordances, individual viewers may form a highly personal interpretation of the *kinesthetic and tactile* properties of embodied dress. However, this perception is co-determined, or mutually constituted, by both the user (one's personal history, sensitivities, culture, and so on) *and* the technology (or rather, device affordances) through which dress is accessed. "Within these human-technology relations, transformations of perception occur," writes P.-P. Verbeek [22]. Dress is disembodied (it is not worn, nor felt on the body), but its embodiment is understood via *other* means, because "technologies help to shape *what counts as 'real'*" [22]. In other words, by co-shaping a digitally-mediated dress experience *and* existence, the screen devices, 3D scanning, and generative AI technologies described

above co-constitute new relations between consumers and business, helping to redefine the frameworks within which dress—and hence, fashion—is given meaning.

## 4.2 Dress Re-embodiment in Extended Digital Relations

Technological innovation and convergence suggest that in the future, some form of dress embodiment might indeed be enjoyed in digital fashion. The integration of haptic, visual, auditory and even olfactory [57] functionalities in technological devices—visors, gloves, suits, and so on—might enable new kinds of multisensory experiences [58]. These may be situated in purposefully crafted hyperreal (that is, blending digital experiences *into* physical contexts<sup>2</sup>) or fully virtual [47, 59] environments.

As discussed in the previous section, fashion brands are already showcasing and promoting digital goods in virtual gaming and in the so-called metaverse [60], where consumers can view and buy digital fashion products to dress their avatars with. These experiences are still primarily visual—co-shaped by the sensory affordances of the virtual reality devices currently available on the mass market. This may change when lightweight, wearable haptic interfaces delivering force, temperature, and texture feedback, compatible with commercially available VR platforms<sup>3</sup>, will be affordably priced; and when ad-hoc kinesthetic and tactile effects will be programmed into existing or newly designed virtual environments. “As the actual and the digital blur further with technologies [...] we could even end up possessing clothes that clad our corporeal and virtual selves in tandem” seamlessly transitioning from physical to digital fashion [61].

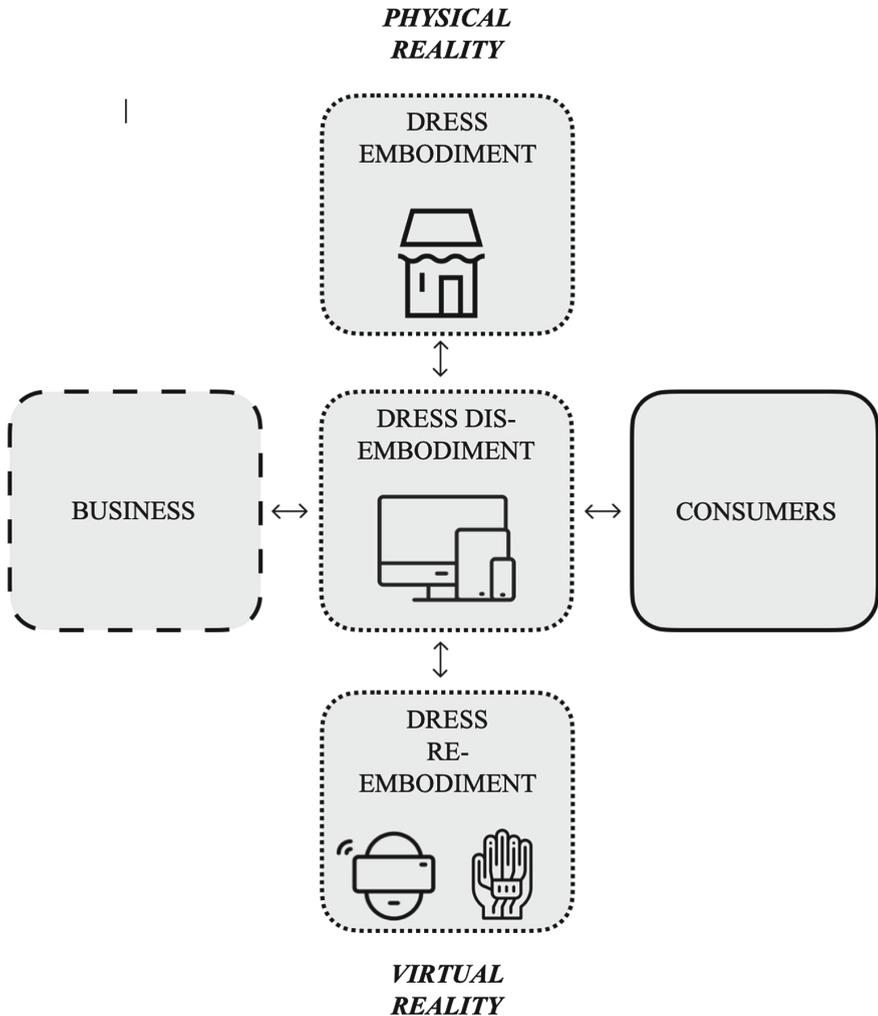
In these extended digital relations between consumers, businesses, and technologies, I expect the latter to mediate and co-determine—as posited by postphenomenology—an altogether different experience and meaning of dress (re)embodiment as compared to what emerges from today’s practices. The implications such developments may hold for fashion industry sustainability [62, 63], marketing management [64] and digital fashion marketing [65, 66], are only beginning to be discussed and investigated. To frame these concerns, I propose a model representing the evolving states of dress embodiment and of the technologies mediating these states between consumers and businesses.

## 5 A Conceptual Model

The model illustrated in Fig. 1 summarizes the ideas put forth so far. The model conceptualizes the experience of dress as situated within Milgram & Kishino’s physical to extended reality continuum [44], represented vertically and from top to bottom. Situated along this axis are the three states of dress embodiment posited by this paper: *dress embodiment* (the on-body, tactile and kinesthetic experience of the physical world: handling and trying on clothes in a fashion store or at home); *dress dis-embodiment* (the off-body, visually rich but touch-diminished interaction available through screen devices); and *dress re-embodiment* (the multisensory dress experiences which converging haptic and other VR technologies might enable in the future).

<sup>2</sup> For a very recent development in hyperreal environments see: <https://www.outernetglobal.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, WeArt’s TouchDiver glove: [www.weart.it](http://www.weart.it).



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual model of digital dress (dis)embodiment, from physical (top) to extended reality (bottom). Icons by C. Njoo and R. Schmitzer, *The Noun Project* ([www.thenounproject.com](http://www.thenounproject.com)).

These diverse and evolving dress states are intersected horizontally, on the one side, by *business* (fashion firms preoccupied with value creation) and on the other, by *consumers*, who influence, and in turn are affected by, fashion business strategies. In the center are the technologies—illustrated symbolically and without pretense of exhaustiveness—which, as suggested by postphenomenology, mediate these relations, and co-determine the individual and collective experience of dress in evolving techno-social contexts and frameworks of understanding. By applying prior conceptualizations of real to virtual experiences to the fashion domain, I believe the model can serve as a framework for current and future research of touch and dress embodiment in digital fashion.

## 6 Conclusion

The digital acceleration of fashion and luxury brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the touch-deprived, disembodied nature of the online dress experience; when shopping online, products can be seen but cannot be *handled* and *felt on the body*. By approaching this phenomenon through the lens of postphenomenology, we can understand the crucial role which available screen technologies play in mediating interaction and co-determining an experience of dress. The latter relies heavily on multisensory integration, memory, and mental imagery to be actionable and meaningful. However, in the future, haptics—together with other augmented and virtual technologies—might ultimately provide complementary or alternative ways of dress (re)embodiment in both physical and digital environments. Evolving forms of techno-human relations may, in turn, create new socio-cultural frameworks in which dress (and hence, fashion) is experienced, interpreted, and valued. I am confident the conceptual model of technological mediation proposed herein will prove useful when thinking through such developments.

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# Communicating Digitalised Supply Chain Transparency: Towards a Guide for Fashion SMEs

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**Abstract.** The digitalisation of fashion supply chain transparency has gained increased attention in recent years. Technology solutions that have arisen based on advanced technologies and Web3 include smart tags, forensic tracers and blockchain platformisation. Whereby current reports discuss supply chain transparency from the perspective of the data, technical solutions and policy [1, 2], little attention is given to the fashion firms that are to adopt these technologies. Finding themselves in the midst of the supply chain transparency polemic, small to medium brands are still at a loss as to transformation and communication strategies [3]. This paper examines the standpoint of the small-scale brand, its challenges and needs in the face of digital transformation and lays the groundwork for the development of Web3 technology adoption guidelines—that can ultimately form, not only part of their implementation but also their communication strategy. Applying the theoretical framework of organisational theory, it provides evidence of successful practice through case study methodology. The study contributes to knowledge of organisational theory in the context of adjusting to rapid and complex change triggered by both external and internal demands for adopting advanced technology.

**Keywords:** Supply chain transparency · Smart tags · Blockchain platformisation · Organisational strategy

## 1 Introduction

“Digital transformation is a team sport that needs a gameplan to coordinate strategies in the face of change” [4].

Textile supply chains (SCs) are notoriously complex and remain stubbornly opaque. Yet calls for greater transparency are demanded through the adoption of digitalisation. Large scale fashion conglomerates have already approached the challenge, but small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are still grappling with the enormity of the task. New software programmes are exponentially entering the market but how the SME is to navigate all the options and integrate already complex operations remains unclear.

This study investigates the applications currently available and initiates a rationalisation of the process of onboarding digital tools that will improve a firm's environmental/social/governance (ESG) strategies, provide veracity to the data that is communicated, and advance supply chain transparency for the industry at large.

SCs customarily deploy paper-based, data systems that are fragmented and operate in silos. Typically, brands only have access to Tier 1 (garment manufacturers) and to an extent, Tier 2 (fabric suppliers') data. The lack of integrated data transfer systems has obscured extensive problems within the industry. Meanwhile, demand for more transparency has increased among consumers [5]. In response to these pressures, many firms have made unverified claims—which in turn has led to allegations of greenwashing. In the interests of meeting United Nations sustainable development goals (UNSDGs) and forthcoming legislation in many jurisdictions, it is essential that supply chains become responsible and accountable. An ideal way to do so is through transparency—and digitalisation offers a swift path forward. However, achieving SC transparency is a complex operation. Large firms enlist the assistance of consultancies—that either have in-house experts. or engage sub-contractors that can select, operationalise, and implement appropriate software systems. Small firms are unlikely to take this route because of lack of resources. As the experience of smaller firms is under researched (and yet constitute the majority of firms in the industry), the subject of this study is the SME. The objective of the study is to assemble knowledge that streamlines transformation to digital SC transparency and subsequently, openly facilitates the communication of that effort.

The paper first examines the academic literature as well as white papers produced by technology providers on extant Web3 technologies related to SC transparency. It discusses the business drivers for change including the need for compliance, forthcoming legislation, public relations, and communications (including the fear of reputational damage through greenwashing) as well as external pressures from both competitors and consumers. The study argues that SMEs are very willing to adopt SC transparency, but that adoption needs direction, governance, consistency, security, simplicity and ultimately a set of integrated principles to guide the onboarding of digitalisation.

## 2 Literature and Context

This review examines scholarly and grey literature that considers the business drivers for digitalising SC transparency including the need for compliance, forthcoming legislation, public relations, and communications arising from external pressures and internal values. Papers are predominantly selected from the UK and EU as these territories provide most relevance to SMEs in the region under examination. This geographic zone has been chosen because it is currently undergoing the most significant revision of transparency legislation globally. The study argues that despite the existing literature there are few comprehensive and effective guidelines that navigate the complex organisational task of adopting digital transformation. Few studies present key parameters to SMEs for onboarding technology in a consistent, simplified, and secure manner while guaranteeing compliance and ensuring that sustainability values are upheld, notwithstanding the subsequent communication to the consumer.

## 2.1 Compliance, Legislation, and Due Diligence

Various jurisdictions have been grappling with standardisations and regulations regarding SC transparency, due diligence, corporate responsibility, and textile waste management including France, The Netherlands Norway and the UK [6]. In 2007, France was the first territory to impose Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) on producers of textile waste. France's Environmental Code (Code de l'Environnement) includes EPR projects and the new Anti-Wastage and Circular Economy Law, controlling textile and fashion waste [7]. The EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles outlines the vision and concrete actions required to ensure that textile products placed on the EU market by 2030 are durable and recyclable, made from regenerated fibres to the greatest extent possible, are free of hazardous substances, and are produced with respect for social rights and the environment [8]. 'The specific measures will include Ecodesign requirements for textiles, clearer information, a Digital Product Passport and a mandatory EU extended producer responsibility scheme' [8].

## 2.2 Data, Public Relations, and Communications

As part of the proposal for an Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR), the concept of the Digital Product Passport (DPP) will be introduced with the intention of improving the traceability of products and providing consumers and manufacturers with access to all relevant product information [9]. A DPP is a textile product communication tool that facilitates the exchange of SC data between stakeholders such as brands and businesses, public authorities, consumers, NGOs, and the public. A DPP is defined as 'a set of data specific to a product that contains the information and is accessible via electronic means on a data carrier' [8]. By the end of 2022, it was expected that additional details regarding the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles would become available [1]. Data sharing is the most important step and can range from informing a customer on the origin of a product shared via the information contained in a QR code to communicating all stages and tiers of the SC [1].

## 2.3 External Pressures and Technology

Supply chain traceability solutions consist of Web3 (blockchain or cloud-based) platforms plus input and data readers (RFIDs, QR codes, forensic markers etc.) that offer digital mapping and visualisation tools, as well as material, batch, and product traceability, and facility profiling. The platforms are used to consolidate and verify chain-of-custody documentation (transaction certificates, scope certificates, and associated sustainability standards). Platforms like these, sometimes referred to as repositories or 'data lakes' (e.g., Microsoft Azure) are mostly hosted by tech giants and offer space to contain all the 'big data' that may be useful to the user. Big data refers to larger, more complex data sets, particularly from new data sources, that are so extensive that conventional data processing software is incapable of managing them. The platforms that hold the data also enable application programme interface (API) integration with organisations' internal systems. APIs are the programmes that can read and deliver selected information from a data repository to the user (in this case, supply chain stakeholders).

Constructing a Web3 ecosystem, choosing a Web3's entry point in the SC, articulating the value of the platform, constructing the governance and security model, exploring legal implications, and scaling the network are crucial activities when designing a digital SC system [10] –yet quite daunting to the SME without an IT department. According to Pedersen et al. [11], the most significant obstacles to launching a Web3 project are determining which advanced technologies to implement and how to customise them. Building on the observations of Zhi Lia et al. [12] some existing fashion management programs such as Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERPs) systems (often already used by SMEs) could offer a head start. This study argues that the selection and integration of the capabilities and features must be dictated by the needs to be met. Building on observations by Casino et al. [13] - who state engagement, innovation, situational context, smart systems, and modification of the technology are additional factors to consider when applying technology appropriately - this study considers the increasingly complex operations that face the SME.

Finally, security, privacy and the safety of trade secrets is a primary consideration for brands. Web3 favours the sharing economy. By making data accessible to more parties, its value lies in its use and exchange. Its premise (like the Internet) is decentralising, and therefore may be viewed as undermining the competitive advantage that can be gained by guarding trade secrets [14]. However, a Web3-designed platform can also enable a reliable and controllable data-sharing protocol. It is claimed by the tech giants that host the platforms, that parties retain complete control over their data and the ability to grant access to their business partners, thereby not only ensuring security but creating new economic opportunities [15].

## 2.4 Digital Transformation and Communication

Woven into the context of digital transformation is the deployment of eCommerce, social media marketing and social commerce, adding the public facing dimension to the communication of sustainability credentials. Kalbaska et al. [16] consider three distinct layers in which fashion interacts with information and communication technologies: 1.) design, production, and distribution of fashion products. 2.) marketing and sales. 3.) co-creation with stakeholders. This study encompasses layers 2 and 3 of this framework and extends the layers by adding details regarding the communication of supply chain information by means of digitalisation.

## 2.5 Research Question

The comprehensive, digital capabilities available for transparency, coupled with the proliferation of buzzwords used by the press, can be daunting and confusing to the fashion SME. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on the following question: *What are the parameters needed to develop guidelines for the digitalisation of SC transparency for fashion SMEs - and the sub-questions: Where and how can the technologies be deployed within the firm? How do the technologies satisfy forthcoming legislative requirements and regulations? And how can the firm communicate this information to verify their transparency claims?*

## 3 Research Design

### 3.1 Theoretical Constructs

Organisational theory has a mature history and several branches. Organisational theorists consider the diverse array of organisational designs, their leadership, capabilities (such as the capacity to innovate, learn, and adapt), processes (such as decision making), and outcomes (including for whom), as well as the emergence and establishment of new organisational designs [17]. According to GreenwoodHinings et al. [17] organisational theory examines the relationship between organisations and their environment, and the effects of these relationships on organisational functioning. Organisational theory provides a suitable construct for the examination of SMEs adopting digitalised SCs because in recent years, organisational theorists have been applying their knowledge to ‘grand challenges’ and influencing practice [17]. This study will view the current and anticipated activities of the firms in relation to their SC strategies from an organisational theory perspective and its related foundations, that is, regulations, collaboration and communications.

### 3.2 Methodology

In research, the theoretical case study approach can be used to elaborate on a company’s adoption of a new system, to explore management views and perceptions of a new initiative or process development, or to investigate management attitudes and experiences of a new initiative or service development [18]. Case study methodology enables in-depth, multifaceted examinations of critical topics in their actual settings [18]. In the fields of business, law, and policy, the value of the case study method is widely recognised, whereas in SC research, this appreciation is rather less prevalent. Taking a qualitative approach, the study analyses the current state of Web3 technology adoption by SMEs as well as mid-sized businesses<sup>1</sup> [19]. The participants have been selected because they are most prevalent in the region examined and have a significant effect on the local economy [19]—but also incline not to engage consultancies therefore have a need for impartial information. The purpose of presenting detailed critiques, typically of one or more firms, is to provide insights into aspects of the business and to illustrate that broader lessons are to be learned. This in turn supports the theoretical lens applied to this study, that is, organisational theory, which encompasses organisational design, governance, proficiencies, innovation, adaptation, processes, and consequences, as well as the emergence and establishment of new organisational models.

This study presents 5 case studies of fashion SMEs and mid-sized firms to enhance its analysis of common practices and actions. After documenting data from the 5 cases, themes and evidence began to repeat, which indicates a saturation point was reached.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of Mid-Sized Businesses is based on annual revenue ranging between £25 million and £500 million. The upper limit for the definition of a SME is set at £25 million, while £500 million was chosen as the threshold for these “smaller” large businesses. Note, however, that the definition of a small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) under the Companies Act requires two of three criteria to be met: revenue (less than £25 million), employees (less than 250), and gross assets (less than £12.5 million) (gov.uk, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews with CSR sustainability coordinators of small to medium fashion firms, technology start-ups and industry bodies serve as the primary source of data, complemented by conversations and observations made during industrial engagement events hosted by the authors. The fashion firm interviewees were selected from the regional Northwest of the UK. This region has a history of textile manufacture but has been in decline in recent years [20]. However, those that have ‘survived’ current economic downturns, plus political and social pressures, have been exemplary in their striving towards sustainable business models. For this reason, the firms were considered ideal for uncovering potential new insights into sustainable SC practices. In addition to 45-min personal interviews conducted post pandemic (from March - December 2022), secondary sources such as sustainability reports, corporate documents, and online analysis were accessed to collect data, thereby strengthening the overall findings. The most pertinent themes in the interviews were categorised based on observed common patterns. Accordingly, the content was divided into three main themes underpinned by organisational design theory, namely regulations, communications, and collaboration among enterprises.

## 4 Findings

The five case studies below evidence the basic organisational and operating details of the firms followed by their particular SC transparency issues. The firms are called ‘Groups’ as they are mostly overarching entities that represent a group of brands. Many themes in the findings were common to all firms. In the interests of clarity and significance, those that were unique to each firm are presented here.

### 4.1 Case Study Group 1

This fashion group is the largest digital retailer and financial services provider in the United Kingdom, with annual sales of £200 million and over 1.9 million daily website visits. The company sells over 1,900 well-known brands, has 4 million mid-market customers, and delivers 49 million products annually. The CSR coordinator discusses some of the challenges in documenting supply chain data:

We have done our Tier 1 collection—but it is still hard to get to Tier 2. In addition, we have a due diligence procedure in place that examines self-assessments so that we can determine where the greatest risks are and what we need to do to ensure that we are observing those possible risks within the supplier base. We are using software, so we have an online platform that we use to map the supply chain and we also work with the Open Apparel Registry (OAR) which has been really helpful for us (CSR co-ordinator).

The open access OAR platform permits the company to share the information with suppliers, customers, and other retailers. This is a completely managed and independent centralised database, so they are keen to continue providing support. They expressed the need for an education piece - a set of principles is desired to help develop communications to a universally accessible level.

## 4.2 Case Study Group 2

This group designs, sources and wholesales own-range and branded fashion and home-wares as well as providing financial services. Annual sales amount to £100 million across 10 brands. In recent years, the group has implemented a significant transformation programme to become a lean, digital organisation. Their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) strategy was rebranded in 2021. The 'Our People' pillar focuses on colleagues, customers, and other business and supply chain stakeholders. The 'Our Planet' pillar focuses on products that are as sustainably sourced, produced, and transported as possible. Nonetheless the company faces challenges in furthering its transparency communications:

What surprises us for an online retailer is that we've got all those systems that don't talk to each other - so there's not one central point that you could pull from and that's what we're working through at the moment. We're working through having a robust system that everybody can update within one place and all use. If someone could potentially offer a platform or collaborative open platform where everybody can upload their information and be able to share that resource - so that if we were dealing with Next or New Look or M&S all of our information would be there and almost like a universal platform that we could refer to (CSR co-ordinator).

The firm feels lifting the data is still going to be quite time consuming. They also question the accuracy and reliability of the data.

## 4.3 Case Study Group 3

Group 3 is a global outdoor clothing manufacturer/wholesaler that is owned privately and encompasses 7 brands. The brand sells via e-commerce, through its own stores and concessions, and through major outdoor retail chains. They associate with select business partners who share their guiding principles and values regarding modern slavery. This is reflected in the Supplier Code of Conduct. In addition, they encourage all collaborators to create their own CSR plans, which the group reviews annually with them to evaluate progress. As the group exports internationally, they are particularly concerned about forthcoming EU legislation:

In the light of forthcoming legislation in France, Norway and Ireland we are interested in producing a digital passport for the garments we export to France and the EU. We need to show recycling information as well as fibre content. Recycled content claims should show the percentage of recycled content and the proof. Garment packaging will also require information on the product passport. We will need to generate reports particularly on data capture methodologies. There are 3 ways of thinking about this: Research data, LCA and specific factory info. The data points include IoT, diversity, water, CO2 energy and soil quality. How will we find and measure CO2 data? (Supply chain manager).

The appetite to consider digital solutions is apparent. They would be interested in reviewing any digital solution that captures all the specific data they might need for a digital product passport.

#### 4.4 Case Study Group 4

Group 4 has reintroduced cotton spinning to the United Kingdom. They use high quality cotton lint—Sea Island cotton from Barbados, Suvin cotton from India, Pima cotton from the United States, Giza cotton from Egypt and Australian cotton—to spin yarns for luxury fabrics and garment makers, enabling knitters, weavers, and designers in the UK to source home-spun quality yarns.

Midway through 2016, our mill was outfitted with the most advanced and efficient cotton spinning equipment. We are keen to work with new innovations but how will you stop the media from cutting this down? All these new ideas and they stop them before they even get started! Which of the systems will survive? Our product is honest and transparent, and we can absolutely show any consumer that product and trace it back into the field it was grown (Founder and CEO).

The firm feels that the level of control they need to demonstrate the veracity of their claims is very difficult because they are not running other people's business. They have adopted a pragmatic approach—ensuring the control of their own brand and effectively keeping this information distinct from others. This may be difficult to reconcile in a 'data lake' scenario.

#### 4.5 Case Study Group 5

This group is a foundation that was set up to support improvements across all areas of the leather value chain from farms to slaughterhouses, chemical companies, and manufacturers to consumers-across global geographies-and to connect the information from farm to finished product—a service that had not been available in the industry before.

We are industry-driven and consumer-centric. Our innovative, integrated Transparency Dashboard™ is at the centre of the foundation. Our Dashboard is connected to an audit certification standard that evaluates the compliance and performance of companies operating within the leather value chain in relation to sustainability - cooperation among competitors and enhanced infrastructure between firms. Revised terms of cross-disciplinary communication drives the data collection so when we go out and deliver an audit, we can put the data in in one place and it will automatically update the dashboard (Founder and CEO).

The beauty of the dashboard is that this is a dynamic platform-this is not just a snapshot taken once every two years, which is often the case with audits and certifications. The information can update in real time but in order for this to occur, the data needs to work more efficiently with APIs.

## 5 Discussion

The study finds that firms are already conducting due diligence into their SCs, which implies they are ready for digital transformation. To optimise SC transparency, it is proposed that a roadmap to adoption should include information on cross-disciplinary communication, competitor cooperation, and improved arrangements between firms. To accomplish this, SMEs will need a pathway to technology adoption that is not onerous, but rather, readily accessible, easily deployed, and ensures success. Todeschini et al. [21] remark that small businesses that begin with low-stakes technology, invest in more sophisticated technology at a later point to aid their growth. Organisations can develop their Web3 capabilities by beginning with simpler applications and or adapting in-house applications such as plug-ins to PLM or ERP systems, and advancing to (or replaced by) increasingly complex, innovative, and transformative applications such as forensic tracers and blockchain. Rationalising legacy systems would also improve efficiencies and save resources. In answering the research question: *What are the parameters needed to develop guidelines for the digitalisation of SC transparency for fashion SMEs* this discussion returns to the themes of organisational design, and arranges this discussion under the topics of governance, proficiencies, innovation, adaptation, processes, and consequences.

### *Governance*

Group 3 had been using the Higg index as this they felt was the best standard available to date. However, the Higg index is not scientific, as it is self-proclaimed. Unfortunately, the index offers only generic data on Life Cycle Assessments. With this flawed information source, they wonder how to educate or communicate with the consumer. The banking sector, investors and insurers also prefer to see supply chain transparency to avoid negative reputational exposure. The firm's supply chain and CSR coordinators feel they need easy, harmonised and globalised directives; sustainability information and benchmarks need to be in one place and standardised. They also are aware that they need to comply to the Triman logo<sup>2</sup>. This suggests that governance is required in two related areas: the level of transparency, privacy and security needed in the supply chain itself, as well as the governance of the data—in particular the 'big data' submitted to large data repositories that are subsequently to be shared with other businesses and then consumers.

### *Proficiencies and Processes*

Group 1 has considered placing QR codes on labels to increase transparency and traceability throughout the process. They are collaborating with their label provider to determine the repercussions. This is significant as many firms appear to onboard IT systems without a rigorous evaluation and testing programme. Furthermore, labelling would only give them clarity as it moves through the production process, not from raw material to finished product, and they believe that is where the gap lies. According to the firm's observations, platforms like SEDEX had tried to rectify this issue, but then retailers started imposing their own requirements which resulted in adapting the audit methodology and demanding slightly different parameters that would only work with certain

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<sup>2</sup> The Triman logo is a mandatory, unified sign for end-of-life products that was mandated by French Decree No. 2014–15733 to harmonise the different collection systems in France.

audit partners. They feel there is a big piece of work that could be done in the retail space to rectify this, and that would be helpful in terms of the Tier 2 and Tier 3 due diligence process.

### *Innovation*

Group 5 believes that the digital process makes people more accountable. They believe that when firms are considering innovation of process this helps them to identify where they can and need to make improvements. Group 5 states they now have real time data - but an extraction engine is missing in their suite of applications. The need for additional APIs (and apprehension about the tech) was a common theme among firms. The need for a digital adoption mindset was also identified—for both visionary leaders and the onboarding of users within the firm.

### *Adaptation and Consequences*

Group 2 continue to be frustrated about all firms working in silos—despite the rhetoric on collaboration and transparency. They believe there is little evidence of collaboration as they are all using the same means for the same ends but on segregated platforms. The firm did experiment with a digital innovations project in which they laid out all of the specifications required, and priorities preferred. They felt disappointed that by the end of the (state funded) trial there were no tangible results. Another firm in the same trial has continued work with a data giant and is happy with their progress.

## **5.1 Building Alternative Values and New Business Models**

In managing innovation, adaptation and processes, initial Web3 adoption expenditures could represent a substantial investment and a sizeable risk. However, there appear to be a number of strategies that have the potential to create sufficient value in the technology for it to ‘pay for itself’ once the initial research and development costs are covered (which appears to be taking place among the larger firms and tech giants). Now that open access platforms are available, smaller, more nimble businesses could begin experimenting to discover opportunities for value creation and gain. Web3 technology can now be adopted in stages, which makes digital transformation more acceptable. This improves the user experience and eliminates delays and fragmented and piecemeal solutions. By enhancing physical products with smartphone-accessible digital services such as information on product provenance, registration, and direct ecommerce, brands can increase customer lifetime value. Tokens (NFTs) can be attached to products to provide incentives, accrue value, and reward ‘sustainable behaviour’.

## **5.2 Limitations and Further Research**

In selecting this group of participants, we found that so-called mid-sized firms had more experiences to share than SMEs (in the strict fiscal definition). That is, the mid-sized firms were well underway with their due diligence and have enough resources to create centralised data repositories (moving beyond excel and using power BI applications, for example) and or had connected with some open source/decentralised platforms such as the Open Apparel Registry. While the study provides novel insights through empirical data, the use of a small number of case studies also has limitations. To increase

robustness of future research, a number of methods may be utilised. First, an investigation of multiple fashion companies, across jurisdictions, at several market sectors, and at various segments of the supply chain could offer a more holistic examination of supply chain transparency. Examining and comparing how various brands approach policy requirements, internal management, governance, traceability, and critical issues throughout supply chains could significantly advance the fashion supply chain literature—and ultimately lessons learned for practical applications. Finally, the communication of transparency initiatives will in themselves become a challenge for the firms and therein another area of future research.

## 6 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate and outline the current and projected requirements for digitalised supply chains, and as a result, inform a transformational strategy. In doing so the study provides foundational material that streamlines and openly facilitates digital SC transparency adoption and success. The strategy should include consideration of digital expenditures, technology needs, participant training and mindset, and a coherent path for adoption, and operationalisation that can ultimately be used for communication of verified data to consumers. Several parameters were itemised, which imply the need to develop a strategy matrix to oversee digital initiatives, measuring returns on digital investments, as well as testing and identifying potential strategy weaknesses. A matrix approach would also address the complex issues while encompassing the need for a unified strategy for accelerating the various digital initiatives. Beginning with a preparedness mindset for digital transformation [22] and adapting legacy software (like LCAs, PLMs, ERPs), certifications, existing relationships and connecting to open-source platforms will rationalise the investment required. Despite potential complexity, the matrix would also show the various areas that can be individually developed as resources become available within the firm while seeking out, participating in, and leveraging a digital ecosystem to the long-term benefit of the firm - and ultimately, successful digitalised global fashion supply chain transparency.

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# How Do Luxury Brands Utilize NFTs to Enhance Their Brand Image?

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**Abstract.** Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) have witnessed unprecedented dynamism over the recent years with only few luxury brands experimenting with the technology albeit the very personal characteristics of NFT ownership. Little is known about how luxury brands use NFTs to develop their brand image and what opportunities luxury brands anticipate from NFTs as a new technology, digital product category or customer relationship channel. The present research note offers an applied research design to tackle these questions and systematically understand the potential of NFTs for personal luxury brands at large.

**Keywords:** NFT · luxury brands · brand image · blockchain · qualitative study

## 1 Introduction

In 2021 the term NFT (non-fungible token) started making headlines when American graphic designer Beeple sold his “Everyday: The First 5000 Days” digital artwork for \$69 Million in partnership with auction house Christies [1]. NFTs technology can be described as a unit of data stored on a blockchain that certifies a digital asset to be unique and not interchangeable, while offering a unique digital certificate of ownership. NFTs can digitally represent almost any type of asset, including digital artwork, real estate, in-game items like avatars, and even event tickets [2]. The NFT ecosystem flourished as it generated over \$23 billion in trading volume in 2021 [3], partially driven from the development of virtual worlds such as the Metaverse [4].

Although NFTs tend to be associated with the art world, there are many ways in which NFTs can be applied [1]. They are a particularly fast-growing area of interest for luxury brands which recently accelerated their digitalization process during the Covid-19 pandemic [5]. Among the luxury brands that have started experimenting with non-fungible tokens, Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana bridged the physical aspect of fashion and metaphysical aspects of NFTs with its “Genesi” collection. The items in the collection were produced in a traditional way and then turned into an animated digital versions of NFTs, hence buyers actually bought the physical item and the NFT together [6]. Other luxury houses such as Givenchy, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton opted for a more

traditional NFT path by selling NFTs based on graphic designs from a collection, or as a movie featuring their fashion (idem).

Given the NFTs industry's fast expansion and global attention, the development of non-fungible tokens by luxury brands and its connected opportunities are worth researching. With personal ownership of NFTs dominant, this development is particularly relevant for personal luxury brands, which includes segments such as apparel, accessories, watches, jewelry, and eyewear [7].

## 1.1 Research Gap

With regards to disruptive trends, luxury brands have historically taken a more conservative approach to mitigate associated risks [8]. Although there are luxury brands which have already been incorporating NFTs into their business strategies, many brands are still hesitant [9]. And even though NFTs continuously gain popularity worldwide, there is only sporadic high-quality research on the topic, with only 32 academic articles published from 2017 to 2021 (idem). Most of the identified studies focus on the technical aspects of non-fungible tokens such as regulations (copyright), protocols, standards, and desired properties [10], lacking a concrete and systematic review of luxury brands developing non-fungible tokens.

## 1.2 Project Objective and Research Questions

Luxury brands compete for the ability to create a strong, favorable, and unique image of the company in consumers' memory [11]. In fact, the image of a luxury brand is considered an essential exterior clue related to purchasing decisions [12]. Consequently, luxury brands incorporate new technologies, including NFTs, to recreate and improve their brand image [13, 14]. Given the image-driven strategy of luxury brands [15], this research aims at investigating the different ways NFTs are utilised by brands in the personal luxury goods segment, to enhance their brand image.

In addition, non-fungible tokens represent multiple opportunities for luxury companies [16]. Thus, this study will explore what actual opportunities managers of different luxury brands (in the personal good segment) associate NFTs with. The overall research investigates:

1. How are NFTs utilised to enhance different brand image factors of luxury brands?
2. What opportunities do luxury brand managers associate with NFTs?

## 2 Background and Relevance

### 2.1 Non-fungible Tokens (NFTs)

NFTs are digital ownership certificates that are based on blockchain technology, whose possession proves the indisputable proprietorship of a purchased digital asset [10]. Non-fungible tokens can be minted (in more simple terms, "uniquely published") with a large variety of creative assets such as a sketch, historical documents, or even a fashion runway moment, all of which are particularly enjoyable for a tech-savvy younger generation of

consumers [17]. Some of them do not only buy the physical version of the luxury item but they buy their own non-fungible token, to be able to bring it to a video game or any digital environment (*idem*). NFTs are widely used in the metaverse (a collection of virtual reality worlds) where users are able to create their own avatars and purchase virtual products, or have real-world products delivered to them. NFTs can be used in order to represent ownership of any digital asset in the metaverse [18]. Despite the NFTs seem to be holding immense potential for the future of luxury fashion, one of the challenges faced in this market is the fact that NFTs are considered a nascent type of assets and the legal issues around them are ambiguous and still in the making [19, 20]. Furthermore, several studies show that the minting process of NFTs has an astonishing environmental footprint, since it requires large amounts of energy, making the sustainability of NFTs a complicated issue [21, 22].

## 2.2 Luxury Brands

There is a variety of definitions for luxury brands starting with the need to offer luxury products [15]. A luxury brand is characterised by symbolic, imaginary, and social values, which differentiates it from other brands [23]. Key attributes of luxury brands are high prices, high quality, and rarity/uniqueness [24]. The price of luxury brands does not have to be explained rationally, because it includes intangible factors such as the history and prestige of the brand [25]. High quality attributed to luxury brands building on (a) the expertise of the producer and the complexity of the production process; (b) technical skills developed by the brand due to its long tradition; (c) the importance given to innovation/development; (d) stylistic competencies in relationship with designers and artists; (e) craftsmanship and (f) attention to details [26]. Scarcity is also an attribute of luxury brands inherited due to high prices and restricted distribution of their products, which makes luxury brands an especially strong category for those who want to display uniqueness to others [27].

## 2.3 Brand Image

Brand image is described as the general perception and feeling of consumers toward brands [28]. When consumers buy a product or service, they often do not just buy that product or service, but they essentially buy what the brand stands for [29]. In the case of luxury brands, the images in the minds of consumers comprise associations about a high level of price, quality, aesthetics, scarcity, extraordinariness, and a high level of non-functional associations [26]. Luxury brands are particularly concerned about their image and to refresh it, they have recently started to leverage new technologies [13]. Non-fungible tokens can provide multiple benefits if incorporated into business models of luxury brands as they are found to improve brand image, especially in connection to the younger affluent consumers [30].

Applying the “Brand Image Factors Model” [31], this research aims to identify how NFTs are affecting factors of brand image such as loyalty towards the brand, brand recognition, brand communication, brand expansion, brand value, and trust in the brand. Brand loyalty is behavior-related and refers to the level of repeated purchases. Brand recognition reflects the ability of consumers to identify a specific brand just by its attributes,

e.g., by its visual elements, or by brand associations such as reliability or quality. Brand Communication refers to the idea of communicating a brand's attributes and benefits to customers, e.g., by the use of information and communications technologies or social media. Brand expansion describes the use of an established brand name in new markets and areas and can have both, benefits and disadvantages for brand image. Brand values are defined as the beliefs that a company stands for. They enable a company to distinguish itself from its competitors. Brand trust is crucial for building strong relationships with stakeholders. The concept refers to consumers' perception that a brand performs in accordance with its promises. Depending on the level of trust, customer experiences can be positive or negative [31].

### 3 Research Design

Because this research aims to find out “how NFTs are utilised to enhance brand image factors of luxury brands?” and “what additional opportunities do luxury brand managers associate NFTs with?”, qualitative research is chosen as the preferred method. To further explore the research questions, a responsive qualitative interview method will be applied as it encourages interview participants to offer extensive in-depth answers regarding the stated topic, allowing a more open dialogue [32]. This type of interview enables the participant to provide vivid examples and more thorough explanations which is beneficial for the discussion (*idem*).

#### 3.1 Empirical Sample

The core sample will consist of participants that allow the researcher to gather different and comparative information relevant to the research question [33]. Respondents will need the necessary knowledge in the area of research and be willing to contribute to the study [34]. Participants will therefore be selected people who work for a brand in the personal luxury goods industry and who are familiar with NFTs in their work context.

As of the current status of the study, interview participants are seven luxury brand managers (including marketing managers, product managers, etc.) from seven different luxury companies from different segments, such as apparel, accessories, watches, etc. With a few personal luxury goods companies embracing NFTs, interview participants particularly from those brands will be invited to participate.

#### 3.2 Interview Outline

The interview outline was divided in different focus areas containing a list of main and of follow-up questions. Follow-up questions allow to gain more depth on certain topics of interest [32]. Based on a thorough review of published literature [33] and taking the research questions into consideration, the interview outline is developed around three focus areas (Fig. 1).

The interviews will open with a set of “general information” warm-up questions, whose primary purpose is to introduce and ease the participants to the interview setting as well as provide the researcher with information about them, e.g. how their luxury

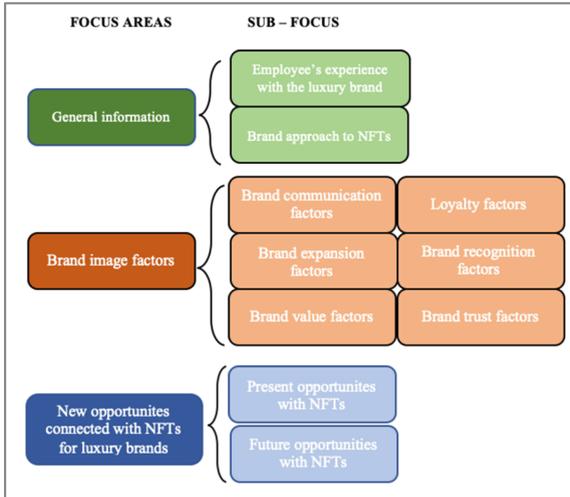


Fig. 1. Focus Areas (Topics) of the Interviews (own illustration)

company has started using NFTs and what kinds of projects they see developing within the industry. The second focus “brand image factors” aims at finding answers for the first research question (how are NFTs utilised to enhance brand image factors of luxury brand?). It includes the various factors determining the creation of the company’s brand image [31] such as loyalty towards the brand, brand recognition, brand communication, brand expansion, brand value, and trust in the brand. Interview questions will focus on the brand image factors in order to understand how luxury companies leverage NFTs to enhance their brand image. Finally, “new opportunities connected with NFTs for luxury brands”, will tackle opportunities that come along with the creation of NFTs. Interview questions aim to provide answers to the second research question (what additional opportunities do luxury brand managers associate NFTs with?).

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Interviews will be transcribed in a “full and accurate word-for-word” written reproduction of the interviews [32] and coded in a deductive approach with inductive elements [35] based on existing theory, e.g., the brand image factors [31]. Inductive category elements will be based on the material gathered [35] where similar topics and ideas will be grouped together with the aim to identify patterns.

### 3.4 Limitations

This study presents a few potential limitations. One constraint is that the research topic has not been widely explored yet with a significant gap in academic research about NFTs for luxury brands. Furthermore, the recruitment of interview participants follows very specific criteria, why it would be difficult to work on a larger sample.

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# The Perks of Being Digital. *Nikeland*: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** The increasing digitalization of consumer behavior and lives has created both opportunities and challenges for fashion brands seeking to engage with their audience. This paper aims to reflect on the perks of being digital for fashion companies, through the observation of *Nikeland* platform on Roblox as a case study for more general considerations. The paper begins by providing an overview of the current digital landscape and the increasingly marked need for brands to create a more engaging relationship with their customers. Two sections will be devoted to the case study, one for the description of the platform, resulting from a personal observation of this, and one for the critical discussion of the characteristics and advantages highlighted. In the conclusion section there will be a further discussion about the potential benefits derived from the use of a new digital business model and how, however, it is necessary to give priority to transparency and authenticity in this process towards users-customers.

**Keywords:** Digitalization · *Nikeland* · Metaverse · Roblox · Digital experience

## 1 Introduction

Fashion is a complex phenomenon that has always interested many scholars. Among these, one that played a significant role was the German sociologist and philosopher George Simmel, fascinated by fashion and its impact on society, whose reflections appear particularly remarkable and current. Fashion, according to Simmel, has for the modern individual the charm of beginning and end at the same time, the charm of new and the charm of caducity [1]. Given what Giacomo Leopardi wrote in his *Operette Morali* about the parallel between Fashion and death [2], one might argue that he could have found a solid substantiation of his ideas if he had had the opportunity to experience modern society. Inserted in the *metropolis* in which everything proceeds with a fast and chaotic movement, the modern human being is driven by the propensity for the new, transitory and changeable, favored by the intensification of the “nervous life”, produced by the rapid and uninterrupted alteration of external and inner impressions [3]. Within the modern metropolis – or *liquid society*, as Bauman defines it [4]- the short life of fashion is highly encouraged by the hyper-connection to the digital world, to which all individuals are now subjected daily.

From the moment the internet entered our homes and lives, the race toward the digitalization of life has never stopped. The accelerator was hit by the spread of Covid-19, which had a very strong impact on our lives – both psychologically and economically. The fashion industry is now facing a digital transformation, attracted by the potential of technology and the digital dimension, from how products are being produced to the communication between retailers and consumers and individuals' shopping habits [5]. During the sanitary hazard period, as the in-person purchase was not allowed, the fashion companies needed to quickly find a new way to communicate and to promote their new releases, to adapt to the new demands of their audience, and to minimize losses due to the situation [6]. These circumstances showed how necessary it was to invest in the digital front, to find alternatives to the in-person shopping experience. Digital tools are the perfect allies for the fashion industry: through them, companies can quickly adapt their businesses and communication models to expand their reach and to keep feeding the vicious life and death-cycle of fashion products. Above all, digital tools can satisfy consumers' hunger for more and more new products, offered at the speed of a simple *click* or *scroll*.

This paper aims to reflect on how the Fashion industry no longer uses technology as a simple medium to better promote its products in a way we already used to see. The small big and digital world that dwells in cyberspace, called *Nikeland*, will be investigated to demonstrate how the Nike brand has used users' enthusiasm for *Metaverse*, creating one by collaborating with *Roblox*. The aim is to illustrate the perks of being digital for a company and how the combination of these tools and competent and creative professionals can be, nowadays, a trump card.

## 2 Methodology

This case study is based on the combination of direct observation of the *Nikeland* platform and Roblox homepage data and – due to the lack of specific existing literature – the critical reworking of studies and reflections of other authors who have devoted themselves to the observation of similar cases and contexts. As support of the §3.1 Case Study discussion will be used some conference proceedings of the previous FACTUM conferences and some studies about other platforms of virtual world games. The fashion world is very vast and its relationship with the videogames industry and online platforms are attracting more and more interest from the academic community.

## 3 *Nikeland*: Where Sport has No Rules

According to the Nike brand, anyone who owns a body is in itself an athlete and therefore a perfect customer of this brand whose mission has always been to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world [7]. The brand has constantly stood out for its interest in innovation and digital transformation considering tools such as Artificial intelligence (AI), e-commerce, in-store experiential technology and smartphone applications – i.e. Nike Training Club and Nike Run Club - as integral parts of their business and communication strategy [8]. Since January 2020, John Donahoe, who has become an expert in the field of digital commerce and technology, has become CEO of Nike

[9], intending to pursue the mission of serving consumers better, offering them more and more engaging experiences, obviously giving priority to the digital future of the company. Shortly after the announcement of the ambitious *Metaverse* project by Meta's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, in November 2021 Nike and Roblox announced their partnership in creating a branded metaverse, called *Nikeland* [10]. Roblox is a famous platform, launched in 2006, that allows users to live many virtual experiences in specific digital spaces, within which they can play and socialize with other users. *Nikeland* is a part of this virtual universe, modeled after the company's real-life headquarters in Oregon, in which users can wander around in a totally branded world -even clouds are marked with the famous *swosh* - through their avatars, obviously dressed in Nike-branded clothes.

The place is divided into different locations – the lobby, Basketball area, Football field, Showroom, My Playground, *etc.* - and each of these allows different activities. The Lobby is the area where users can meet themselves, visiting the store and getting familiar with the game; The sports fields are intended for the game of reference sports even if with some modification to the traditional rules; The showroom is the area where subscribers can purchase Nike branded items and decorations for their personal spaces (My Playground). Thanks to a map members can move between all these various locations and enjoy the game. Exploring the Nike world and through competitions with or against other members, users can get many free items– like wearables to customize their avatar - or coins to buy them in the Showroom.

To enhance a connection between the virtual online world and the physical one, the Roblox engine uses smartphone accelerometers and augmented reality (AR) hardware to interpret a user's movement during online play such as long jumps or running [11].

With this project, Nike wants to communicate that sports and play are part of an available and fun lifestyle for both the young and old generations, and it does so by offering these engaging experiences. The brand that in the past had successfully found ways to involve users creatively– e.g. allowing them to customize their sneakers with unusual designs – and physically – via the training apps – in this virtual space aims to involve them in both ways. Everything in *Nikeland* is possible, there are no rules nor physical logic – it's possible to swim underwater for as long as the user wants – and there is no impediment to creativity: here users can do, be and dress as they prefer. Granted, only with Nike clothing.

### 3.1 Case Study Discussion

As we mentioned, Nike CEO John Donahoe has invested heavily in digital tools to communicate the brand's mission and get closer to consumers. The *Nikeland* project has been one of the many attempts that have shown how the use of these tools can be beneficial for a brand. This first experience of the digital universe has registered over 31.5 million accesses to the platform [10] and has thus allowed the company to invoice a net income beyond \$1.39 billion [12]. This high gain makes one believe that in the future the company will continue to offer more and more engaging and innovative experiences for its customers like this. The advantages of this experience – which is still provided free of charge – are numerous and quite lucrative and worthy of reflection. Some of these will be highlighted below.

The *Nikeland* platform combines the strengths of video games and social networks, creating a virtual space where users can socialize, compete and be creative, a great winning strategy that could represent an opportunity to grow brand awareness and test ideas for new designs [13]. The combination of competition and sociability has already been successfully used within the Nike app, where friends can train, maybe go on a run, and see them change positions in the rankings. The opportunity to socialize with others and have fun competing against them seems to be a great way to ensure that users use the platform in a fun way and especially for extended times.

The free access to the platform makes it possible to affirm a democratization of participation in sport: at *Nikeland* all limits are pulled down. There are no economic or geographical limits because users can connect simply from their homes and live unique experiences almost impossible to replicate in reality – such as playing with LeBron James during the NBA All-Star Week, training with their favorite teams or athletes, competing in famous sporting events, wearing clothes that in the real world would not be affordable or that would encourage others' judgment, and so on. Accessibility and democratization of sports are one of the main values that the brand wants to convey.

The large space that the platform leaves to the users' creativity is another element that guarantees a prolonged use of this game. In fact, subscribers can engage themselves in the invention of new games and the creation of new designs for the clothes and accessories they want to wear. The customization of the somatic traits and clothing style of their character – which is not a new idea because fashion has become part of the video games world for some time- allowed players to have fun creatively and to find a new way to express themselves: they wouldn't have to create a character necessarily in their image and likeness, but they could use it as a *medium* of their personality and identity and dress it with the style they most prefer. The creation of the avatar as a citizen of a virtual world can represent the projection of a particular sphere of the player's being, which in physical life fails to exhibit and represses. The alteration of identity becomes a means through which to reinvent oneself [14]. The player in the video game can temporarily adopt a specific imaginary lifestyle through the embodiment of the avatar [15].

The game became easily inclusive not only in terms of style and personality but also in physical terms because augmented reality allows to overcome the exclusion of physically fragile subjects and this allows them to feel part of something and make experiences that, otherwise, they would not have had the opportunity to try. By doing so, players can fully express their personalities and feel represented during the game. In this sense the company gains in terms of image, being perceived as inclusive by potential future consumers. The gain for the company, it goes without saying is both in terms of image and economic terms. The brand can earn through the collection of members' data resulting from their activities on the platform: this data can be reused to get targeted advertising but can also be resold to third parties. Thanks to this data it's possible to monitor the preferences and interests of the customers and understand how much they appreciate a given product and, based on this information, propose the product in physical and real form. Users have become what Toffler, in his *The third wave* [16], defined as *prosumer*, a consumer who is at the same time producer of the same products he consumes.

Has been created a synergic duo between the digital and the physical world, that now can communicate and share information to provide better experiences in both worlds. Proposing the experience under the guise of a game allows them to involve more and more and for a longer time the consumer but also to reach the younger consumer groups. The company knows how to get closer and closer to the youngest people, creating a relationship of trust with new possible customers and taking advantage of their familiarity with online games and the need to purchase virtual goods with real money to customize their appearance. Marketing opportunities with this platform are almost endless. Just think of the possibility of creating hybrid events, which take place simultaneously in both dimensions and there are no restrictions on anyone's participation, no matter how far away the event is, everyone can participate from the comfort of their own home. The virtual world is so attractive for the total absence of rules dictated by logic because the only limit is represented by the human imagination. *Nikeland* is a perfect representation and extension of what Nike is like as a brand.

## 4 Conclusions

Through this paper, we have seen how the social context we inhabit is strongly influenced by technology, whose speed is reflected in many aspects of our daily lives. Due to the period of health hazards, which forced potential customers to stay at home and exclusively buy online, the major fashion companies have understood the need to invest even more in the digital sector. Undoubtedly, they creatively and boldly used both digital tools and consumers' need for novelty. The digitalization and the push of the fashion industry towards the digital dimension have brought the need for the creation of new professional figures with the digital skill to take care of the new media platforms [17] with a creative and fashionable touch. Fashion companies have made their appearances on various screens and platforms, through collaborations with video games – such as *Fortnite*, *The Sims*, *Animal Crossing* [18], *etc.* – and social networks platforms – such as the famous *Habbo* and *Second life* [19]. The Zuckerberg *Metaverse*, as we know it up to now, is just a work in progress and ambitious project, but the audience seems to be excited about it. Many companies are already starting to use similar platforms, such as Roblox, to test the strengths of this new way of marketing and communicating their brand. As we have seen, the Nike brand has proved to be very far-sighted in the use of digital tools by collaborating with Roblox and creating its virtual world. The idea of creating a virtual space was obviously not new in the fashion field, which due to the spread of Covid-19 has found in these spaces a possible alternative to the crowded catwalks and fashion design events [20].

In Sect. 3.1 were mentioned the advantages that the brand has gained thanks to the creation of this experience. The brand has gained in terms of visibility around the world for the free access and novelty of the branded game – securing ads from the video game community on various platforms such as *Twitch* and *Youtube* – but also in terms of image communicating its values through the game itself. The possibility to socialize and play with others allowed the brand to implement a marketing strategy that reaches players in a less “aggressive” way. Within the game it's possible to make a more consumer-friendly marketing strategy: the consumer is not interrupted during the game by advertising,

since this becomes an integral part of the gaming experience. The promoted object can be proposed in three-dimensional form and can be an actual object of the game, such as an item of clothing or a piece of furniture of the avatar's house. Above all, this project has shown how the use of these tools can bring brands and fashion to younger generations that identify the most with technology [21] and use these platforms on a daily basis – we have reason to believe that their usage will not decrease with the arrival of the official *Metaverse* of Meta. Gamification is used to provide brand co-creation and participation; consumers might feel they are part of the brand itself [22] and feel a sense of proximity with it [23].

The conversation between the brand and the consumer has been enriched thanks to technology and interactivity [24] and having the data on the preferences and needs of the users is a real game changer in fashion advertisement because it allows orienting not only sales and advertising but especially the production of the favorite products of the public.

We have briefly seen how the digital transformation is changing the way and the speed with which fashion is produced and consumed and how being digital can be beneficial to a fashion brand in general. It is no longer possible to conceive fashion adv only in a traditional way – with magazines, film, television and outdoor media [23]. It is mandatory to conceive consumers as an integral part of product creation and promotion. Digital strategies are numerous and often very lucrative on several fronts and not only from the simple consumer's purchase. However, it will be necessary to ethically question the type of relationship that is being created between brands and costumers and how this can be exploited by the brands themselves. In order to be ethically correct, brands should be transparent about the use of personal data and users' creations, essential for building trust and maintaining a positive reputation. Being transparent about how they use user data is not only an ethical obligation for brands but also helps users make educated decisions about their engagement with the brand itself. When brands take responsibility and consider the ethical implications of their actions, they foster responsible behavior, benefiting the user as well as the brand itself. Ultimately, transparency is the cornerstone of building a mutually beneficial and trustworthy relationship between brands and their users, making it essential for creating an ethical and sustainable business model.

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# **Fashion Between Local and Global**



# How Swiss Watchmaking Brands are Communicating Made in Switzerland

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**Abstract.** Country-of-origin indications, also called “made in” labeling [35], are utilized in marketing strategies by companies to distinguish themselves from others, trying to associate their products with positive characteristics [9].

Swiss watchmaking companies have an iconic status that is essential to their reputation - mainly due to their high quality, precision, innovation, and craftsmanship [7]. They are also using country-of-origin information as a competitive advantage in their communication strategies [11].

Although people have become acquainted with the “Swiss-made” label, and numerous studies have been dedicated to diverse Swiss watchmaking field topics [26], a significant research gap exists regarding the understanding of what are the “made in Switzerland” communication strategies and how Swiss watchmaking brands are using them. This study aims to examine how country-of-origin symbols - considering Swiss made related terms - and watchmaking-related words are employed by analyzing the official communication of thirty Swiss watchmaking brands.

**Keywords:** Country-of-origin · Made in · Swiss-made · Swiss watchmaking · Digital fashion communication

## 1 Introduction

Country-of-origin symbols, also named “made in” labeling [35], are used in marketing strategies for brands to distinguish themselves, as well as associate the goods they produce with positive features [9]. They are considered a competitive advantage [12], mainly if the region or country associated with the brand is recognized for a particular product or expertise [11]. Because of craftsmanship, high quality, precision, and innovation, Swiss watchmaking companies own an iconic status that is fundamental to their reputation [7] and a competitive edge in their communication strategies [11].

After an extensive literature review, it has been observed that numerous studies have addressed different topics concerning the “Swiss-made label” [26]. However, no one has studied the communication strategies of “made in Switzerland” utilized by Swiss watchmaking brands.

Thus, the goal of this study is to analyze how the country-of-origin symbols - Swiss made related words - and watchmaking-related words are used in the Swiss watchmaking

communication strategies, considering official communication of Swiss watchmaking brands online. Thirty websites of Swiss watchmaking companies were studied.

## 2 Literature Review

The literature review examines three aspects related to the topic of “made in” within the Swiss watchmaking industry, including country of origin & made in, made in Switzerland, and the communication of made in Switzerland in the Swiss watchmaking industry.

### 2.1 Country of Origin and Made in

The country-of-origin concept is amongst the most examined issues in international business and marketing [33]. Various research has considered the country-of-origin impact on customers’ goods evaluation, impression, along with eagerness to buy products [13, 21]. These studies date back to the 1960s. Many definitions are available regarding the term “country of origin”. Zhang describes it as “information pertaining to where a product is made” [3] (p.51). The “made-in” label is essential in fashion consumption, mainly when discussing luxury consumption. The country of origin generally guarantees craftsmanship and quality to consumers and is a source of trust concerning the manufacturing status [27]. Places of origin can be used as a competitive advantage, especially if the brand’s country or region is recognized for specific expertise or a product [11]. In the fashion industry, the values connected to the country of origin are embodied within a country’s image and origin effect. Luxury labels such as “Made in Italy” or “Made in France” represent the local fashion industry heritage and related experienced skills, transmitting great prestige [26]. The Swiss-made label legitimizes “the image of the regional tradition and know-how for watchmaking” (p.38), regulating the entrance of timepieces within the luxury field of Swiss products worldwide [22].

**Made-In-Country Index.** According to Statista [31], the value of the “made-in” label is more significant than ever. In 2017 the company presented the Made-In-Country Index, which illustrates how individuals perceive goods “Made in...”. This index indicates the prestige of goods worldwide [31]. By looking at the Made-In-Country Index ranking (Table 1), we can see that Switzerland’s position comes in second place (98), right after Germany (100), and followed by the European Union (92). During the Statista surveys run in 2017, respondents were asked about characteristics related to made-in-Switzerland goods (Table 2). 43% of respondents claimed that they relate “high quality” with goods made in Switzerland, followed by “advanced technology” (28%) and “excellent design” (26%) [32]. “High quality” seems to be the most crucial product characteristic when describing a Swiss-made product by the consumers.

### 2.2 Made in Switzerland

Swiss goods have an exceptional reputation in Switzerland and foreign countries [10], and “Swiss made” is able to sell well [30]. Several studies have demonstrated that “the

value-added generated by the Swiss brand can represent as much as 20% of the sale price for certain products – and as much as 50% for luxury items – compared to comparable goods from other origins” [30].

**Table 1.** Made-In-Country Index by Statista [31] (Extract)

Rank	Country	Index
1	Germany	100
2	Switzerland	98
3	European Union	92
4	United Kingdom	91
5	Sweden	90
6	Canada	85
7	Italy	84
8	Japan	81
9	France	81
10	USA	81

**Table 2.** Made-In-Country Index Swiss goods product attributes by Statista [32] (Extract)

Product attributes	Percentage
High quality	43
Advanced technology	28
Excellent design	26
High security standards	23
Status symbol	22
Authenticity	21
Uniqueness	20
Very good value for money	17
Sustainability	16
Fair production	16

The words “Swiss” and “Swiss made” are “geographical indications denoting the place of origin of high-quality watches, clocks, and alarm clocks manufactured in Switzerland” [24] (p.944). “Swissness” is the word related to the modification of the Federal Law on the protection of indications of origin and trademarks [17]. Since conditions regulating the utilization of these clues, usually and concerning the term “Swiss” mainly, were not yet thoroughly regulated, the Swiss parliament advanced the revision on 21 June 2013 [17]. The “Swissness” legislation proposed new criteria making it possible to establish more precisely the geographical origin of goods or services; namely, the law imposed the point at which goods can legitimately declare to be of Swiss origin [17]. It has been established “a minimum rate of Swiss value of 60% for industrial goods, including watches” [17].

### 2.3 Communication of Made in Switzerland in the Swiss Watchmaking Industry

Fine watchmaking is defined as “excellence in watchmaking, the techniques of watchmaking in symbiosis with the applied arts” (p.14) by the Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie [18]. The watchmaking industry is regulated mainly by Swiss brands renowned for their expertise [28]. The Swiss watchmaking industry emerged in Geneva, Switzerland, in the middle of the 16th century, soon securing a prestige for excellence [16]; and now, for over two decades, it has experienced undisputed supremacy in the worldwide market [14]. The two most relevant Swiss watchmaking regions were and still are the Jura region and Geneva [28]. In 2020, the craftsmanship of art mechanics and mechanical watchmaking was added to UNESCO’s List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [23, 25] while confirming its universal value.

To gain an advantage over their competitors, Swiss watchmakers concentrate on unique features [26], for instance, storytelling about tradition and heritage. Brand heritage is a driver of brand identity and an essential part of Swiss watch brand equity [1]. Storytelling is a crucial characteristic of the communication strategies of luxury companies [8]. The content has to inspire, inform and, ultimately, engage the customers [11]. The association with the place of origin is fundamental and, thus, is advertised because it serves as a solid and compelling competitive advantage [12].

Anholt [4] introduces the concept of competitive identity as a new representation of amplified national competitiveness worldwide, which is advantageous for various cities, regions, and countries. Every place with a positive and effective reputation notices that nearly everything they launch at a global level is effortless compared to one with a negative reputation [5]. However, others suggest that excessively emphasizing the country of origin might be counterproductive since luxury companies want to attract consumers worldwide, indicating that being too ethnocentric might undermine the company [34]. Therefore, an adequate balance should be maintained. Some authors have examined marketing strategies, especially in the luxury watchmaking industry [11, 28]. Philippe et al. [28] displayed how fine watchmaking companies utilize their printed commercials to establish an exclusive social position in the watch industry. Historical brands can adequately use the image of authenticity [19] to gradually underline their expertise and originality [6]. However, a considerable research gap exists regarding the precise official communication strategy of “made in Switzerland” that Swiss watchmaking brands use in the digital environment. The research gap will be addressed to determine how Swiss watchmaking companies communicate their made-in-Switzerland authenticity, particularly concerning the digital communication of Swiss made and watchmaking-related words on their corporate brands’ websites.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Step 1 – Literature Review and Research Questions

Through the literature review, a list of characteristics related to “made in Switzerland” watchmaking was created. Table 3 concerns the Swiss made keywords and Table 4 includes the Swiss watchmaking associated terms. The keywords in Table 3 were chosen when conducting the literature review, selecting terms used to express the origin of Swiss watches. While the words in Table 4 were selected since they relate to watchmaking characteristics, identity, or craftsmanship. According to Philippe et al. [28], the essential significance of fine watchmaking contains identity (referring to geography and history), mastery, and authenticity. This terminology has become the starting point for the analysis section.

As the aim of the study is to understand *how Swiss watchmaking brands are communicating made in Switzerland* digitally, the decision has been to analyze the official websites of a series of Swiss watchmaking brands.

The following research questions are proposed: *How is Swiss made communicated (both from a verbal and visual perspective) on the websites? Which is the most frequent terminology used?*

**Table 3.** Swiss made related keywords

Swiss made related keywords
Made in Switzerland
Swiss
Swiss made
Swiss origin
Swissness
Switzerland

**Table 4.** Swiss watchmaking related keywords

Swiss watchmaking related keywords	Swiss watchmaking related keywords
Affective value	Leadership
Atelier	Legitimacy
Authenticity	Luxury fashion accessory
Competitive advantage	Luxury value
Craftsmanship	Manufacture
Crossroads between craftsmanship & art	Master watchmaker
Cultural heritage	Mechanics
Elegance	Métier d'art (craftwork)
Excellence	Performance
Exceptional reputation	Precision
Exclusivity/exclusive image	Retain customers
Expertise/core expertise	Savoir-faire
Heritage/brand heritage	Service design
High quality/quality	Swiss identity/identity of the industry
High standards	Technical excellence
History	Tradition
Iconic status	Trustworthy
Illustration of European Lifestyle	Unique value
Innovation/product innovation	Watchmaking know-how

The brands were chosen from the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry (FH) website [15], the Swiss watchmaking industry's leading organization, which unites more than 300 Swiss watchmaking brands.

### 3.2 Step 2 – Data Collection

The first thirty Swiss watchmaking brands were chosen from the alphabetical list of the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry (FH) website to generalize the results further. Their official websites were analyzed from March 31 to July 31, 2022.

The final sample was built according to these criteria: (a) only the English version of the websites have been considered; (b) unavailable links have been discarded; (c) only companies founded in Switzerland have been analyzed; (d) only brands that focus

entirely on watchmaking have been taken into account, eliminating the ones selling other products (e.g., jewelry and high jewelry).

The final list of companies were the following: Adriatica, Advolat, Aerowatch, Andersen Genève, André Mouche, Armin Strom, Audemars Piguet, Balco, Baume & Mercier, Baumgartner, Bedat & Co., Bijoumontre, Blancpain, Bovet, Breitling, Candino, Carl F. Bucherer, Catena, Catorex, Century, Certina, Charles Girardier, Chrono AG, Cimier, Claude Meylan, Concord, Corum, Cover, Cyma, and Czapek Genève.

Per each Swiss watchmaking brand's website, the following data was gathered:

- (a) Date and place of foundation and headquarters.
- (b) Swiss-related terms on the homepage, history page, and eventually, Swiss-made section and their frequency.
- (c) Swiss-related terms inside the logo and their frequency.
- (d) Swiss-related terms and visual cues on a randomly chosen watch image and description website's page and relative frequency.
- (e) Made-In-Country Index product attributes developed by Statista [32] and presented in Table 2 on all the analyzed website pages and their frequency.

### 3.3 Step 3 – Content Analysis

Content analysis was chosen as a methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative study, the latter employed to establish the frequency of phenomena [20]. The content analysis has been divided into six parts. For each website, (1) homepage, (2) history page, (3) eventual Swiss-made dedicated section, (4) logo, (5) watch image and description, (6) Made-In-Country Index Swiss goods product attributes were examined.

An example of Swiss-made section analysis is the following. Below is an extract of the brand Advolat Swiss-made website section [2]. Swiss-related words relevant to the content analysis have been underlined.

“What exactly does SWISS MADE mean for watches?

The rules of the Association of the Swiss Watch Industry (FH) have been in effect since 1971 and define exactly when a watch may bear the words SWISS MADE on its dial and case back. These criteria were revised again in 2013 according to new, even stricter Swissness rules, stated as follows:

The movement must have been made in Switzerland (as before), “Swiss Parts” is not enough, it must be genuinely Swiss Made.” [2].

In addition, all the data analyzed has been compared to the list of characteristics related to Swiss made and watchmaking industry derived from the literature review (Tables 3 & 4).

### 3.4 Step 4 – Coding Process

One researcher developed the codes, while the coding schema has been double-checked and approved. The terminology was selected as follows:

- (a) A term might be composed only of one word or a combination of words (two or more), and therefore during the quantitative analysis (frequency) is just counted once.

- (b) Terms should be strictly related to Swiss-made labels, places of origin, or Swiss watchmaking characteristics. Words concerning the brand's heritage and craftsmanship were also coded as pertaining to the "Swiss-related" terms (Swiss made + watchmaking).
- (c) "Swiss watches" (plural) and "Swiss watch/timepiece" (singular) have been considered distinct categories in frequency counting, purely as a matter of semantics.

## 4 Results

This section introduces the sample examined and the analysis' findings, responding to the research questions.

More than half of the companies analyzed were founded and still have headquarters in the French-Swiss part of Switzerland. In specific, 17 out of 30 companies are French-Swiss, 11 out of 30 are Swiss-German, and 2 out of 30 are Swiss-Italian.

*(RQ) How is Swiss made communicated (both from a verbal and visual perspective) on the websites? Which is the most frequent terminology used?*

Regarding the communication words used within the homepage, history page, and Swiss-made section of the thirty websites, the results have underlined that the most used ones are "place of origin" (42), "Swiss made" (31), and "fine watchmaking" (27) (Table 5). It is relevant to note that only 4 out of 30 brands had a Swiss-made section on their website.

Concerning the logo, within the sample examined, 11 out of 30 have the foundation date within it. The most frequent Swiss-related word is "Swiss Watches" (4/30), and the most frequent place-related term is "Genève" (3/30) (Table 6).

The findings have then highlighted that the most used word in the watch image and description study is "Swiss made". For the visual part, cues were examined primarily on the frontal image of the watch itself, while for the textual one, cues were analyzed in the description of the chosen watch.

Overall, the visual cues are the most present in the watch image and description analysis of all the thirty websites examined. They are 47, including mainly the Swiss-made term inscribed within the watch (image) and four Swiss crosses (symbols) present in the watch description (Table 7). Instead, the textual cues - Swiss-related words included in the watch description - are 28 in total (Table 7), and the most frequently used one is "Swiss made" (14).

Finally, regarding the Made-In-Country Index Swiss goods product attributes analysis found on all the analyzed websites pages, the results have shown that the most frequent product attributes used are "high quality" (79), "excellent design" (69), and "uniqueness" (44). Followed by "advanced technology" (19) and "status symbol" (2). Instead, "high security standards" and "authenticity" were never used on all the different pages of the websites (Table 8).

To wrap up, "place of origin" (particularly "Genève"), "Swiss made", and "Swiss watches" are among the most used terms concerning the overall words used within the various website pages (homepage, history page, and Swiss-made section) and the logo. "Swiss made" and "Genève" are also the most used in the watch image and description analysis.

**Table 5.** Swiss-related words used in the 30 websites' analysis results

Words used	frequency	Words used	frequency
Place of origin Vallée de Joux (8) Swiss Jura region (4)	42	Savoir-faire	3
		Horological innovation/tradition	3
		Swiss handcrafted	2
Swiss made	31	Swiss components/parts	2
Fine watchmaking	27	Swissness	2
Switzerland	21	Swiss victory	2
Master watchmaker	14	Swiss made industry	2
Swiss watchmaking	13	Swiss watch brand	2
Swiss made watches	12	Swiss tradition	2
Swiss watches	11	Iconic watches/timepieces	2
Swiss watch/wristwatch	10	Poinçon de Genève quality hallmark	1
Swiss	9	Suisse Certifiée	1
Swiss craftsmanship	6	Swiss movement	1
Atelier	6	Swiss Family Heritage	1
Made in Switzerland	5	Swiss factory	1
Swiss made quality	5	Swiss luxury	1
FH	4	Swiss/Master craftsmen	1
Quality Swiss workmanship	3	Haute-horology timepieces	1
Swiss made label	3	Kingdom of Watches	1

**Table 6.** Logo Swiss-related words, place-related words & other elements

Swiss-related (14/30)	Place-related (9/30)	Other elements (8/30)
Swiss Watches (4/30)	Genève (3/30)	Only with foundation date (2/30)
Swiss Made (3/30)	Fabriqu�� �� Gen��ve (1/30)	Nothing just brand's name (2/30)
Swiss Watch (2/30)	Maison d'Horlogerie Gen��ve (1/30)	Original (1/30)
Swiss (2/30)	Manufacture d'Haute Horlogerie (1/30)	Avant-garde (1/30)
Swiss Made Watches (1/30)	Vall��e de Joux (1/30)	At the pulse of time (1/30)
Swiss Watchmaking (1/30)	Le Brassus (1/30)	For Women of Character (1/30)
Switzerland (1/30)	Lucerne (1/30)	
<i>Something</i> = brand name, Swiss-related words, place-related words, or other elements		<i>Something</i> + foundation date (11/30)

**Table 7.** Watch image and description analysis

	frequency
Visual cues	47
➤ Something Swiss cross (4)	
Textual cues	28

**Table 8.** Made-In-Country Index Swiss product attributes analysis, in brands' official communication

Product attributes	frequency
High quality	79
Excellent design	69
Uniqueness	44
Advanced technology	19
Status symbol	2
High security standards	0
Authenticity	0

## 5 Discussion

It can be observed that the most used communication terms within the homepage, history page, and Swiss-made section of the thirty websites are “place of origin” (42), “Swiss made” (31), and “fine watchmaking” (27).

This terminology is relevant and connects to the literature review. Places of origin are used as a competitive advantage, particularly if the region or the country of the company is known for a distinct kind of product or expertise [11]. “Place of origin” in the present study refers to specific places or villages where the manufacture of the watchmaking brand is located, for instance, Vallée de Joux or Le Brassus (Tables 5 & 6).

The second most used word is “Swiss made”. Swiss products have a remarkable reputation at home and abroad [10]. As previously stated, according to Statista's [31] Made-In-Country Index, made in Switzerland comes in second place globally (Table 1). Undoubtedly, “Swiss made” has the power to sell [30].

The third most used term is “fine watchmaking”. Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie defines it as being “excellence in watchmaking, the techniques of watchmaking in symbiosis with the applied arts” [18] (p.14). The watchmaking industry is dominated primarily by Swiss companies distinguished for their know-how [28]. Swiss watch companies enjoy an exclusive image that is essential for their reputation as a result of craftsmanship, precision, high quality, high standards, and innovation [7]. Furthermore, the Swiss cultural heritage is a significant advantage for watch companies [29].

Regarding the logo analysis (Table 6), out of analysis, out of 30 analyzed items, 11 have the foundation date within the logo. Then, the most frequent Swiss-related term is “Swiss watches” (4/30), and the most frequent place-related word is “Genève” (3/30).

The logo underlines the foundation date since it is directly linked to a brand’s history, heritage, and tradition. As stated by Aeker [1], a company’s heritage is a driver of brand identity and a fundamental part of Swiss watch brand equity. In addition, the Swiss watch industry uses storytelling about tradition and heritage as a competitive advantage [14].

The most repeated Swiss-related term in the logo is “Swiss watches”. The term “Swiss” highlights the country-of-origin information about the “watches”, i.e., the products sold by the brand.

Then, the most common place-related word is “Genève”. As illustrated in the literature review, the Swiss watchmaking industry was established in Geneva in the middle of the 16th century and soon acquired a reputation for excellence [16].

The findings have additionally pointed out that the most used term in the watch image and description analysis is “Swiss made”. As already mentioned, “Swiss made” sells [30], and Swiss goods have an outstanding reputation both in Switzerland and in foreign countries [10]. In line with Jeannerat and Crevoisier [22], the Swiss-made label codifies “the image of the regional tradition and know-how for watchmaking” (p.38).

Thus, it is understandable why it is used both on the product (watch image) and in the watch’s description.

A comparison can be made regarding the Made-In-Country Index Swiss goods product attributes analysis, linking the literature review on the Made-In-Country Index by Statista [32] and the undergoing study (Tables 9 & 10).

**Table 9.** Made-In-Country Index Swiss goods product attributes by Statista [32] (Extract)

Product attributes	percentage
High quality	43
Advanced technology	28
Excellent design	26
High security standards	23
Status symbol	22
Authenticity	21
Uniqueness	20

**Table 10.** Made-In-Country Index Swiss goods product attributes analysis found in brands’ official communication

Product attributes	percentage
High quality	79
Excellent design	69
Uniqueness	44
Advanced technology	19
Status symbol	2
High security standards	0
Authenticity	0

Only “high quality” is in both tables’ first and exact position. Nevertheless, also “excellent design”, “uniqueness”, and “advanced technology” seem to be quite popular as communication terms to transmit the features of Swiss goods to the websites’ customers. An additional comparison can be made by examining the list of characteristics related to Swiss made and watchmaking extracted from the literature review (Tables 3 & 4) and the data gathered in the various analysis tables. Among the Swiss made related keywords,

all the terms - made in Switzerland, Swiss, Swiss made, Swissness, and Switzerland - are used on the websites, except for “Swiss origin”. On the websites examined, Swissness is the least used one (2). An explanation might be that “Swissness” is not so common and refers more to the legislation than to official communication by the brands.

Among the Swiss watchmaking related keywords, these are the terms used both in the literature review and the undergoing analysis: atelier, craftsmanship, heritage/brand heritage, high quality/quality, iconic status, innovation/product innovation, luxury value, manufacture, master watchmaker, savoir-faire, tradition, and watchmaking know-how. One of the most recurring keywords noticed in the literature review is authenticity, together with tradition and craftsmanship. It is surprising to acknowledge that authenticity was never used among the thirty websites examined, as already established in the Made-In-Country Index Swiss goods product attributes analysis (Table 10). Concerning the fine watchmaking terminology, “manufacture”, “master watchmaker”, and “watchmaking know-how” are some of the words utilized, most probably because they enhance the idea of craftsmanship, expertise, and high quality behind the timepiece. It can be observed that many terms used in the thirty websites examined are a combination of the word “Swiss” or “Swiss made” and other terms related to the watchmaking industry. For instance, “Swiss movement” is composed of “Swiss”, designating the country of origin, and “movement”, referring to a specific feature of a watch. Another example is “Swiss made quality”, containing “Swiss made” as a geographical indication of the country of origin and “quality” emphasizing the high-quality characteristic of Swiss watches. However, from the literature review, it has been discovered that an excessive emphasis on the country of origin might be counter-productive [34]. Thus, a balance should be preferred. The analysis stressed that the brand with the most Swiss-related words is “Advolat”, while the brand with the least frequent terms on the homepage, history page, and Swiss-made section is “Concord”.

## 6 Conclusion

The theoretical contribution given by this paper mainly refers to the specific terminology used by Swiss watchmaking companies on their websites to communicate the fact that they are producing high-quality Swiss-made goods. To respond to the main research question, the most used terms by the Swiss watchmaking brands to communicate their made in Switzerland through their official online communication on their websites are the “place of origin”, especially “Genève”, “Swiss made”, “Swiss watches”, and “high quality”. Accompanied by “excellent design”, “uniqueness”, and “advanced technology”. The paper, therefore, contributes to the continuation of studies regarding made in Switzerland in the watchmaking industry by considering digital communication in particular.

The study provides managerial suggestions to marketing and communication strategists or brand managers within the Swiss watchmaking industry. The importance of underlining the tradition, craftsmanship, high quality, and origin of the watch itself is highlighted by the analysis. The sample analyzed gives a broad spectrum of Swiss-related words, which are the ones used in the websites. Managers can benefit from this, related to the terms to use or how to use them. Swiss made is the most used term concerning

the country of origin of Swiss watches. “Authenticity” is highly relevant in the literature review and the consumers’ perception, as indicated by Statista, but not used in the analyzed websites. This could be something that historical watch brands might improve in the future.

Some limitations and further research opportunities should be considered. First, the websites were examined in their English version. An additional research opportunity might be to consider the country-of-origin language to further determine if specific terms are only used in the original language on the website. Second, the chosen sample is composed by thirty brands’ websites in alphabetical order out of more than 300. A more extensive sample might create different results. Third, the websites have not been completely analyzed, just some specific pages and sections. A full analysis, comprising all, might give other outputs. Fourth, only the brand websites have been considered for the study; in the future, other media platforms like social media might be considered. A visual merchandising analysis of the brands’ window shops could also be conducted. A further step might be taken by contacting the brands’ various marketing and communication managers with the most frequent and least frequent “made in Switzerland” related words found through the analysis to understand their communication practices and related strategic decisions in their corporate communication. In conclusion, through a broader sample, future studies could evaluate to what degree the communication strategy used by the brands is successful, for instance, by comparing the outcome to brand reputation or profits. Associating communication research with the strategy’s efficiency might, in fact, motivate companies’ attention toward the relevance of having a successful communication strategy.

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# Made in Italy? Images and Narratives of Afro-Italian Fashion

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**Abstract.** In recent years, several studies have attempted to trace the evolution of the fashion system in a globalised context and pluralized societies. This paper follows in the footsteps of similar research, focusing in particular on Afro-Italian fashion, i.e. on garments created by designers of African descent who have chosen Made in Italy - its rules, structures and conventions - as a tangible and symbolic place to give form to their creativity.

Through qualitative research, the paper discusses the storytelling of Afro-Italian fashion within the Made in Italy imaginary; it focuses on communication practices put in place by the actors involved and by the networks they activate. Specific interest is dedicated to self-defining strategies in terms of values and images proposed as narratives that are both authentic and not other-directed.

In doing so, the study highlights how Afro-descendant creatives promote a new model of Italian-ness, and critically nurture a new Made in Italy by being relevant social and economic actors within and beyond the African diaspora on the national territory.

**Keywords:** Fashion · Afro-Italian fashion · Made in Italy · Communication practices · Authentic narratives

## 1 Introduction: Afro-Italian Fashion as an Object of Communication

Italy hosts approximately 1 million people of African descent; a complex diaspora that comprises recent economic-motivated arrivals, asylum seekers and refugees but also a significant number of permanent residents, citizens and so-called “second generations” struggling to leave behind the “immigrant” label and fully be recognized as part of the Italian society<sup>1</sup>. All in a historical period that has seen a surge of xenophobia, discriminatory practices, and racist attitudes – sometimes ending in unspeakable violence - directed towards BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of colour) individuals in general, and Blacks in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> According to ISTAT census data on resident African citizens, added to Afro-descendants who have acquired Italian citizenship and ISMU estimates of irregular migrants in the territory, the African diaspora in Italy numbered around 1.5 million people in 2019[1, 2].

Since the early 2000s, the fashion and beauty industry has helped to promote - at least aesthetically - the concept of diversity: themes such as inclusivity, body positivity, and self-acceptance have inevitably also passed through the category 'skin colour', one of the many discriminations that have defined the image-related industries for years. Today, around 47% of all fashion show castings are made up of black models [3]. In February 2020, *Vogue Italia* featured a cover that portrayed the young Maty Fall Diba, an Italian model of Senegalese origin, in a white dress, holding the words 'Italy' in her hands, and the words Italian beauty. Needless to say, there was no lack of controversy over the representation of an Afro-descendant girl as an emblem of true Italian beauty [4]. Decisions that lead to statements like this are important: they contribute to unhinging obsolete and yet still problematic assumptions and imagery, but they are not enough.

The presence of black female bodies in fashion scenarios, from the catwalks to the pages of magazines, is a practice, moreover, far from uncritical; a heated and impassioned debate that often highlights problems related to the stereotypical and sexualised representation of black bodies, attempts to camouflage overt ethnic markers, and problems related to the narrative of aesthetic standards of beauty [5].

Then there is another risk, more submerged and less openly overt, which is that of not talking about and not representing Blackness because of the eternal fear of doing so, as White people, inevitably harbouring a colonial or post-colonial legacy and attitude<sup>2</sup>. The unspoken risk is to perceive and communicate cultures as sealed boxes with a label indicating the rightful owner. This denies that cultures are mobile and influence each other in time and space [6].

Our work embraces this perspective: by tracing the history of the We are made in Italy - WAMI Collective, through the voices of the protagonists, their personal histories and their individual accounts of collections and creations, we will show the process of negotiating tangible and intangible meanings in Italian Afro-descendant fashion. The aim is twofold: a) showing how the crafting and communicative practices implemented by Afro-descendant creatives and designers critically nurture a manifold concept of Made in Italy; b) revealing the cultural and symbolic dimensions - the heritage - of this specific field.

In an industry as complex as the fashion one, perpetually balancing its material and immaterial natures [7], heritage refers indubitably to a specific know-how, a technical and artisanal expertise as well as a more subtle *savoir-faire* [8]; at the same time, however, it recalls intangible values, narratives, and stories. Thereby, fashion is something both inherently communicative and much communicated about, and creatives display a large amount of reflexivity into self-portrayal through their creative outputs. Therefore, the communication practices enacted by both the designers and the Collective play a crucial role in establishing the boundaries of self-narrative, with the aim of presenting themselves and their work as 100% Made in Italy; a total percentage that does not erase, neither refuse, the African roots and identity they carry within, but that, at the contrary, presents the country and the Italian fashion system with the question of what is 'Made in Italy' in 2023.

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<sup>2</sup> We discuss both Blackness and Whiteness, as Italianess, as socially constructed concepts, bearing socio-political and cultural meanings that go far beyond bare skin colour or official nationality.

## 2 African Heritage in Made in Italy: Practices and Narratives

Having or not having a national fashion upon which to rely seems to matter more and more in a globalized world. Some authors pointed out this because of production being increasingly transnational: in other words, they questioned the ability of productions made in geographical and cultural contexts far away from Italy to continue to incorporate the distinctive features of Made in Italy creations [9].

Nevertheless, the search for a distinctive Italian fashion identity is relevant even when production remains geographically in Italy because of the re-negotiation of meaning and practices that cultural encounters activates; and it is precisely this topic this essay seeks to highlight: moving beyond the macro-economic effects, we investigate how the afro descendant diaspora visible in the Italian fashion system is transforming the way we ideate, create and narrate Italian fashion through discursive formulations and creative practices.

To achieve this, it is essential to clarify on the one hand the social construction nature of the Made in Italy and, on the other, to identify its core values. Made in Italy cannot be understood if separated from its origins in Italian culture. As a national label, Made in Italy with regard to fashion was launched in the post-war years but took hold on the national and international consciousness with the triumph of Milan and prêt-à-porter in the late 1970s and 1980s [10]. Its roots are to be found in the in Italian art, literature and culture, creativity, and craftsmanship[11]: recalling what Perrino and Kohler, argue on their study on the narratives about and around Made in Italy the recurrent ideology surrounding the concept describes it as “what gives a product the “authentic” taste of being planned, manufactured, and even packed in a country with a longstanding artistic tradition” [12-16].

In such a context, the power of “Made in Italy,” is connected to the ability to translate Italian culture into different forms [17]. When it comes to Italian fashion, the ability of garments to narrate knowledges, tastes and techniques is particularly evident. Over the last fifty years, Italian fashion has experienced an ascending parable; such a success depends, of course, on the great stylists whose names gleam in the windows of the world’s most prestigious capitals (from Armani to Versace, from Dolce & Gabbana to Gucci, from Prada to Pucci, from Valentino to Salvatore Ferragamo), but also on the extraordinary quality, creativity, and competitiveness of all those involved in this supply chain: craftsmen, artisans, designers and embroiderers, patternmakers, and tailors all help to define its excellence from the outset [18].

The added value of Italian fashion, i.e. the prestige of high quality and excellence à la carte, is precisely the atelier culture that still ennobles the whole sector; even the largest companies, with thousands of employees and branches all over the world, still carefully guard their artisan core, aware that know-how, style and formal and material perfection are preserved in specific manufacturing techniques that still are pivotal for the success of Made in Italy. In fact, Italian fashion is not only an industry, but also a culture. More precisely it can be said to be a capital-intensive culture, that is, with a high use of cultural capital [19].

It might be clearer at this point that the label Made in Italy paradoxically engenders two opposing - but co-existing - narratives: an historical and fixed narrative of Italian

identity rooted in the artistic past; and a mutable one that tends to embrace a multiple number of identities, places and actors in their efforts toward global challenges.

In this article, referring to the WAMI collective and their current practices we explore this second narrative: all the designers that belong to this network have chosen Made in Italy - its rules, structures and conventions - as a tangible and symbolic place to give form to their creativity and thus use the tangible and intangible knowledge – heritage - as a raw material within the production process and consider it as a productive investment. Studying in Italy, doing internships in the Made in Italy sector, having mentors who are well established in the Italian market are all choices perceived as strategic precisely because these choices allow direct contact with the specificity of Italian production, that prêt-à-porter universally known for its mix of elegance and practicality.

Thus, when we refer to the WAMI Collective we are basically observing how the individual and collective identity of its creatives and designers is shaped and consolidated through discourses, past and present, in which Made in Italy is explicitly recalled. The creatives we interviewed told us stories not only about their brands, but also about their own biographies: they recalled families, friends, and networks and, at the same time, evoked historical and traditional backgrounds, geographical provenance, and recent location. In this way, on the one hand, we can observe how they reconstruct and give meaning to their personal biographies, and on the other hand, through these narratives, we can understand to which of the publicly circulating discourses of Made in Italy they turn to justify their belonging. In this sense, recalling Perrino and Kohler [20], narratives were studied as performances embedded in their sociocultural context, rather than as isolated, decontextualized texts [12].

### 3 Afro-Italian Fashion: A Methodological Approach

This work was born with the hope of being an Italian contribution the trend that fashion studies is acquiring of inserting itself into the debate concerning socio-cultural and, why not, political dynamics. It might indeed shed some light on some of the socio-cultural dimensions that characterise Italian fashion today and can dialogue with a broader international perspective. In this light, storytelling practices are thus understood as complex hermeneutical tools: life stories of creatives and designers becomes a biographic-narrative method they use to reconstruct, retell, and build new meanings and discourses while making sense of past experiences, present conditions, and future projects [21].

Throughout 2020 and 2021, an extensive fieldwork was carried out on the Italian territory, aimed at mapping and studying the presence and dynamics of Afro-Italian fashion, a phenomenon that was starting to attract academic interest, but was severely underexplored. The methodology used is qualitative; it includes textual analysis, a netnography that made it possible to map about 50 different realities, and interviews.

Being the research grounded, over time it became possible to identify actors belonging to three different categories: Afro-descendant designers, Italian designers with a strong Afro connotation, and members of social tailoring workshops that promoted educational and working projects through sartorial craft for individuals with a migratory background. Out of the 50 realities mapped, more than 25 were selected to recruit respondents for in-depth interviews. For the purposes of this paper, we used a specific

subgroup of the above-mentioned data: mapping, interviews, and ethnographic observations pertaining to the dimension of strictly Afro-descendant creatives, that is designers of African descent who have chosen Made in Italy as a tangible and symbolic place to give form to their creativity. A total amount of 15 interviews constituted the main research corpus for the present research.

Access to the field was not easy, especially in regard to emerging and established designers, and it was largely helped by the opportunity to interact with a key respondent, Ms Michelle Ngonmo, founder and president of the Afro Fashion Association. Thanks to her and some of the designers in her network, it was possible to reconstruct the experience of the WAMI Collective from the words of its protagonists.

The case of the WAMI Collective, which we will address in the next section, helps us to understand operationally, with a fascinating case study, the complexity of a cultural object deeply embedded with meanings. To do so, a particularly relevant analytical tool is the Circuit of Culture [22], developed by scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1960s. Looking not only at the theoretical contribution but also at the life trajectory of Stuart Hall in particular, we can see how the Circuit can be a powerful tool to bring out the approach and contribution of exponents of different perspectives, including in terms of heritage.

In the Circuit, Hall found a hermeneutic tool capable of bringing out all the symbolic values associated with a given product of material culture. Observing the society of the United Kingdom of his time, he certainly saw how the cultural contribution of the ethnic matrix to the concept of Britishness was an inescapable element; the fact that, decades later, in a different part of the world, we too use his lens - to quote Bourdieu - to observe our investigated phenomenon is of value not only for the tool itself but, even more so, for the similarity of context that can be drawn from it.

The WAMI case, therefore, provides an opportunity to look critically at the whole concept of the Made in Italy heritage from the perspective of multicultural Italy. The cultural composition of the country has been slowly changing since the last decades of the 20th century; however, the Black Italian presence has become a significant game-changer in the emergence of cultural diversity only more recently had it newly appeared on the fashion scenario. A study in this sense is interesting because, in today's global context, all cultures "come into play, interfere, mix, and become decontextualized and made spectacular [...] [23]". We see this tendency in various fields, from food to music and, of course, within fashion. The latter - in particular the succession of styles, techniques, shapes and colours - becomes, through the work of designers, creatives, pattern-makers - who nurture creativity throughout the supply chain - a container of multiple and plural identities.

## **4 The WAMI Experience: The Game Changers**

The Afro-descendant designers featured in this work emerge as actively engaged actors, and their choice to place themselves on the Italian scene is neither accidental, automatic, or inevitable. Africa, in all its complexity as a vast and internally highly differentiated continent, presents both a rich and stimulating cultural and productive environment as well as an active, growing, global market, including the production and consumption

of material cultural products. Therefore, it is crucial to remember that the designers are not only physically located in Italy as far as their lives and production are concerned but have also made the choice to operate within the Italian fashion system, to play by its rules and to address its audience. In the frank and extremely to-the-point words of Gzifa:

*“I am African, and I took a plane all the way to Italy to study the Italian style; if I wanted to study the African style I would have stayed in Cameroun.”*

This crucial agency risks going unnoticed without an active effort to decolonise the perspective with which the Western world looks at both African fashion products and African fashion knowledge; only acknowledging that a suitable comparable scenario is available within the African continent the impact of the African diaspora in Europe and Italy can be understood.

In this context, and while world-changing events, including a pandemic, were shaking the globe, a small revolution took place on the catwalks of Milan. It was September 2020 and, for the first time since its establishment in 1958, the Milan Fashion Week was opened by five designers of African origins. Fabiola Manirakiza, Gisèle Claudia Ntsama, Joy Meribe, Karim Daoudi and Pape Mocodou Fall thus made history. Such a statement might seem excessive. However, the fashion system in Italy is a cautious and conservative environment that represents not only an industry that generates a turnover of more than 70 billion euros each year, but that is also the poster sector of the so-called Made in Italy, pride of the nation and symbol of excellence and Italianess itself at home and abroad, as briefly stated in the previous pages.

The memorable achievement has quite obviously not been reached out of the blue. In the summer of 2016, two friends, Italian-Cameroonian Michelle and Italian-Ghanaian Ruth, gathered a group of industry insiders in Milan to present the newly born Afro Fashion Association and to launch a bold initiative planned for the following year: an Afro Fashion Week in the fashion capital [24].

Camilla Hawthorne, who was present in that occasion, recounts: *“In Ruth’s introductory remarks, she rejected the idea of an undifferentiated Blackness, one characterized in the popular Italian geographical imagination by poverty, abjection, passivity, and non-productivity. The alternative imaginary invoked by the AFRO Fashion Association that day was characterized by a colourful and happy hybridity that, as a collateral benefit, could also awaken a moribund Italian economy from its slumber. Instead of drowning refugees, Ruth conjured a continent full of brightly patterned fabrics and rich creative traditions – a continent whose European-raised children could marshal their spatially extended ‘Afropolitan’ [25] networks to revitalize the storied tradition of ‘Made in Italy’”* [26].

In a 2021 interview Michelle declared herself quite happy of the achievements of the Association:

*“In 2017, the first Afro Fashion Week was presented [...] and, little by little, we went from the first edition where there were 20 of us, including the models, to an edition where there are 400 of us, with a backstage with 100 people working, so we’ve come a little way...”*

She soon realised she wanted to set the AFW in a style as similar as possible to the official Italian one, certainly not in subservience, but to make the players understand that they spoke the same language, that they were on the same level. The idea was to first be accepted as full members of the field - to use the Bourdosian metaphor - before starting to try to change the rules of the game. On the same note, the AFW took place every year from 2017 to 2022 in the same exact dates as the official Milan Fashion Week, the decision moved by the understanding that all the professionals of the sector flocked to Milan in those few days and that therefore that week was the best time to get noticed.

After years of perseverance, 2020 was the year when things started changing. The Western world had seen an increase in discrimination and violence against people of colour, and the movement known as 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) had ended up into the global spotlight. Although not without its critics, the movement had resonance in Italy as well and led to a specific, provocative, question: "Do black lives matter in Italian fashion?". The question was asked by designer Stella Jean (to date the only black member of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana - CNMI) in response to several personalities within the Italian fashion system expressing sympathy and solidarity towards the victims of racism. United by the same desire to make the Italian fashion world more inclusive and to support Afro-descendant designers based in Italy, Michelle and Stella joined forces, also recruiting Edward Buchanan, creative director of Sansovino6, and created a collective that goes by the name of 'WAMI – We are Made in Italy'.

The "Fab Five Bridge Builders" project thus saw the light of day and the above-mentioned first 5 designers, whom Michelle defined as "the game changers" debuted on the – digital - catwalks of the Milan Fashion Week. One later, at Fashion Week in September 2021, Joy Meribe presented her collection in a 30-piece fashion show, with the audience finally in attendance. In the dark room that hosted the show, bold white letters on a black backdrop announced: 'Joy Meribe - Made in Italy'. The importance of it becomes clear when recalling Joy's own words regarding the choice of name for her brand:

*"... When Edward Buchanan and Stella Jean first suggested it to me, I said, 'Are you kidding?' It's the name I've had since I was born, I don't even know what it sounds like, [...] and moreover Meribe is an Igbo name, Nigerian, I said 'Maybe they'll see that... They'll think that...' But in the end I thought 'Well, if these two giants say my name sounds good, who knows?' Stella told me: 'All the big designers, they all put their name in. ' [...] By using my name I felt like I was making myself too exposed, [...] I wanted to keep my private life separate from my work, but now that we are here... [...] I like it; seeing my clothes, seeing the labels with my name on them, the customised hangers... it's quite an impact, isn't it?"*

It is certainly a turning point, in a certain sense the end of a process that allowed a designer of Nigerian origin to open the Italian fashion week, but also the beginning of a new challenge, that of not turning the event into a desert cathedral, a symbolic gesture made in a peculiar historical and cultural context, but really making it the beginning of an irreversible process. The signs seem to be positive, because the message of the Afro Fashion Association and the WAMI collective has been accepted and taken up by two key players: the CNMI and the Condé Nast group together with high-profile personalities

in the fashion world, top models and designers alike, including the late Virgil Abloh who designed a T-shirt for the occasion with his Off-White label, the proceeds of which would be donated to the Afro Fashion Association. Indeed, in September 2021, no less than Francesca Ragazzi (Head of Editorial Content for Vogue Italia), Edward Enninful (Editor-in-Chief for British Vogue) and Anna Wintour (Global Chief Content Officer for Condé Nast) visited the backstage of Afro Fashion Week accompanied by Naomi Campbell, while Bianca Balti walked for Karim Daoudi.

For the 2021 edition, the choice of the five talents promoted within the 'Fab Five - Bridge Builders' project was as interesting as it was significant. The group consisted of five young women, with origins in five different countries, three different continents, all grown up and based in Italy: Sheetal Shah, Nyny Ryke Goungou, Romy Calzado Celda, Zineb Hazim and Judith Saint Germain. The five were featured on a special digital cover of Vogue Italia and in a video presenting their capsule collection entitled 'Fab Five, We've always been here' written by Angolan-born author Antonio Dikele Distefano.

In September 2022, Stella Jean returned to the catwalks, two years after she announced that she would no longer take part in the Milan Fashion Week if she remained the only Black designer on the calendar. With her, the third generation of Fab Five: Phan Dan Hoang, Made for a Woman, Fatra, Runway Reinvented and Villain, brands from the most diverse backgrounds, evidence of the diversity so much advocated by the collective.

The fact that as we write these lines, in February 2023, there are ongoing disagreements between the CNMI and some of the members of the WAMI Collective, of which Stella Jean has once again become the main spokesperson, shows that the subject is certainly still hot and not without its exposed points. The Made in Italy imaginary is, for Italian fashion, still strongly linked to Milan Fashion Week, which in this case was the core around which the issues were raised. We do not want to minimise the episode; nor do we want it to cast more media shadow than it should on the steps that have been taken on the imagery that has effectively been released, and on the resonance that WAMI's experience may have in an international context, where support has not been lacking.

In this direction it is interesting to show that the communication practices enacted by the designers and the WAMI Collective outlines, little by little, a new narrative plot for Made in Italy: in such a conceptual redefinition African roots and identity seems one of the plural current declinations of Italian-ness, and tangible and intangible knowledges of such creative practices seems to be the fuel for a new cultural heritage of Italian fashion.

## 5 Conclusions: Whose Heritage?

The importance of the WAMI Collective's success lies in the fact that crucial players in the Italian fashion system, who are not only strictly insiders, but also the public interested in the subject, have recognised and addressed through their narratives and practices the need for a paradigm shift within Made in Italy production.

Extensive and long-lasting literature shows us how exoticism, in fashion, has existed since the dawn of time; in Europe, that attitude that Said [27] would later go on to call Orientalism in 1978 can already be seen in the Middle Ages, in the courts of the lords, princes and dukes of the Peninsula, where the fabrics and dyes brought from the silk route were seen as eccentric, albeit sophisticated, symbols of wealth, status and power.

The same happened in later eras with the African continent, from animal prints, to bold prints in bright colours, to the use of beads and weaves.

Despite the phenomenon's long history, however, the concept of cultural appropriation only emerged in the 1990s, and it is since then that it has steadily started to grow in resonance and militant vigour. The basic assumption that often underlies the discussion is that there are 'insiders' and 'outsiders', members and non-members of a given culture who are clearly recognisable and therefore clearly entitled or non-entitled to use and express it [28].

If, however, we accept the principle that cultures – and thus meanings, values, rules and conventions- are not fixed and unchanging, but constantly evolving - including through contamination with the outside world - the issue of fashion heritage becomes more complicated; this is evident in several interviews collected and analysed in this contribution. Unequal power relations are the key to address it and its relationship with appropriation, and it is in this light that the issue is addressed in this work: focusing on differential access to resources and media attention, it becomes impossible to justify cultural appropriation in the name of creativity and freedom of expression, as it is sometimes done, defending practices of appropriation under the label of appreciation and recognition of the beauty and value of diversity. However, the power relations at work should not be decided a priori on the basis of categories identified, once again, in a unilateral way, but it is necessary for these to emerge from the field, through empirical research [29].

Young describes three types of cultural appropriation: a) Subject appropriation when the culture or life of a population is represented; b) Content appropriation when products, elements or styles belonging to a culture are used; c) Object appropriation when tangible objects come into the possession of someone belonging to a culture other than the one who produced them. Although fashion is arguably a creative industry, and not an art form, the comparison is interesting because all three types of appropriation listed above can easily be traced in fashion creations. Let us think of a fashion show that has as its narrative framework life in tribal Africa (subject appropriation) brings to the catwalks garments inspired by traditional costumes or made by copying typical textiles (content appropriation) and perhaps is accompanied by scenic elements, or jewellery, or accessories, from Africa (object appropriation).

If in the past drawing inspiration from faraway cultures was less problematized, nowadays the critique is focused not so much on inspiration – fashion being, after all, a creative industry – whereas on the lack of recognition attributed to local artisans and craftspeople and the exclusion of the represented cultures from the narration surrounding the creations themselves. Therefore, without in any way denying the dangerous and potentially harmful consequences of cultural appropriation, we nevertheless want to emphasise how crucial it is to overcome a dichotomous approach of 'mine' versus 'yours'. It is necessary to be aware of how much heritage and how much cultural transmission there is in fashion, and to work on two fronts: on the one hand, certainly, to implement dialogue and responsible and accurate communication of the creative process, and on the other hand, as the case illustrated in these pages has shown, to increase within the fashion system the spaces and opportunities to represent a narrative that is not

exclusively dominated by the gatekeepers that have too long been associated exclusively with the concept of Whiteness.

In such a context, the discourses of WAMI designers and creatives are key sites for observing the dialectical process of the social construction of Afro-Italian fashion because they reveal not only how individuals construct their social world through their actions, but also how their individual and collective identities reflect their ability to appropriate this objectified social reality.

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# European Fashion Companies and Chinese Social Media Influencers A «Liaison Dangereuse»?

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**Abstract.** European fashion companies – especially luxury ones – have been struggling to enter the Chinese market because of this market’s financial dimensions. However, in order to do so in an effective way, they need to localize their practices and messages, so to address such a different market in an adequate way. When it comes to digital media, different channels, players, and practices are to be considered, due to the Chinese policy of banning most of external social media players. Also, when it comes to the choice of Chinese social media influencers, European brands need to find the right characters, able to embody them in front of Chinese consumers. The case of online live stream sales and of Huang Wei – also known as Viya – has recently demonstrated both how powerful such influencers can be, as well as how their status can change in a few days – she moved from being a “Queen Midas” into becoming a tax evader – with possible negative impacts onto the companies she is working with. The paper presents in-depth interviews with managers of European companies from the luxury sector, responsible to run their online communication in the Chinese market, presenting and discussing their choices of Chinese social media influencers and the reasons for those.

**Keywords:** European fashion companies · Digital channels · Chinese social media · Chinese social media influencers · Digital fashion communication

## 1 Introduction

European fashion companies – especially luxury ones – have been struggling to enter the Chinese market because of this market’s financial dimensions. To do so, they need to localize their practices and messages, so to address such a different market in an adequate way. When it comes to digital media, different channels, players, and practices are to be considered: also, when it comes to the choice of Chinese social media influencers, European brands need to find the right characters, able to embody them in front of Chinese consumers.

According to the White Paper on Chinese Digital Economy Development released by the China Academy of Information and Communication Technology in 2021, Chinese digital economy reached about 5.8 trillion USD in 2020, ranking the second in the world

and demonstrating that the digital economy industry has become an important engine of stable economic growth in China [30].

The digital market in China developed rapidly during Covid. It has become more and more important as one of the main strategies for European fashion companies to attract Chinese customers during Covid and Post-Covid time.

On the other hand, Chinese policy banned some major external social media channels; therefore, only local digital channels are widely used in China. One of the iconic digital media is live streaming, which became a familiar digital channel for Chinese customers to interact with livestream influencers and have an entertainment and buying experience at the same time.

The popular social media platers in China are Douyin, Taobao, and WeChat, which are somehow “China locked”: WeChat is essential to everyday life in China, Taobao requires a Chinese bank account to purchase goods, and Douyin is geographically locked to Chinese users with Chinese phone numbers [30]. Social media in China is different from social media in Europe. According to Chinese policies, various external digital channels have been banned in China, so the need for foreign companies to find “local” Chinese influencers working on the local Chinese social media is a key strategy for their digital communication and marketing [30].

Live streaming is rapidly gaining popularity in the Chinese digital market. European fashion companies are increasingly utilizing live streaming platforms and influencers to advertise their products, as this allows them to engage with a large number of customers directly, gaining in higher and more frequent sales. However, this approach carries a number of risks, especially due to the intimate relationship between companies and influencers.

European fashion brands can evoke a deep connection with customers through their storytelling and emotional expression, as well as demonstrate the quality with precise data and authoritative research. It is evident that social media influencers must be engaged in digital communication in China in order to gain greater visibility and recognition in this new market. On the other hand, influencer and celebrity endorsements are becoming increasingly risky as their status can suddenly change within an ever-changing digital communication environment.

The case of Viya, the Chinese social media influencer has demonstrated both how powerful influencers are, as well as how important and risky their selection is. In fact, in December 2021, she has been accused of taxation frauds and her channels have been put offline. Such sudden change from being a “Queen Midas” into becoming a tax evader has been a possible risk for all companies (including European ones) working with her and has demonstrated – more generally – how risky it is the choice of an influencer in China.

This paper is structured as follows: after the literature review, the research aim, and methodology are presented. The case of Viya is then introduced, in order to outline the complexity of the choice of influencers; then the interviews conducted with managers of European luxury companies are presented and discussed, highlighting their views and strategies when it comes to the Chinese market.

## 2 Literature Review

This paragraph covers digital marketing and e-commerce of luxury in China, as well as influencer marketing and localization.

Digital marketing and influencer marketing depending largely on the role of communication and trade interacting with each other on the internet, this hybrid models have become powerful new players in the fashion market [14]. Many companies reduce their overhead costs by utilizing e-commerce platforms and social media marketing to reach a much wider customer base than they would have been able to reach with traditional marketing strategies. Furthermore, the companies are able to measure the performance with their products and services. The use of digital marketing and influencer marketing for internationalization warrants special consideration [9], especially in fashion industry since fashion is a field of constant metamorphosis [2]. “Digital fashion” is becoming more and more popular and is arousing the curiosity of both scholars and stakeholders [22]. “Digital fashion” pertains to the digital transformation of the fashion sector as a whole, including advertising and sharing tangible and intangible products; the devising and enactment of processes for the progression of the industry and last but not least the effects of digital progress on society [23]. China has presented remarkable enthusiasm for the digitized world, characterized by a growing engagement with the e-commerce in all commercial sectors [24]. Before delving into the Chinese digital marketplace and influencers, it is essential to understand the digital marketing and influencer marketing and localization.

The influence on consumer groups is based on the acceptance of endorsements [4] and the choice of celebrity endorsers is a noteworthy issue. This has sparked interest among academics and stakeholders, starting with the research by Carl I. Hovland and his colleagues in the 1950s [10]. His initial source credibility model was followed by three other models “Source Attractiveness Model” [19], the product matching hypothesis [15], the meaning transfer model [19]. The compatibility of recognized products and multiple celebrity endorsers is a key factor when it comes to the use of their advertisements [11].

The influencers and celebrities are commonly used for purposes such as gaining attention, enhancing brand image and brand positioning [15], careful selection of celebrity/product pairings is important. This study highlights the significance of carefully selecting influencers and endorsers for products to maximize the value of endorsements. Sometimes, the use of influencer and celebrity endorsers may have a positive impact on stock prices [10]. However, the attractive endorsers may be effective (at least compared to unattractive endorsers), proficiency may be a more appropriate criterion for matching products with influencers and endorsers [25].

In China, social media has distinctive features compared to its European counterparts. For instance, WeChat has clear advantages over other social media platforms, in terms of their functionalities which make it suitable for not only the brand managers but also the luxury consumers in China and abroad [17]. The luxury fashion brand Louis Vuitton, for instance, has created an efficient promotion system that includes different Chinese social media such as WeChat account, Weibo account to approach the various market needs [5].

On the other hand, the trend of following renowned social media influencers and celebrities is increasing in prevalence, particularly among the youth in China [3]. Therefore, to evaluate the efficacy of the marketing campaign to choose the social media influencers model have been developed to pick the most suitable figures.

Throughout Chinese culture heritage, the concept of “moderation” has been held in high esteem for thousands of years since the time of Confucius (500 B.C.). The way of Middle Way, also known as the Golden Mean philosophy, forms a vital part of Confucianism. This philosophy emphasizes the importance of living a balanced life, avoiding extremes and overindulgence [26]. It also encourages people to seek ways to come to an agreement and consensus with others and has a directly influenced the Chinese subjective evaluation of perception of others [26]. Therefore, due to this cultural context, Chinese consumers are more likely to accept the key opinion leaders or influencers. This culture is also directly related to consumer behavior in modern times, where Chinese consumers tend to listen the advice of key opinion leaders or influential people when choosing their products.

Therefore, key opinion Leaders (KOLs) must be well-versed in a particular field and provide insightful advice as influencer [28]. In order to determine the effectiveness of endorsement strategies, certain models have been developed to select and identify suitable social media influencers. The European fashion companies in China should draw upon past experiences and lessons to fulfill consumer desires, and quickly adapt themselves to the current market and to fit the consumer’s buying habits.

### 3 Research Gap, Aim and Questions

Considering the above reviewed literature, two main gaps have been identified: the first one focuses on how foreign (European) fashion companies are selecting social media influencers for the Chinese digital market; the second gap relates to the criteria used to select their Chinese influencers.

The research aim is then to examine and identify how are foreign (European) fashion companies selecting social media influencers for the Chinese digital market and which are the criteria used when selecting Chinese influencers for the Chinese digital market.

The following research questions are thus addressed:

*RQ1. Do foreign, European, fashion companies need to find a “Local” Chinese influencer working on local Chinese market, especially on Chinese social media? And, if yes, why?*

*RQ2. As demonstrated by the case of Viya, such selection is very risky: how are companies selecting their influencers for the Chinese market, based on which criteria?*

### 4 Methodology

Based on the research questions, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with decision makers from European fashion companies and a case study has been prepared about Viya.

Through contacting European fashion companies via Linked-in, email, telephone, events, semi-structured interviews have been made with managers from 13 European

fashion companies within the different industrial sectors of Watch, Jewelry & Accessories, luxury fashion brands, consulting companies, etc. The interviewees are CEOs (7), Managers or Directors (6). The heterogeneity of the experts in our interviews have taken steps to ensure that data was analyzed in a way that considered the different backgrounds and experiences of each individual. They were all decision makers for the digital marketing sector coming from different types of fashion companies (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Interviewees

Exp. #	Role	Sector
Exp.1	Head of digital market	Watch
Exp.2	CEO (former)	Watch
Exp.3	Founder & CEO	Watch
Exp.4	Founder& CEO	Watch
Exp.5	Executive Vice President	Fashion e-commerce platform
Exp.6	Secretary General	Fashion e-commerce platform
Exp.7	General Manager	Fashion e-commerce platform
Exp.8	Founder & CEO	Luxury fashion consulting
Exp.9	Founder & CEO	Luxury fashion consulting
Exp.10	Digital market Director	Luxury fashion consulting
Exp.11	Founder & CEO	Jewelry & Accessories
Exp.12	Owner & President	Jewelry & watch
Exp.13	Ex-Chairman & CEO	Association

These companies range in size from large international fashion companies to small & medium-sized luxury fashion ones. Their headquarters are all in Europe, seven companies have already entered the Chinese market and six are willing to do so.

All semi-structured interviews were conducted on the topics of Chinese digital market and influencers. Questions did cover three main areas: The questions did cover three main areas as we believe these are the most suitable for providing answers to the research questions and for precisely communicating the relevance of the research.

- Digital Channels.
- Chinese social media influencers and live steaming.
- The future of the digital market and digital communication

Among the actual questions:

- Which digital channels does your company use to reach your customers, especially during Covid?
- Do you use different digital channels in Europe and China?
- Do you use live streaming in China?
- What are your criteria for choosing Chinese influencers?

- Why is it important to have Chinese influencers?
- What are the risks of choosing a Chinese influencer?
- How significant does it have for your business to engage Chinese social media influencers?

Most of the interviews were conducted in person, some of them online, through Microsoft Teams. Names have been anonymized at the request of the interviewees and their companies. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 min. With the consent of the interviewees, some conversations were audio recorded, while for the others, notes have been taken.

The choice of examining the analysis through discourse allows us to focus it on the social elements of communication, emphasizing the importance of conversational situations. We use conversation analysis to examine the discourse present in the data to better understand the interactions between different discourses. The language used to discuss the complex use of social platform influencers, particularly regarding the dynamics of decision marking and how different customer groups interact [8, 16].

## 5 The Case of Viya

Viya, with original name Huang Wei, was born in Anhui Province of China in 1985 [13]. In May 2016, Viya became a Taobao Live streaming anchor for selling products, and four months later her turnover had reached 17 million dollars [13].

With the report from Taobao indicating that she has been successfully selling a wide variety of products and services, she has become a renowned social media influencer. She even sold a rocket launch for six million dollars. On Singles' Day in 2020, her sales reached 1.3 billion dollars, thus people give her the title of the "Queen of Live Streaming" in China [13].

Behind the aura of Viya's e-commerce anchor is her senior knowledge of the industry and support for her two principles. First, the quality of the selected products must pass. No matter the big or small brands, the products are excellent before being recommended to everyone in the live streaming. Secondly, "we must communicate with our fans honestly" [1]. Viya always treats her fans as friends and lovers. This shortens the distance between her and her fans and allows Viya to understand her fan base more deeply to plan and adjust her live content in a more targeted way [13].

However, in December 2021, due to her incorrectly reported incomes in 2019 and 2020, she had an unpaid tax liability of 100 million dollars, resulting in a fine of 210 million dollars from the Chinese tax authorities - the highest fine ever imposed on a live streaming influencer in China [13] (Fig. 1).

Viya then issued an apology letter, saying that she fully accepted the relevant penalty decision and would complete the payment of back taxes, late payment fees and fines within the stipulated time. That night, her accounts on Weibo, Douying, Xiaohongshu and other social media platforms and Taobao Live were blocked, and her Taobao store was also shut down [29].

This case well exemplifies the role an influencer, especially when working on live streaming, can have in China in order to promote the visibility of products and brands, and to ensure extensive sales. At the same time, it shows that a change in the status of

**致歉信**

税务部门发布加强直播行业从业人员税收管理通知以来，我针对税务问题进行自查，同时积极配合税务机关调查。在自查和调查过程中，我发现自己确实存在税务上违反税收法律法规的行为，对此我深感愧疚，在此向公众道歉。

在自查和配合调查期间，我将我的收入结构、收入来源都向税务机关汇报，并积极配合税务机关调查。此次税务问题让我深刻认识到，依法纳税是自己应尽的义务。

我完全接受税务部门依法对我做出的相关处罚决定，并将积极筹措资金在规定时间内完成补缴税款、滞纳金和罚款。

再次向社会，向一直支持信赖我的用户致歉！错了就是错了，我愿意为我的错误承担一切后果，对不起！

薇娅  
2021年12月20日

**Fig. 1.** Apology Letter issued by Viya on her Weibo account [29].

the influencer herself, due to factors completely outside of the control by the partner brands, can impact not only the influencer and her business, but her partners at large, casting a possible negative light also onto them.

Hence the importance to carefully select influencers in order to avoid “*liaisons dangereuses*”: dangerous liaisons...

## 6 Insights from the Interviews

European fashion companies are stepping out of their traditional ways to reach their local large number of users and customers. The attributes associated with luxury involve emotional connections formed with individuals who seek stimulating, pleasant, and delightful customer contact that is inherently personal and subjective [7]. They are actively embracing the digital communication and increasingly cooperating with Chinese influencers.

### 6.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Working with Chinese Influencers

According to the interviewees, there are many opportunities and challenges for European fashion companies to collaborate with Chinese social media influencers.

The innovations in technology are having a major effect in the fashion industry and the development in technology are transforming to the fashion sector [20]. All the interviewees stated that to use the Chinese social media influencers is particularly needed in order to (i) approach large number of users and customers; (ii) increase the awareness of the brands; (iii) increase online sales, helping their company to generate revenue. Such elements became even more important during the Covid pandemic and related lockdowns, which made the online channels the only accessible ones to keep a dialogue with prospects and clients, as well as to keep the commerce alive. Because we can clearly see that China, as the superpower of the fashion industry, will still provide an expansion of global consumption [27].

According to Exp.1: “our company is fortunate that we have a long history of working with influencers in China, so the relationship between the brand and the influencer is quite strong and stable, and this relationship has helped us successfully expand our brand awareness in the Chinese digital market.” Exp.3 and Exp.4, respectively the Founder and

the CEO of two watch companies, explained that online sales are one of the key components of their digital marketing strategy, so working with local social media influencers is a necessity.

Exp.11, Founder and CEO of a jewelry and accessories company, said: “working with Chinese social media influencers is important for the company to grow and reach customers not only in the developed cities but also in other third and fourth tier cities of China”. In fact, in China cities are grouped in different tiers according to their dimensions and development. The third-tier cities include some provincial capitals in 23 provinces in China, with a total of 70 cities. As the regional economies expand, the number of the third-tier cities is increasing, in particularly the inland provinces [31]. Companies, once they have targeted cities from the first two tiers, are interested to extend their business to emerging markets within the country, located in the following tiers.

However, the interviewees also expressed the disadvantages in their experience of working with Chinese influencers.

The most common problem is closely connected with the reputation and behavior of the influencers, requiring a careful design of the legal contract binding the company and the influencers themselves. “The image of the influencers is very important for us, once we established our cooperation, their reputation and behavior are very closely related to ours. Therefore, our legal team is responsible for drafting the contract with the selected Chinese influencers, on the other hand, we also listen to our Chinese Team, since we are in Chinese market for more than decades, our Chinese team is very professional, we listen to their opinion because they know the market better and understand the image of the influencers in China.”, explained Exp.1.

Another issue to be considered, is the need to provide them with free materials, and to allow them to offer discounts while promoting a product. According to Exp.11, “Offering more discounts to customers and giving more free gifts to influencers is a disadvantage of our company, we invest more in this kind of online promotion than in traditional advertising”.

Moreover, Exp.12 said that the disadvantage of working with social media influencers was that it would waste his offline shop facilities and reduce their employment numbers. Other interviewees expressed losing the core values of the brand as a disadvantage of working with social media influencers.

In Table 2, both advantages and disadvantages are summarized.

**Table 2.** Advantages and disadvantages as emerged from interviews.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase brand awareness</li> <li>• Reach large numbers of users &amp; customers</li> <li>• Develop customers in new emerging city markets</li> <li>• Increase online sales, especially during the pandemic and related lockdowns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer more discounts and gifts</li> <li>• Lose the core value of the brand</li> <li>• Compete against offline shopping facilities</li> <li>• Put at risk brand reputation due to the behavior of the influencers or external events that involve them</li> </ul>

## 6.2 Criteria Used to Select Chinese Influencers

The results of the research clarified that certain criteria of selecting social media influencers will be considered and taken into account when managers make their decisions. One of the important factors depends on the type of product, such as brand fit and appeal, the image of the Influencer and familiarity with the target audience, the importance of understanding the product and the target market [6].

The criteria used to select Chinese influencers were discussed during the interviews. The European fashion companies will profit mainly from “word of mouth”, while connecting with their large number of customers in China, gaining a good impression and reaching out more local customers by working with Chinese influencers, as expressed in all interviews. The Chinese influencers will showcase the brand’s own characteristics, capabilities, and strengths to reach its sales proposition through digital channels in the Chinese digital market.

The first selection criterion of Chinese social media influencers is their followers, both in terms of numbers and in terms of typology, this was the opinion of all interviewees.

Most of the interviewees also added the skill criterion for influencers. Exp.9 said “live steaming is an online communication that happens within a certain time frame. The influencers need to have good communication skills, know their audience and customers, demonstrate the features and functionalities of the product within the limited amount of time, there are also many challenges for influencers, for examples some of the customers are hearing about the brand and product for the first time, therefore storytelling skill is a fundamental skill for selecting the influencers”.

Some interviewees indicated that the understanding of the European fashion company’s corporate culture has to be considered when making the choice to collaborate with Chinese influencers. “Influencers need to be integrated with our brand, we don’t like ‘a money transfer’ contract with the influencer, we request them to be responsive to our brand.” said Exp.1. A manager of a fashion company, especially those of luxury brands, must wisely manage the tension between catering to the local market and maintaining a consistent brand image globally. For example, facing a complex business environment with low customer recognition and loyalty while maintaining their exclusive character [18]. Other interviewees felt the personal looking and style of the influencer was very important, especially during the livestreaming or video shooting. A few interviewees believe that to understand a foreign language such as English is an additional desired skill.

However, the influencers must show their strong willingness of collaboration with the brand as Viya said “I feel like that I’m the one who helps consumers to make decisions, and I need to think about their needs.” [12].

It is very important for the European companies to work with their Chinese team or collaborate with local professional agencies to evaluate the popularity and activities of the influencers, according to Exp.1 and to Exp.3, who said: “In this way, they will keep the value and the quality of their collaboration”. As demonstrated by several recent examples, the need to “localize” a brand’s message, while at the same time preserving its identity and nature, is of the utmost importance, and requires a careful analysis and consideration of the local market, which only a local team of experts is likely to offer [21].

## 7 Conclusions

If we go back to the above defined research questions, we can now answer them as follows.

*RQ1. Do foreign, European, fashion companies need to find a “Local” Chinese influencer working on local Chinese market, especially on Chinese social media? And, if yes, why?*

Yes, they do so because of the peculiarity of the Chinese social media eco-system, very different from the one in Europe and elsewhere and because of their need to mediate their message in a way that can be better accessible by Chinese prospects and clients. The choice to collaborate with social media influencers is also done in order due to approach a large number of users and customers, increase brand awareness, and to increase online sales. However, interviews have also stressed problems and risks related with such collaborations, which leads us to the second research question.

*RQ2. As demonstrated by the case of Viya, such selection is very risky: how are companies selecting their influencers for the Chinese market, based on which criteria?*

The presented Viya case study has highlighted how risky it can be partnering with an influencer whose fate changes abruptly. In general, companies do select Chinese influencers based on their expected impact and impression on their followers – hence their numbers and typology is of particular interest. Additionally, they consider also their alignment with and understanding of the company and its peculiarities, as well as their story telling ability, especially if they are active in live streaming. Language skills, previous experiences, and responsiveness are further considered criteria.

This study has offered a first insight onto how European fashion and luxury companies address the Chinese market when it comes to collaborating with local influencers. It has done so by listening to the voices of managers responsible to take decisions on such a critical issue. Hence, beside contributing to the academic research on influencer marketing and localization, it provides also European fashion companies with ideal strategies for working with influencers in the Chinese digital market.

However, this study has also some limitations. In particular, the number of interviewees might be enlarged for future research activities, so to include further perspectives. Moreover, beside listening to company managers, an analysis of actual performances of influencers on Chinese social media should be done, including the contents they share and the actual response by their audiences in terms of liking, sharing, commenting.

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# Developments of Cultural Appropriation in Fashion: An In-Progress Research

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**Abstract.** The research examines global fashion, with a special focus on cultural appropriation and inspiration in the contemporary fashion industry. The issue of cultural appropriation is quite new in the scenario of cultural studies. In its early stage, the project will consider new perspectives on the analysis of fashion production with a multidisciplinary approach. By collecting and studying material from international frameworks, the research aims to understand how the concept of appropriation develops. By outlining an approach for a conscious production process, even cooperating with other international realities, the present work might be of help in decentralizing the market.

**Keywords:** Cultural Appropriation · Fashion System · Eurocentrism · Digital Archive · Qualitative Research

## 1 Introduction

Cultural appropriation is a complex issue that relates with other concepts such as colonialism, cultural exchange, authenticity, and transculturation [8]. This phenomenon occurs in every sector of real-life situations and in many sectors of academic interest [8].

In fashion, the debate about its global dimension is not new [9] but the current debate about cultural sustainability has seen an increased awareness of the issue. “The appropriation of symbols, styles and terminology by the fashion industry is strictly related to colonial practices still active to date” [10, p. 98], which have become a component of the legacy of a fashion system that needs to be reframed from industry to academia [10]. Over the last decade, the academic world related to Fashion Studies started to re-conceptualize the socio-historical frame built around this field. Despite the scholars’ interest in fashion as a new phenomenon, compared to other fields which belong to the so-called soft sciences, the concepts that revolve around this research area bring with them the sign of the transformation in our society as an ever-changing system.

The present paper stems from the on-going PhD research process carried out by the author. Once briefly addressing cultural appropriation in the fashion system, the contribution would offer some research notes, based on a part of the on-going research study, in the context of the intangible cultural heritage dimension of fashion.

## 2 Introducing Cultural Appropriation in Fashion

Cultural appropriation has a multiple dimension of analysis: from the historical, legal, ethical, and the ethnographic point of view [19] and from a normative side, since it is from the concept of cultural heritage that cultural appropriation originates [19].

Cultural appropriation is a complex subject prompting a political and ethical debate, starting from producers and consumers of fashion that have expressed a fascination with the *other* and with what was called *exotic* for a long [7]. What Europeans call ethnic is the result of complex vicissitudes that have created strong boundaries and stereotypes in the definition of modern and traditional clothing.

Indeed, until the last century, fashion was considered a *European fact* that was implicitly the measure of progress and well-being [17]. In addition, the discourse on fashion has been dominated for centuries by a Eurocentric perspective which excluded the clothes of non-Western peoples from the concept of fashion [20] and allowed cultural appropriation.

According with Oxford Reference, cultural appropriation is, therefore, “a term used to describe the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes, or practices by one cultural group from another [...] and carries connotations of exploitation and dominance” ([www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com): “cultural appropriation”) [3], and for a culture to be appropriated, “it first needs to go through a process of commodification” [8, p. 108]. Nowadays, the fact that cultural appropriation is encountered in many different systems makes its definition quite an effort. Thus, theorizing and analyzing cultural appropriation requires an in-depth consideration of its multiple aspects in any field [8].

Moreover, there are few works on cultural appropriation in fashion, with a prevalence of theory studies, and the majority of the empirical research that includes data mostly refers to content analyses of media narratives [14]. This can be related to the fact that fashion is a field where the line between appropriation and appreciation can blur [4]. According to Ayres, in the creativity process it is hard to clarify the line between appropriation and inspiration, defining cultural appropriation as a term that can have “different degrees of borrowing, ranging from inspiration to theft” [1, p. 152].

The use of items and symbols from other cultures might be viewed as an appreciation of cultural diversity. Yet, their use is often considered problematic, as in cases of religious or cultural symbols of other ethnic groups used for commercial reasons, misrepresenting the true meaning they have, or when reducing the representations of a culture to a mere stereotype [18]. According to Minh-Ha T. Pham, the framework of cultural appropriation/cultural appreciation produces an array of sociocultural, and economic advantages for dominant groups. The fashion system can borrow with impunity by appealing to inspiration, homage, and cultural appreciation [16] and traditionally preferring to place fashion in the dream worlds [15]. Even in the context of sustainable fashion companies, where the focus is on environmental issues, the cultural aspects are significantly less represented. This current lack of broader understanding of fashion-as-culture constrains us to the predominant, economic growth-led fashion system [11], where non-Western cultures are underrepresented and little-talked-about. When it comes to minorities or religious beliefs, cultural industries must face people and consider their impact on society, since fashion houses still can push their global acceptance, even if culturally embedded trends start at street level [2]. Nevertheless, the fashion industry continues to cross the

boundaries of the culture: designers are accused of racism, cultural appropriation, and other kinds of lack of concern for others' feelings towards powerless and vulnerable groups [23]. Moreover, events of this sort, which often occur in the media sphere, might give birth to crises, like Dolce & Gabbana's chopstick-gate, the Gucci's sweater accused of racism and the H&M's 'coolest monkey' jumper, which are just some examples in which fashion companies, called to deal with exogenous crises also from in a digital setting, need to mitigate the loss of credibility and address criticism [13].

### 3 Notes from an On-Going Research

The author collected and cross-checked factual information to understand how cultural appropriation and appreciation developed during a period of time in the established structure of global fashion.

To do so, the author conducted a detailed analysis mapping the global fashion industry with a data-driven approach in order to evaluate the general landscape of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry and its impact. The analysis was performed from December 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 to December 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, and collected all the fashion shows published on Vogue Runway [24] from 2010 up to 2020 of brands which had at least ten fashion shows (comprising Ready-to-wear and High-Fashion) in that decade, in order to restrict the sample.

Through a systemic analysis and reworking of the classification system of dress proposed in *The Visible Self* [5] a table was created (see Table 1) for entering data according to a mixed approach: the Content Analysis and Image Content Analysis of the produced images, yet necessarily integrated with virtual ethnography [6].

Starting from a period ranging from 2010, in which attention on cultural appropriation grew [21] to 2020, a list of 106 fashion brands was created. Thus, 2,281 fashion shows were analyzed, drawing from the Vogue archive. The analysed items were clothes, accessories, and prints seen in the photographs portraying every model, and how they were used. The data collection took place along with the construction of a glossary, which is still underway.

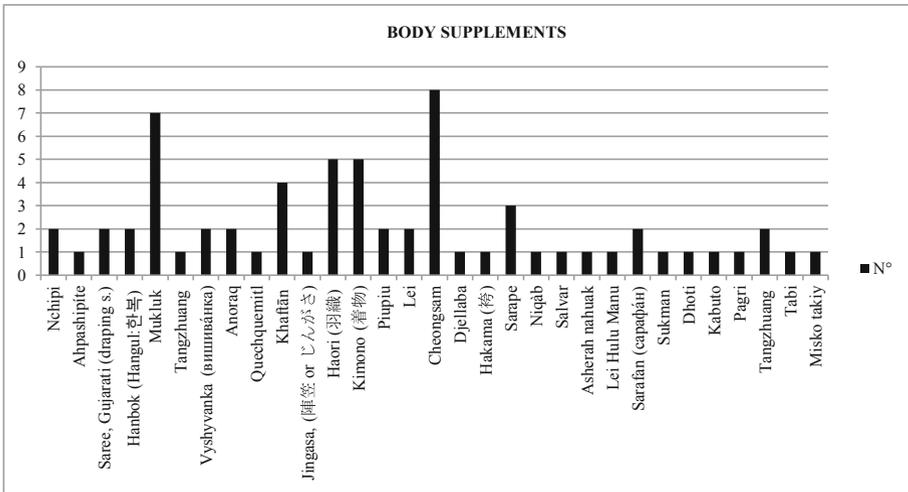
Assuming that Vogue Runway is a platform structured for commercial purposes and for the promotion of fashion, it was deemed necessary to adopt exclusion criteria to establish which features were suitable for the analysis. To investigate the main contents related to cultural appropriation, the following research protocol was designed. The observation of the 106 sample fashion shows was facilitated by two classification areas, identified at the beginning of the research: a commercial one and one limited to the classification of the dress system according to which every detail can be traced back to a society or a culture, with its socio-cultural meaning (ceremony, protection, ornament, ritual, etc.). Furthermore, each of them can be read as the act of fashioning the body: 1) Temporary Body Modification; 2) Body Supplements; and 3) Features.

The methodology applied in the research is to be understood as adequate for the final intent, but it has its limitations. This part of the presented research is not extensive, nor can be understood as exhaustive for addressing cultural appropriation issues. This leaves room for future analysis and observations on fashion production at a less creative level, like in fast fashion, whose margin of error is much higher.



For example, of the examined fashion brands, one-fifth of them have not presented elements of cultural appropriation or inspiration, while other fashion houses have been counted up to seven times in five collections. Another interesting datum is related to the classification system. According to the analysis, body supplements belonging to a different (designer’s) culture are the most featured: cloth enclosures that can be wrapped, pre-shaped, or combined, considered attachments to the body (draped, clipped...). On these assumptions, for example, four main appropriated contents relating to the types of body supplements have been identified: *Mukluk*, *Kimono*, *Cheongasm*, and *Haori* (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Body supplements.



This speaks volumes about the very persistent problems of the contemporary fashion industry, appropriating *other* cultures. Indeed, the critical positions that question the dichotomy of western fashion/*ethnic* garments seem still significant, with an overlap creating schematic and stereotyped shapes/results. According to these findings, there is an East-West perspective-referring to Orientalism - and a North-South perspective which refers to colonial and postcolonial events [20]. However, the present analysis can trace a growing convergence even in the appropriation of Eastern European cultures. Indeed, the fashion system, along with its conceptualization and theorization, has been communicated with a modernity/colonialist framework, as one of the creations of a system of power and a capitalist industry that was developed in the West [22].

## 4 Conclusions

The overall picture emerging at the end of the present work suggests some reflections. In the era of globalization, “reflecting the multi-cultural harmony and designing for acculturation is becoming a new challenge” [25, p. 228]. Accusations of cultural appropriation seem to be increasing despite society’s growing interest in preserving diversity and enhancing multicultural perspectives. Indeed, although the phenomenon of cultural appropriation is not a recent phenomenon, the reaction and replies to these controversies have been favored by the use of social networks and online media [19].

With the Dolce & Gabbana’s “DG Loves China” campaign and the Gucci’s “blackface-sweater” [12], companies have shown poor cultural awareness. Furthermore, from the industry’s side, since fashion can take inspiration and examples from many cultures in its design process, it seems necessary that firms establish protocols to manage or prevent accusations of cultural appropriation or other insensitiveness that could affect the company [19].

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for fashion deconstruction, given the instances of Western industries being called out for racist or stereotypical imagery. Contributing to a greater awareness towards little-talked-about topics such as cultural appropriation could be a move towards deconstructing the axes of fashion dynamics productions in all their complexity. As the author has observed, the lack of authenticity still finds its place within the Western-centered dimension. As a result, the current social involvement does not imply an integrated approach to cultural sustainability. Hopefully, the commitments of the cultural agents and the flourishing of deconstruction and decolonization theories in fashion studies can have an impact on the hegemony of Eurocentric and Western fashion.

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# What Would Kachru Wear? A Discourse Analysis of Global Englishes in Fashion Weblogs from Expanding Circle Countries

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**Abstract.** The fashion weblog (blog) emerged as a space on the Internet to disseminate colorful visuals and complementary stories to chronicle individual musings and promote brands. Fashion and beauty trends, retail news, on-the-street candid shots of personal style, and shopping hauls appeared on homepages and hamburger menus. Content creators connect viewers to matters of taste and socio-cultural implications of style and dress as a way of expression. Scholars look to understand its connection to gender; its cultural production practices; and its legitimacy in the print and digital journalism and media field. I aim to expand the discourse of fashion communication knowledge production of these cultural products and examine English as a lingua franca connecting bloggers from countries such as France, Brazil, and Japan across the digital landscape. This discourse analysis employs Braj Kachru's model of Global Englishes to identify content and relies on theoretical frameworks of Gramsci's hegemony and Bourdieu's cultural capital to interpret rhetorical choices made. I argue English enables bloggers to make definitive statements about identity and culture and contribute to the international discourse about matters of taste.

**Keywords:** Global Englishes · weblogs · hegemony · discourse analysis · cultural capital

## 1 Introduction

The fashion weblog (blog) rose to prominence in the early 2000s [1, 2], joining a host of other niche, political, and lifestyle sites already in existence since the late 1990s [3]. An individual would set up an account on the Internet with a username and password and begin posting their musings about daily occurrences or style choices. These social media entrepreneurs not only created or curated content but also developed business plans to brand and monetize their posts and images [4]. Educators found the weblog genre equally useful for helping language learners to practice their acquisition of skills [5]. Students could document everyday life using their newly acquired vocabulary. These personal diaries took on the personas of the content creators, setting the foundation for future web-based occurrences documented on YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, and more recently, TikTok. However, these cultural products have resided in a social system shaped

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by historical, cultural, and economic forces. The purpose of this discourse analysis aims to explore and chronicle the historical trajectory of this phenomenon on a global scale [6]. Global Englishes, or English itself, enable users of Braj Kachru's Expanding Circle countries to participate in the fashion system through a multitudinous lingua franca [7, 8]. More important, the negotiation between a mother tongue and English allows for an examination into how bloggers seek to gain cultural capital, build their individual brands, and navigate personal and cultural identity within hegemonic structures.

## 2 Literature Review

Three bodies of literature will be drawn from to explore the bloggers' content and guide the discourse analysis: (a) hegemony; (b) Global Englishes; and (c) cultural capital. Each theoretical framework provides a view into the complexities and richness of the content in cultural products, as it relates to depictions of blogger identity and culture. Gramsci, Kachru, and Bourdieu's theories anchor the study and will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

### 2.1 Hegemony

The dominant narrative about who participates in discourses about fashion and beauty trends, or the social practice of writing, has been informed by Western ideologies and historical contexts [9]. Early pieces about the topic started in the courts of the wealthy [10] and focused on the fineries and textiles of the leisure class. I suggest the genre's early formation established norms of how fashion writing ought to be written and who ought to disseminate knowledge about aesthetics and matters of taste [9]. In the Gramscian tradition, fashion's early association with elites and their fancies dominated discourses and continue to do so, reinforcing a hierarchical-based class system still evident today [9, 10]. Media allows producers to create and replicate content unlike other social groups, creating norms and disseminating dominant-hegemonic ideologies of elites [11]. Lull [11] argues large-scale media company owners and managers and now social media influencers compete and manage "key socializing institutions" in the public sphere.

Yet, as Raymond Williams [12] argues hegemonic ideas never remain fixed and change through time. Fashion system discourses [13] have evolved in meaning, shifting from residing in the leisure class domain to more expansive conversations about lifestyle journalism and blogging [14–16]; gender [17]; and race and class [18]. Furthermore, status quo scripts about racial and ethnic participation have focused and privileged one group from the West over another, leaving out or "othering" voices from historically marginalized groups in the Global South or the East [19].

### 2.2 Global Englishes

Three scholars noted for being at the forefront of the discourse about the term Global English and its many facets are Kachru [7], Robert Phillipson [20], and David Crystal [21]. Each brings their own perspectives to the topic, looking at its evolution, its usage, and its modalities. Both Crystal [21], and Phillipson [20] argue the English language

has been used to help people to work across borders and to facilitate business. Crystal [21] acknowledges a language receives its recognition in a country when its citizens start to adopt it and use media to disseminate their political and everyday ideas. Pennycook [22] asserts globalization assists in a language's spread, using his studies of hip hop and rap musicians in Malaysia and Tanzania to illustrate phenomena. Through localization/nativization [22] and code switching [8, 20], Englishes emerge that speak to the culture of its users. While the language may appear in a milieu much like hip-hop music, Pennycook [22] and Bhatt [23] argue that citizens of the language navigate and negotiate its uses by looking to their culture, language, and politics for guidance. Possessing "multilingual repertoires," as Cutler and Røyneland [24] suggest, allows for individuals to connect via computer mediated communication channels with not only family and friends but also with diverse followers.

**Kachru's Circles.** Kachru, who was born in Srinagar, Kashmir, India in 1932, and died in 2016, developed a visual of concentric circles to help articulate the spread of English and document his own experiences with the language [7, 8]. The Inner Circle varieties consist of people from the following countries: England, New Zealand, Australia, United States, Ireland, and Canada [7, 8]. The Outer or Extended appears in at least 50 former colonized countries (Cuba, Malawi, Singapore), where English appears in "chief institutions" as well as government-run media [7, 8]. The Expanding Circle represents countries (France, Japan, Brazil) that use English as a tool in a market-driven world [7, 8]. Kachru [25] writes in *The Alchemy of English* the language "is used as a tool of power to cultural and other norms of the political elite." Fashion and beauty bloggers from Expanding Circle countries such as France and Japan, much like native English speakers, want to expand their reach to fashion aficionados and elite gatekeepers and participate in the marketplace [17, 26].

Scholars do interrogate the relevancy of Kachru's model in a globalized and multinet-worked society. Yano [27] suggests the geographical and regional boundaries assigned to the circles may not hold true. Instead, Yano [27] argues for more research looking into how individuals within the countries employ English and practice their proficiency with the language. However, Mufwene [28] argues Kachru's model serves to examine how users of English in Expanding Circle countries are in fellowship with others. They may use innovative language structures not guided by the Inner Circle norms. Fashion bloggers do adopt English and may include their mother tongue to demonstrate their culture, identity, and commitment to connect with audiences.

### 2.3 Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's [29] theories about cultural capital may be applied to the analysis of fashion blogger content. Writers must have the economic means and educational background to learn English. Knowledge acquisition also can occur through English books and media. He argues aesthetic acuity comes with a decoder's "cultural competence" and ability to encode messages into their own works [29]. Furthermore, the social practice of blogging is multi-faceted with users possessing financial and technological resources to sustain their sites [3]. Fashion, beauty, and more generally, lifestyle bloggers, write content to reside in the fashion system [13]. They practice relating and relaying different "realities

and fictions” about cultural topics, based on their own positionality or aspirations [17, 29]. Through posts, bloggers exhibit a level of taste and “distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar” [29]. Their assessments make them attractive to followers with similar interests or common identities, who reaffirm their fashion and beauty choices through feedback mechanisms such as likes and comments.

**Methodology.** The Internet is a vast land where numerous blogs exist. However, to select global cases remained a significant task. I identified a website called Signature 9 [30, 31], a marketing intelligence company, which compiled its list of sites and editors to know. The company touted its methodological approach, which used SEO data from search engines and compiled the sharing activity data from social media sites, Facebook, and Twitter. A pilot genre analysis study was conducted for a 2013 conference paper, 10 years after the first fashion blog—nogoodforme—launched in 2003 [1]. Three blogs from France, Brazil, and Japan were explored. Signature 9 has since stopped producing its lists and the site has been deactivated. However, access to content comes through archived lists obtained through waybackmachine.com, which featured limited data. To advance the study, I obtained lists from 2013 and 2014, representing 198 fashion blogs. The data culled appeared to be at the height of the site’s popularity, based on Twitter retweets promoting the list from brands and organizations such as Cole Haan, 818 Agency, and Next Model.

Then, I entered them into NVivo qualitative software and compiled a dataset of  $N = 24$  blogs with more than 200 posts from countries that use English to participate in global discourses [7]. I eliminated sites if they no longer existed or if they were duplicated in 2013 and 2014. Some continue to produce content, sell goods, or feature sporadic posts displayed on their home pages; they will be noted in the analysis. The study will examine the blogs from 2013–2023 to historically explore how bloggers use English to engage with their followers as technologies advance. Gee’s [6] scholar’s tools of inquiry provide questions to guide the analyses about “identities,” “sign system and knowledge,” and “politics.” The research questions being considered are the following:

**RQ1:** How do fashion and beauty blogs in Kachru’s Expanding Circle countries feature English in their content?

**RQ2:** How do bloggers use the English language to exert power, show influence, and/or demonstrate legitimacy?

**Preliminary Findings.** A purposive sample drew from countries in the dataset, which included the following: Brazil (7); China (Hong Kong) (1); France (5); Germany (1); Italy (1); Japan (2); Mexico/Netherlands (1); Poland (1); Spain (2); Sweden (2); and Switzerland (1). An emerging pattern from the data showed bloggers used English in their navigation bars or post-related headlines intertextually with their mother tongue. Their identities remained at the center, with English dotting their content. Portuguese dominated the sites of Brazilian bloggers, Thereza Chammas of Fashionismo and Lia Camargo of Just Lia. However, each blogger strategically placed an English word into their content. Chammas employed key words such as “lifestyle” and “red carpet” into her discourses in Portuguese about trends, celebrities, shopping, and beauty. Comparatively, Camargo’s 2021 post about Pantone’s 2022 color of the year, “Very Peri,” relied on

the American trend forecaster's color branded content. Camargo's gallery of "looks" showed her interpretation of the trend, with a Portuguese header titled, "para inspirar." The influencers from the Global South exhibited their aesthetic and taste levels on sites with high-resolution color photos in galleries and content about the trends. The texts cited spoke to Gee's [6] argument that "important connections" occur through language. Both Chammas' and Camargo's selection of key English words linked them to a global community, where lifestyle, celebrity, and trends dominate influencer social media sites. Their intentionality demonstrated their efforts to engage in conversations within the fashion system. They maintained their identities, while exhibiting their cultural capital by the insertion of an English word placed on the home page of their blogs.

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# **Fashion Between Individual and Social Identities**



# ***Homo Consumens, Amidst Advertising and ‘Sports’ Fast Fashion. The Role of Ethics in Marking Out the Vulnerability of Consumers***

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**Abstract.** Nowadays, with the Internet and the algorithmic machines, not only has fashion advertising become ubiquitous and engaging, advertising media has also become a paragon for other communicative languages. The relationship between fashion and advertising has certainly implemented the sales and visibility of lots of brands but it has also boosted consumerism as a guide for our buying decisions. Such consumerism-centred phenomenon has paved the way to the development and success of fast fashion, making people free to experiment with their own identity and suggesting new choice criteria. Such a dimension will be brought into focus by exploring the advertising of (fast) fashion for the promotion of psychophysical wellbeing. Post pandemic crisis and the strengthening of people’s central role and responsibility in personal and collective health, a lot more attention has been paid to wellbeing and therefore to body care. Some areas of fashion have tapped into the new vulnerabilities of today’s consumers and have boosted not just the consumption of goods and activities that promote psychophysical wellbeing, but also a lifestyle that is about not “consuming” the body and opting instead for long-term wellbeing, thus prompting people to reflect on the role of fashion experiences and on their own choices in a conscious, self-directed way.

**Keywords:** Advertising Communication · Ethics · Fashion · Consumerism

## **1 Introduction**

The many compartments of contemporary communication are increasingly resorting to the typical strategies of the advertising world; such trend can be noticed in fashion communication, also in fast fashion, a recent phenomenon that has played on that desire for change that is inherent in all humans, by launching new pieces all the time, far beyond the traditional turnover of styles, colours and shapes that goes hand in hand with the seasons. Such phenomenon is a response to a social welfare society that is built on an uncontrollable rise in the consumption not only of commodities, but also of identities, values, wishes and needs. It is a form of consumerism that affects many dimensions of people’s lives and therefore their choices – sometimes very quick and shallow – about which pieces to buy, imagine, experience, wear and ‘consume’.

Therefore, this essay will first address the relationship between fashion and advertising, and the contemporary advertising strategies that boost consumerism in fashion. Then, the second part will concern the concept of consumerism [Baudrillard 1974; Bauman 2007; Veblen 1899; Trentmann 2016], “the tangible form of imagination, what makes our self-representation tangible” [Andò 2020: 49] and its relationship with some characteristics of modern people, more liquid and ostentatious. Not only does the incentive to consume respond to market laws, it also responds to the vulnerability of people, who, with the help of the Internet and especially the social media, need to feel constantly satisfied with their appearance, with their outfits, by buying things that try to soothe their artificial needs and create a sort of *dépense*, à la Baudrillard, people spending themselves on commodities.

Reviewed in the third part of the paper, fast fashion perfectly responds to this new relationship with fashion, especially fashion promoted for wellbeing and self-care activities. The particular case of (fast) fashion advertising that we might associate with ‘sports’ seems to be emblematic of such trend, for two reasons: first, because ethical values such as wellbeing, strength, determination, care for personal and collective health take centre stage, providing grounds for buying in the name of responsible shopping; secondly, because it concerns the aestheticizing of contemporary life that is typical of narcissistic people and pervades the body and the clothes people like to wear to be more attractive [Lipovetsky 2002], beyond gender stereotypes or “aspirational models”<sup>1</sup>. Both reasons nod to the relationship between vulnerability and consumption that is dealt with in the fourth part of this paper. The pandemic has recently triggered feelings of uncertainty and danger that have led to a consumption of fashion based on the central role of the person and the responsibility one takes by making specific choices. For such purpose, another form of consumption makes its appearance, the one that Franchi defines as the form “of fear”, which gives pride of place to consumption for health and physical wellbeing, as well as for sports [Franchi 2019].

I will eventually try to think of some ways to curb the consumeristic drifts that seem to pervade people’s identities [Paccagnella and Vellar 2016: 11 ss] and a lifestyle that seems to be ethically unsustainable. Every day, the stability of one’s identity feels threatened by advertisements that engaging and promise to renew it through new styles and pieces, sometimes suggesting it to take its distance, with that “magical thinking” that governs consumption, from its own authenticity [Baudrillard 2011: 31; Taylor 1992] and a *modus vivendi* that is sensitive to the environment we live in [Jonas 1979]. As, after all, Barthes writes, “through fashion, society shows off and communicates what it thinks of the world”, that is, itself as a community but also as the sum total of its individuals [Barthes 2006, Id. 1998: 118].

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<sup>1</sup> Brands like Versace, H&M or Calvin Klein to give just a few examples are speaking the language of seduction with models who show off their being different for size.

## 2 Fashion Advertising Strategies and Induced Consumption

Historically, fashion has always relied on advertising media to promote itself, from the so-called “fashion dolls” of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the Metaverse and Artificial Intelligence of our days [Codeluppi 2016: 14–15, Monneyron 2008]. Advertising is a form of communication that fashion did and does cherish, to such an extent that more and more often it shapes new languages, which are then borrowed by other fields and industries, from political to public communication, from media to biomedical communication, etc. In Baudrillard’s footsteps, advertising, “the patterns of which permeate any other media” [Baudrillard 2011: 101], “has become in the eyes of the citizens of today’s Western societies a sort of model – or benchmark – for any other activity. Since [...] an increasingly wide area of social life is incorporated into the “consumer model”, it’s not entirely surprising then that the “Metaphysics” of consumerism has turned, along the way, into a sort of implicit philosophy of all modern life” [Campbell 2004: 41–42]. While over time fashion advertising has often strayed into stereotyped and self-referential patterns as it tried not to emotionally engage its audience, nowadays, with the help of the Internet, of social media and the new frontiers in AI, it is taking new forms, especially from an experiential perspective. Promotional storytelling, emotional narratives, the development of creative skills, the “algorithmic turn” [Uricchio 2011], the building of experiences through fashion are the frontiers in online advertising, by interacting with their own audiences, who are certainly more aware of promotional dynamics and ethical fashion.

Fashion advertising, especially now with Instagram, TikTok and the AI, is built not only more on “the representation of dress” in advertising [Barthes 2006], the real dress, that is, the one you actually buy and wear, a fashion experience and more generally a brand experience, that affects us through the media “drillability” mechanism first described by Jenkins [2014].

It is a representation that builds a reality through – extremely arbitrary – signs that may be worn, “mythologised” and “demythologised”, along a timeline that does not wait for the item to wear out but for it to be replaced, regardless of its value-in-use [Svendsen 2006: 73–75]. But it is also an interactive, dynamic experience of direct and/or indirect observation and consumption (just think of touchpoints) with the brand and mass-media environments. In its multiple forms, advertising makes such process possible. While then the relationship between fashion and advertising looks inextricable and essential, it is imperative that it be fast, as the mirror of an ever-changing and therefore consumeristic society, to keep abreast of the latest trends.

Here, then, in addition to the typical seasonal turnover of fashion advertisements, such a process is sparked off by a consumeristic trend that is inherent in the contemporary Western world. As Baudrillard writes, advertising is the mass medium *par excellence*, and the “technological process of mass communication conveys a certain type of a very imperative message: a message of consumption of the message, of subdivision and showmanship, disregard for the world and exploitation of information as a commodity, and glorification of the content as a sign” [Baudrillard 2011: 101].

This happens through a form of fashion advertising that is certainly different from what Baudrillard observed. A form of advertising that has evolved into the digital era. The new goal of advertising with a new prosumer consists of creating new communication in which the advertisement does not persuade the prosumer [Toffler 1980] but engages him

or her through a participatory experience, which is as emotional as it is cognitive, full of different stimuli. Fashion advertising does not consist merely in original, creative, convincing displays that cannot be judged as fake, but that actually add truthfulness to what they communicate, as a sort of ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ [Ivi: 108–109], but in making people believe in the goodness and beauty of the product for sale through transmedia storytelling and spreadability strategies [Jenkins 2014, Andò 2020: 86, 88], in which the new consumer, no longer passive, is engaged, even by the advertising. And social media, most recently with the arrival of the Metaverse, are increasingly a privileged tool in this sense as they make the world represented more real than reality. Possession becomes the benchmark for regarding others as “a requisite to the complacency that we call self-respect” [Veblen 1899: 31]. A similar version based on fashion consumption as the acknowledgement of a status symbol and of an (assumed) self-worth, along the lines of Baudrillard [Baudrillard 2011] and Veblen, is criticised by Lipovetsky, who pointed out that needs stem from a tendency to de-socialise consumption and “having pushed back the immemorial primacy of the status-related worth of objects to the benefit of the now prevailing value, use for personal pleasure” [Lipovetsky 2002], to pursue an eminently personal fulfilment. The added value that one thinks of gaining by buying a new fashion piece is accompanied by pleasure for pleasure’s sake.

Fast fashion, based on low price, placement and being up-to-date, has given free access to the discourse on appearance, thus fulfilling (though fleetingly) that almost troubled longing that feeds consumption to be more and more up-to-date [Campbell 1987]. Unintentionally, such model has evolved, on one hand, into a better-performing but more polluting supply chain, and, on the other hand, into consumers not being always so perfectly aware of the environmental and ethical harm that can be done when they buy large amounts of goods and throw them away soon afterwards.

### 3 Consumerism, Fast Fashion and Athleisure

As so, consumerism in and of fashion brings to mind an ethical reflection about making informed choices when we buy and then use something. But what does consumerism mean? It can be briefly defined as an economic, social and ethical phenomenon that is typical of wealthy industrialised countries and is based on boosting people’s consumption to meet needs that are more artificial than real and that are induced by advertising and social imitation behaviours. From the Latin *consumere*, it seems it first appeared in French in the 12<sup>th</sup> century to mean the physical exhaustion of the matter. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the word consumption took connotations that went beyond material decay. Buying fulfils people’s desires and makes society richer by expanding the market. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the interwar period, when mass production took off, companies and advertising agents joined forces to boost the consumption of the goods they placed on the market; in the meantime, the concept of consumerism dramatically changed and prompted a rethinking of some moral values and principles. People turned into consumers of goods, services as well as consumers of emotions and experiences<sup>2</sup>. So,

<sup>2</sup> It’s no coincidence that the Japanese for consumption, coined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is *shōhi*, a conflation, as pointed out by Trentmann, of two concepts, “spending” (*hi*) and “exhausting” (*shō*), emphasising the material connotation of consumption [Trentmann 2017].

consumption shapes and makes sense of social life, and it makes sense of identity. Such approach is widely criticised by the Frankfurt School, especially by Marcuse (1964), claims that man is reduced to the mere consumerist dimension. In consumerism, he sees a new form of totalitarianism based on moral degradation in which artificial desires have replaced the real ones [Trentmann 2016, Adorno and Horkheimer 1947].

Anyway, the wish for consumption thus criticised had already been analysed a few decades earlier by Veblen who worked out the concept of 'conspicuous consumption', by which he claims that people have a tendency to buy things that are not really appreciated for their intrinsic value but for the social status they confer. It's no coincidence, then, that in "The Theory of the Leisure Class" Veblen [1899, 168] states that "the rule of the conspicuous waste of goods finds expression in dress. Other methods of putting one's pecuniary standing in evidence serve their end effectually, but expenditure on dress has this advantage over most other methods, that our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance". Hirsch defined the goods that confer prestigious social status as 'positional' goods as they affect people's position in society [Hirsch 1977: 41 ss].

So, consumption is boosted by exogenous causes, the market, as well as by endogenous causes, the desire to identify with a given social milieu. One is induced to consume, and fashion, in Barthes's footsteps, "every year [...] destroys what it had adored and adores what it will destroy". Today's society encourages us not to turn into "damaged consumers" *à la* Bauman, that is, outcasts of society as non-consumers. People are constantly pressured into being someone else, stoking their fragilities and their dissatisfaction with their identities, in a sort of tyrannical obsolescence. The tyranny of the *carpe diem* replaces the tyranny of the eternity of the *memento mori*: "Commodification invades and reshapes dimensions of social life that so far had been spared its arguments, to such an extent that subjectivity itself becomes a commodity to be displayed and sold on the market in the form of beauty. Of cleanliness, sincerity, independence".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the consumer society works by triggering a constant feeling of dissatisfaction, by inspiring a feeling of missing out that turns desires into needs. It is up to people to decide whether to obey such commercial *diktat* or use their freedom of choice and take responsibility for themselves; in other words, whether to choose an ethical gesture even if they could then be socially isolated because they do not consume. Thus, society seems to be intolerant of poor people, whom it regards as inadequate, flawed consumers who cannot recover their "reputation" unless they partake of consumption. Bauman's *homo consumens* is not free to choose and is haunted by a fear of boredom. He fears he will have no desire for anything anymore, and that's why he pursues new needs and chooses new fashion items, because newness reassures him, even if in fact such endless turnover prevents him from building a stable identity for himself. Actually, Bauman speaks of 'liquid identity' to mean the ongoing motion, the fast changeability that comes from the fact that man runs after trends not to feel left out of a social group. The aim is to drive people to maximise their pleasure, which will be felt afresh at every new purchase. Consumption becomes a relational phenomenon as well as a personal preference (no matter how rational) within a system of social standing.

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<sup>3</sup> Obsolescenza. Retrieved January 20, from <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/obsolescenza/>.

In the world of fashion, the approach of contemporary consumerism has certainly encouraged a kind of “throwaway fashion”, the so-called “fast fashion”, that meets the need to consume over and over again. Coined in the Nineties, fast fashion is the strategy which the big high-street fashion companies are built upon. The operative words are a short production lead time, ongoing inventory turnover, low retail prices, and innovative, trendy designs.

While such phenomenon certainly produces cheap clothes, it has an impact on the environment, with greater gas emissions and waste [Bédard 2022; Muthu 2018; Brooks 2015]. It is a system that has led to buying more short-lived clothes. The new waste is made up of clothes that are no longer trendy, so they are useless. It is no longer the ‘conspicuous’ consumption of a “positional good”, but a fast consumption to always look like someone else. The ultimate goal of fast fashion then is to produce the trendiest clothes and make them available to consumers as quickly as possible, keeping the cost down to a minimum. Such phenomenon distorts the traditional manufacturing system, which is based on accurate planning. Every day, it reassesses and improves its offering, in the attempt to meet the customers’ tastes and changes as fast as it can. Conversely, the planned one has a value proposition that follows, step by step, the customers’ response to the collection, so tapping into and keeping up with the new tastes can become quite complicated. The fast fashion revolution has overturned the consumer’s traditional buying process, leading to a new way of interacting with the stores: today, you will find a piece in a store that will not be there next week. You will buy it even if you are not sure you are going to use it. Such a process has exponentially increased the fast fashion companies’ brand awareness. It is a sort of “democratisation of fashion”, whereby, because the goods are so cheap, many more people, regardless of their status or disposable income, can express themselves and communicate through what they wear, as they can afford to change their wardrobe more often, obeying the diktat of narcissistically investing in their own body as a fetish [Cietta 2009, Thomas 2020]. After all, Simmel already claimed that fashion “possesses the peculiar attraction of limitation, the attraction of a simultaneous beginning and end at the same time, the charm of newness and simultaneously of transitoriness” [Simmel 1957: 549]; and then, as if predicting what has now so rapidly flourished with extreme consequences, he adds that “the more an article becomes subject to rapid changes of fashion, the greater the demand for cheap products of its kind, and the cheaper the products become the more they invite consumers and constrain producers to a quick change of fashion” [Simmel 1957: 58].

#### **4 Fashion and Vulnerable Consumers**

The promotion of consumption conveyed by fashion advertising, and mainly by fast fashion, apparently gives consumers more freedom of choice, because of the wider availability of fashion items, but buyers are in fact more deeply concerned with other people’s approval and judgement, partly because of the Internet-based promotional tools encouraging them to take care of their appearance, forcing them to put themselves on display in real time, bolstered by a form of communication that is based on seeing and being seen. Such issue goes hand in hand with another kind of personal vulnerability, which has come to the fore in the last few years, which have been so riddled with

the pandemic and the conflict, and have made people more fragile when faced with uncontrollable external factors that can undermine their health and even their lives. Fashion advertising – through influencers, famous testimonials and ad hoc websites – suggests therefore that one should take good care of oneself, of one's body and one's health, to fulfil one's aspirations and wishes, thus encouraging an individualistic and narcissistic approach to action. It is a very specific form of advertising, built not so much on traditional commercials as – just think of the Spanish Zara – on word of mouth, on countercultural practices based on the the same rational as citizen journalism – on people and celebrities wearing some given pieces and posting their outfits on their social media, thus making them seen and known everywhere<sup>4</sup>.

While such trend has made people, in some respects, more aware of themselves and of the worth of their authenticity, in other respects it has made them more fragile and sensitive to other people's judgement. Fashion advertising, mainly through visual communication tools, pursues the goal of enhancing and propagating self-perception. But, on the other hand, (quite paradoxically) it also hints at new forms of vulnerability in people, who are more exposed than a few decades ago when the Internet as a mass medium was still in its infancy [Briggs and Burke 2010]. Fashion advertising comes up with goods that make people feel comfortable and cope with their new insecurities. Especially now that it promises beauty and wellbeing, with the help of all the social-media marketing hype that propagates a hyper-reality that is more real than real, increasingly targeted to a sustainable lifestyle, centred on the health of individuals and of an increasingly global community [Fletcher 2016; Griffin 1986].

After all, vulnerability hints at the possibility of being hurt and therefore at the fragility of individuals. Metaphorically, clothes "protect" from wounds, from other people's looks (and approval), but they also protect from one's own look. Nevertheless, many brands use many different "aspirational models"; the language of seduction now also relies on del's showing off their being different sizes, for example, like Victoria's Secret. The adjective vulnerable [from the Latin *vulnerabilis*, a derivative of *vulnerare*, «to woundmo»] actually encompasses the idea of *vulnus*; one is vulnerable when one is exposed to a wound, to a damage, to failure. Vulnerability does not have to have a negative connotation, it can become an asset for the *homo oeconomicus*<sup>5</sup>. Fragile, instead, from the Latin "frangere", means snapping and breaking. Fragility is a condition that affects all living things. But a distinction needs to be made between existential fragility, a human fragility that is ingrained in the precariousness of life, and a more psychophysical fragility, sometimes even in a pejorative sense, which is not so much a susceptibility to disease but rather a proneness to moral weakness and fear.

<sup>4</sup> As Findlay writes, "the staging of one's personal style in a blog may be better understood as performative, meaning that the identities taken on by bloggers through their clothes consist of performative acts. In fashion blogs, the self does not exist *per se*, but is a progressive journey, revealed by the blogger's change of dress" [Findlay 2017: 120].

<sup>5</sup> It is an asset that allows people to think of themselves in relational terms again where the relationship is not only meant as closeness to others but as closeness to the environment, to nature. As Pulcini writes, "By sharing this kind of perspective, I have developed an idea that I might call the fertility of the negative: by reinstating its grey areas, the Self apparently loses power, independence, certainties but gains the ability to confront at last the otherness that is its deepest and most inalienable humus" [Pulcini 2013: 23-38].

Fashion easily taps into such personal vulnerability, coming up with collections that increasingly respond to a need to feel protected, to feel stronger in the face of global change. Wellness-related fashion is a call to fight precisely that (multidimensional) contemporary vulnerability.

And so, fashion is promoted against vulnerability, not to efface it but to remind one that it should be protected, because it somehow defends us. The so-called athleisure is brought into play as the point where haute couture meets sportswear, making the two worlds blur into each other and offering items that can be worn on the catwalk as well as at a yoga class. The big luxury brands have begun to launch their own sportswear collections, while comfortable pieces made for the gym have sprung up in the shop-windows of fast fashion: from tracksuits to tops for Pilates, from leggings in engineered materials to actual gym equipment, such as weights and mats. Clothes starring in Instagram stories, online ads, suggesting different lifestyles according to Jenkins' transmedia rationale, built on spreadability, on wordbuilding, immersion and extractability, experiencing fashion as an environment to be lived in and built up by immersing oneself in experiences that are not necessarily aimed at buying. Jenkins aptly defines such concept as "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" [Jenkins 2012]. So, athleisure becomes a trend to wear sporty, casual clothes even on formal occasions. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, athleisure is defined as "casual clothing designed to be worn both for exercising and for general use" and appeared for the first time in 1976 in a footwear advertising in the *El Paso Herald Post*.

Actually, on the online fashion websites or blog of microcelebrities dedicated to lifestyle, there are more and more advertisement sections for athleisure in precious materials that resonate with the new contemporary identity conveyed by fashion, because it is associated with a healthy, dynamic lifestyle, where comfort and function say that health and wellbeing now come first. After all, wellbeing can also be holistically regarded *à la* Taylor, not just as an "integral human development" (art. 3 Cost it.) in a personal sense, but even in a social sense, going beyond the mere fulfilment of one's wishes, along a utilitarian model, and living solely according to one's authenticity and uniqueness [Taylor 1985, Ferrara 2019: 32–45].

## 5 Conclusions

The brief discussion above clearly shows that fashion cannot help responding to the consumeristic laws of the market or to the contemporary man's desire for multiple identities. On one hand, it fills people's increasing vulnerabilities occasioned by the recent global transformations – from technological developments to the pandemic, and all the way up to the war – and, on the other hand, it exacerbates them by arousing wishes that are never perfectly fulfilled, and thus whet new appetites. With the global crisis of the last few years, fashion has tried to do its part to soothe the weaknesses of people and society in terms of health and to encourage activities that help them achieve a psychophysical balance by wearing comfortable but glamorous clothes. At the same

time, it also tried to give people a chance to experiment with and reshape their bodies at a bargain price.

Based on this, people’s ability to choose is clothed with a higher level of complexity, considering the algorithmic machines that gently prod us to action, the so-called *nudges*<sup>6</sup>. Faced with an increased number of buying opportunities, we risk slipping into a sort of consumeristic bulimia, caring little for the purchases and much more for the power of owning them.

Informed choices seem to opt for pieces that are suitable for a lifestyle that promotes environmental sustainability and the protection of personal and global health, such as, for instance, using the goods for longer, manufacturing processes that are respectful of human dignity, recycled materials, etc. Just like the slow food movement that was born in Italy in the 1990s, now’s the time to reflect on the possibility of a slow fashion [Clark 2019: 309–327; Id. 2008: 427–446], so our fashion items will have back their multiple lives, and will be selected as carefully as we would select a pair of prescription glasses, which must correct our vision so we can responsibly be in the world, while retaining a crystal-clear ‘view’ of it.

However, such perspective should also reflect the contemporary desire, boosted by the digital technologies of visibility, to appear, and to appear in the multiple identities that can ever be invented. A need that can be assuaged by the pursuit of wellbeing leads people to take more and more care of themselves and of the community. A wellbeing that brings to mind an ethical fashion, not just in the sense of *atleisure*, but in the sense of making informed choices for clothes that will stay for their value-in-use, that are our signature looks and that reflect our authenticity, which cannot be so multifarious as fast fashion would have us believe. In this way, people’s fragility turns into a strength too. It prods people to reflect on the right measure of and care for themselves.

All things considered, this means choosing to consume a fashion that will not consume our bodies or our identities, but will strengthen them, one that we should not be afraid of. The pressure to be always someone else stokes people’s fragility and dissatisfaction with their current identities. So, fashion, fast fashion and fast fashion for wellbeing should not, as Stasiuk feared [Bauman 2007: 26], provide a pseudo- “possibility of changing the shape of our body and reshape it according to different patterns [...] When you flip through the glossy magazines, you have the feeling that most of the time they all tell the same old story, over and over again: about how to make a new personality for yourself starting with your diet, your house, the places you go to, and even build a different physical structure from the one you had before, though often with the mantra “be yourself””. But it is a fashion that gives us strength in our bodies and

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<sup>6</sup> The nudge is based on an ethically oriented architecture of choices: “is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives [...]. Nudges are not mandates. Putting fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not” [Thaler and Sunstein, 2009: 9]. The nudge thus makes use of “anchors” to push to act, such as memory, emotions, some stereotypes, self-overestimation, opposition to loss and change, the economic aspect, conforming to the influential social group, priming, immediate feedback, etc. And anchors can also promote the “algorithmic arbitrage”, the ability to organize the content through the “corrupt customization”. This system directs people’s tastes on the basis of each one’s preferences [Finn 2017: 111].

direction in our moral sphere. However, such approach is challenged by a flippant, creative fashion, a hotbed of contaminations and transfigurations of luxury brands imitated by fast fashion, such as Gucci by Alessandro Michele or Balenciaga by Demna Gvasalia, for example, in the Gucci Aria 2021 fashion campaign, which seems to bring in many different aspirational models of being.

However, today, such approach must confront “choice architecture”; when consumers take their decisions, they rely on the information they find or is provided by machine learning (ML) models, public profiling and filtering systems. In particular, ML models use algorithms to process the users’ data through their pathways, thus enabling computers to learn, apprehend and evolve through automatic input/output analyses (sound, visual, verbal, etc.), simulating man’s cognitive faculties and therefore making data-based predictions [Pitruzzella et al. 2017: 92–93].

As well as encouraging fashion brands to create more sustainable styles and lifestyles, a toolbox should be provided too so one could learn how to choose, getting out of the quagmire of the algorithms and the material and standardising culture they promote as we search our buys online. We need to keep in mind that “in practice Artificial Intelligence does not behave ethically. It does not behave unethically either. It has simply no idea what ethics is. But as we observe its predictions we can judge if its results match or go against our ethical principles” [Quintarelli 2020: 74].

We can then get out of such vicious circle through our freedom of choice, an ethical deed that makes man unique and where freedom is the source of the responsibility that man is called to take if he wants to remain human. Even if, as Bernays claims, “we are governed, our minds moulded, our tastes formed, and our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never seen or heard of” [Bernays 2020: 23], and, now one could add, by unknown machines, the final choice must be made by the people, who can refuse to be persuaded by critically using the information they get from the advertising campaigns and from the devices to which they (in)voluntarily delegate some of their decision-making power. As Floridi points out, the ethical questions are and will always remain a human question [Floridi 2022: 23].

So, the choice architecture needs to be improved through clear advertising messages, expert groups’ comments, and ethically-directed nudges. Faced with a fashion advertisement, one should not abdicate responsibility, and the decisive factor will consist in encouraging public debates and policies about such phenomenon to build a long-term bond with things, caring less for material wealth and more for emotional and empathic wealth, that reflect ourselves and our care not just for ourselves but also for the ‘other’ and the world we live in. Though still aware of the danger lurking everywhere that “the real stimulating and hot attraction of fashion lies in the contrast between its wide, all-encompassing presence and its fast, fundamental transitoriness, in the right to be unfaithful to it” [Simmel 1957: 558] and hence the endless longing that may never be completely met.

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# Ryunosuke Okazaki: Fashion through the Prism of Posthuman and Affect Theories

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**Abstract.** This paper analyses Ryunosuke Okazaki's designs in relation to understandings of the Human within both 18<sup>th</sup> Century 'Western' philosophy as well as contemporary theories of the feminine sublime [1]. Positioning the human in this way, Okazaki's work comments on mankind's relationship to nature as well as technology, referencing his own spirituality to conjure notions of the sublime. Fashion here becomes an ideal medium through which to challenge contemporary understandings of humanity and the human form in relation to gender and sexuality, as well as question the human desire for mass production and consumption. Beginning with an exploration of Okazaki's material work and their construction processes, I go on to examine visual representations of their work within magazines (Metal, attitude) as well as on the runway. This application foregrounds Okazaki's emotional connection to their work, which promotes a reevaluation of fashion as disposable and suggests instead that we, as viewers and consumers, adopt an appreciation for the natural world, elements of which are almost always referenced within Okazaki's designs. This paper, through consideration of Okazaki's spiritual approach, investigates tradition alongside developments in technology and the role that fashion plays in this symbiosis.

**Keywords:** Ryunosuke Okazaki · Sublime · Human · Posthuman · Digital Fashion communication · Technology · Sustainability · Gender

## 1 Introduction

Fashion's ability to determine and transform the body has been utilised by many designers to decentre the human, towards a posthuman understanding of fashion away from its inception as a patriarchal tool for Othering and disciplining bodies. Posthumanism is defined by Rosi Braidotti as both "the critique of the Humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things" as well as criticizing "species hierarchy and anthropocentric exceptionalism" [2]. Ryunosuke Okazaki is one of 2022's graduate designers of Tokyo University of the Arts who, I propose, has created a body of work reflective of posthumanist thought and, more specifically, Joanna Zylińska's theory of the feminine sublime [1]. With much of their work taking influence from the Jomon era as well as their connection to the Shinto religion, Okazaki's approach to design is highly meditative, considering themes of powerlessness in relation to the threat of God and the natural world, as well as feelings of the sublime inherent to seeing God in nature.

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Having grown up in the city of Hiroshima, fashion is used by Okazaki to express the unpredictability of the natural world as well as the transience of human life. As Caroline Evan's notes, fashion can be "a symptom of alienation, loss, mourning, fear of contagion and death, instability and change" [3]; Okazaki uses their design practice to meditate over such overwhelming feelings, which they consider to be pivotal in re-evaluating the relationship between humans and nature. Creating highly intricate and otherworldly sculptural garments which go beyond the natural forms of the human body, Okazaki's work, I argue, also disrupts the 'Western' hierarchies of art/fashion, male/female, and culture/nature in its relationship to posthumanism and the sublime.

### 1.1 Methodology

Okazaki's work, whilst utilising traditional hand-crafted techniques with reference to ancient Japanese Shintoism, is consumed by most as images through modern digital mediums. As with many other designers who produce sculptural garments rich in meaning, such as Hussein Chalayan, Okazaki does not necessarily produce fashion to be worn but admired as artistic spectacle on the runway and subsequently immortalised within the digital realm. With this in mind, "their brief appearance on the catwalk would, however, be fixed in the amber of the press photograph, and would circulate in both digital and print media as an image and memory of a fleeting moment in an evanescent spectacle" [4]. Following Hans Belting's assertion that "we comprehend the world in images" [5], it is these moments of visual spectacle that I focus on in this paper, utilising visual research methods to analyse how the digital dissemination of fashion imagery and the evolution of digital technologies "are enabling the devolution of fashion authority" [6]. For most, Okazaki's work is consumed purely through digital mediums, thus removing the elitism surrounding high-fashion consumption by making it instantly available to almost anyone. This mirrors the way in which Okazaki's makes a posthuman attempt at questioning other forms of hierarchical mastery. Showcasing this, I employ visual research methods to draw attention to the digital mediums through which we consume 'high fashion' (primarily Instagram), which have "opened up new spaces of fashion consumption that are unprecedented in their levels of ubiquity, immersion, fluidity, and interactivity" [6]. Okazaki's ancient techniques consumed through digital spaces represents a meeting of old and new worlds, promoting a posthuman openness towards the future whilst honoring the past, creating "new contexts engendered by the digital" [7].

## 2 Towards a Definition of the Feminine Sublime

Joanna Zylinksa, a key voice in developing theories of posthumanism particularly in relation to feminism and art, has established a theory of the sublime which moves away from its 18<sup>th</sup> century roots, as understood by 'Western' philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, and towards the French feminism of H el ene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. The notion of the sublime, in its early understandings, can be defined as "a feeling of negative pleasure which mixes fear with delight" [1]. Burke's understanding of sublimity can be aligned with a Humanist centring of the power of man, suggesting that "the sublime is ultimately the experience of overcoming this terror and thus celebrating

one's invincibility in the face of what *seemed* to be a greater power" [1]. For Burke, then, the sublime is also rooted in the feeling man gets when establishing power over that 'Other' considered to be a threat. While nature as well as technology are viewed as tools to be mastered by and become subservient to mankind within the Humanist paradigm, Zylinska establishes the feminine sublime as:

[A] recognition, rather than denial, of mortality and finitude to which the self is exposed in its encounter with absolute difference [...] the feminine sublime takes responsibility for the inaccommodable otherness that many theorists of the sublime have attempted in one way or another to deny or tame.

Within this understanding, Zylinska encourages "the weakening of the idea of the universal subject" [1] to reveal the patriarchal bias inherent in the Enlightenment, and Humanism as an extension, which prioritises the human subject as male, white, and able-bodied. Such traditional theories of the sublime have made "attempts to annul the power of the sublime by either describing it in feminine terms or, contrarily, protecting it against femininity at all costs" [1], which can be linked to Emmanuel Kant's emphasis on the sacrifice of imagination for reason, facilitated by the elimination of weakness and effeminacy. Barbara Claire Freeman classifies this traditional sublime as an "allegory of the construction of the patriarchal (but not necessarily male) subject, a self that maintains its borders by subordinating difference and by appropriating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other" [8]. Embracing rather than mastering, the feminine sublime "opens itself to an incalculable difference which threatens the stability and self-sufficiency of the modern subject" [1]. In its rejection of the binary logic inherent within Humanism and early concepts of the sublime, the feminine sublime does not ascribe to traditional gender binaries, as the use of the term 'woman' "does not refer to some alleged feminine essence which acts as a thread linking all women, irrespective of their background, age and experience." [1]. Instead, 'feminine' is used here as an ideal position to rethink a tradition centred around masculine ideas of reason, as described by Rosi Braidotti in her *Patterns of Dissonance* [9]. Opening such a debate around sexual difference thus encourages a re-examination of other 'Western' forms of hierarchical categorisation such as nature/culture, human/non-human, as well as art/fashion.

### 3 Ryunosuke Okazaki: A Contemplative Approach to Fashion

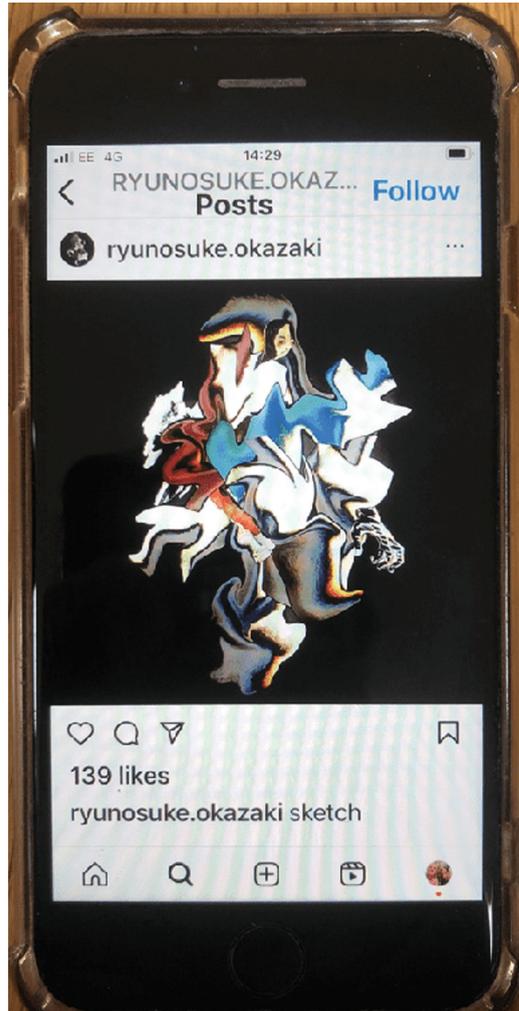
In applying Zylinska's theory of the feminine sublime to the work of Okazaki, I first examine the ways in which his garments blur the line between art and fashion in both concept and design. The relationship between art and fashion has been a point of contention for many critics across these respective industries, with many upholding ideas of fashion as frivolous and superficial in comparison with the art world, which is often considered "above commerce" [10]. Art critic Michael Boodro maintains this kind of hierarchical categorisation in stating that "[a]rt is typically private, the creation of an individual. Fashion is public, a collaboration between designer, manufacturer, and wearer and then between wearer and viewer. Art requires time, contemplation, and thought. Fashion is instantaneous..." [10]. Okazaki rejects this binary by taking an extremely

thoughtful approach to his designs, creating sculptural, avant-garde pieces which are highly influenced by his own spirituality and connection to the natural world.

Okazaki's graduate collection, *JōmonJōmon*, is an homage to the Jōmon era and particularly the pottery created during this period. The people of this era saw God in nature while also acknowledging the sublime threat that nature posed; with natural disasters being beyond their control, they channeled their prayers into the creation of vessels which were highly decorative rather than functional [11]. Okazaki connects these fears prevalent in the Jōmon period to today's increasingly threatening climate crisis, as well as the recent pandemic. Beyond these issues, Okazaki has also been impacted by the lasting effects of the Second World War and the atomic bombs which devastated Japan, notably his native city of Hiroshima. Okazaki is, therefore, inspired by human experiences of overcoming terror, but does not take this as a sign of human 'invincibility', as within early concepts of the sublime, but as an indication of the power of God and the natural world, which humans should appreciate, care for, and fear. Subscribing to Japanese Shintoism, Okazaki views his creations as an act of prayer, and crafted one of his earliest pieces from paper cranes, a symbol of peace in Japan. Named *Wearing Prayer*, the process of creating this garment was rooted in Japanese Shinto rites through the act of twisting paper into strings [11]. In an interview with *Metal* magazine, Okazaki recalls the highly meditative nature of his construction process, believing "that the act of creating itself is also an act of prayer" [11]. This reveals Okazaki's garments to be highly personal and thoughtful embodiments of his spirituality and connection to Japanese tradition as well as the natural world, describing how he "feel[s] the roots of myself and the Japanese people as I create my works" [11]. In creating these "one-of-a-kind dresses with an artistic point of view" [11], Okazaki is deeply connected to each piece, taking an emotive approach to design which rejects the idea of fashion as an "instantaneous" [10] commodity to be mass produced and profited from at the expense of the planet.

Okazaki's avant-garde approach produces garments not necessarily to be worn but to be admired as spectacles rich in meaning, rejecting traditional understandings of beauty in relation to 18<sup>th</sup> century notions of aesthetics. In this, women have been "reduced to images of weakness, submission and beauty" and thereby "situated outside the ethical sphere [...] excluded from the universal concept of 'personhood'" [1]. Okazaki describes his approach to beauty as being more conceptual [11]; rather than reinforcing what is typically considered beautiful on the runway, Okazaki takes what he finds beautiful in the natural world and fashions the body around this. This kind of abstract approach can be seen in Okazaki's initial stages of design, particularly his fashion sketches from 2019 (Fig. 1), in which limbs, colours, and shapes merge and overlap in such a way which demands thoughtful consideration to decipher the human form beneath the fabric. This can be likened to Rei Kawakubo's *Comme des Garçon* Spring 1997 collection, titled 'Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress, and Become One', in the way that it reconsidered the fashioned (female) body by going beyond the human form itself. This, by extension, encourages a slow and thoughtful consumption of Okazaki's intricate garments outside of the fast-paced mainstream fashion system. Okazaki's ethos as a designer is rooted, from concept to design to construction, in an intimate connection to and respect for the natural world. Stating that "I feel as if I myself, the creator, am a part of nature" [11], Okazaki

rejects all Humanist desire to dominate and establish superiority over nature and the non-human, as well as the tendency for contemporary fashion designers to create without consideration for the planet, especially after understanding the devastating effects of mankind on the people and landscape of his home during World War 2.



**Fig. 1.** *Fashion sketches* (2019). @ryunosuke.okazaki [Instagram]

#### 4 A Posthuman Reassessment of the Natural/Technological Worlds

While showcasing his connection and appreciation for the natural world, Okazaki breaks down the nature/technology binary by acknowledging the innovative potential of the modern technological world, with natural and industrial imagery coming together harmoniously through his designs. The photography of *RYUNOSUKEOKAZAKI 000* collection showcases this meeting of worlds; much of Okazaki's pieces, imitating the intricacies of the natural world with their swirling forms and insect-like structures, are photographed in city landscapes and industrial areas. Providing details of his upbringing, Okazaki explains his connection to both city-life and nature:

I was born and raised in a place full of nature. The Seto Inland Sea was nearby, and I could see the torii gate of Miyajima. Behind the torii gate is Itsukushima Shrine, and behind that is a mountain. It was very magnificent, and I felt at peace when I saw it [...] It was when I started living in the city that I began to think about nature [...] If I hadn't been in the city, I wouldn't have been able to create the work I do now. [11]

This is encapsulated within an image included in *Metal* magazine alongside Okazaki's interview, where a black and white striped dress from the *RYUNOSUKEOKAZAKI 000* collection morphs with the striped road markings to produce a hypnotic coming together of body, garment, and landscape. This blurring of the natural/unnatural is further articulated by the photography of Hiroshi Kutomi (Fig. 2). Here, the model is transformed into an otherworldly being, despite the designer being so inspired by nature, with the dress itself appearing supernatural with its geometric shapes and surrealist wing-like structures. The composition of the image, where the model can be seen within an oval, is reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (1490). *The Vitruvian Man* represents the supposedly divine connection between the human form and the universe, foregrounding Enlightenment definitions of the human as white, male, and able-bodied; inscribed within a circle, man is not reliant on anything outside of himself. In contrast to this self-sufficiency, Okazaki's garments represent an entirely different understanding of humanity and selfhood; the model is beginning to step outside of the oval in which they are inscribed, encouraging a reevaluation of the Humanist understanding of man at the centre of the universe, not independent from or superior to the natural world.

The connection between the human/non-human, nature/technology is also prevalent in Okazaki's Spring 2022 runway showcasing the *RYUNOSUKEOKAZAKI 001* collection. Set in a warehouse under construction in Shibuya, Tokyo, the garments imitate "the shapes of insects and leaf veins that Okazaki drew in his picture diary as a boy" [12] and are brought to life under the extreme industrial lighting. The protruding tubes attached to some of the garments appear agentic as they move with the models, while surrealist ruffles in delicate mesh fabric mimic the iridescent transparency of insect wings as they are lit up by artificial lights. The show is described by Okazaki as "like insects drawn to a lamppost [...] the intense light is like the future" [12], conveying a posthuman intrigue towards an unknown future where the lines between human/non-human,



**Fig. 2.** *JOMONJOMON* dress from *RYUNOSUKEOKAZAKI 000*. Photographer – Hiroshi Kutomi. @ryunosuke.okazaki [Instagram]

nature/technology, are not so clear. In this way, the *RYUNOSUKEOKAZAKI 001* collection materialises Zylinska's comparison of the spider and the cyborg, as "inhabiting both the natural and the technological world and transgressing the distance between human and inhuman. The respective feelings of arachnophobia and technophobia they evoke reflect a broader anxiety at the heart of the modern world, which both bemoans the loss of the natural and passionately yearns for the alien" [1]. Okazaki embraces these anxieties by creating garments which invite the viewer to consider modes of engaging with the world away from hierarchical categorisation and the need to understand,

define, and dominate. Just as Zylinska rejects the linearity of masculinist, Humanist discourse through the description of her work as a spider's web, reflecting "a certain circular, or perhaps spiral, movement" [1], so to do the protruding antenna-like swirls of Okazaki's garments as they transform the human models into surreal figures which defy categorisation.

## 5 Refashioning Otherness

With such a sculptural, abstract approach to design, Okazaki's garments are gender neutral in the sense that they often completely distort or conceal the body in a way which rejects "a systematised standard of recognisability – of Sameness – by which all other can be assessed, regulated and allotted" [13]. Fashion, while having been used as a way to regulate the body and perpetuate the "sameness" of heteronormativity, can also be a valuable tool to materialise posthuman efforts to "harness the body's capacities for transformation and connection (i.e. affect), in order to force it to become-otherwise, beyond the dominant modes of organising and imagining bodies" [14]. Just one way in which Okazaki does this is by extending the sculpted fabric of the garment to cover the face, as seen in his Spring 2022 collection (Fig. 3). Stephen Seely discusses this kind of "defacialising" in relation to designer Hussein Chalayan, suggesting that through this "he untethers fashion from normative images of beauty, bodies, gender, and humanity, allowing it to be used instead for the creative production of entirely new assemblages" [14]. Essentially detaching the identity of the wearer from the garment, Okazaki challenges the Humanist need to define, understand, and categorise through his posthuman, gender-neutral approach to fashion. Taking agency away from the gaze in this way, Okazaki invokes the feminine sublime and its rejection of "the gaze with its active/passive dichotomy as the principle of the perception of otherness. Instead, it opts for a less fixating interaction, allowing for a form of 'visual caress' which involves more than the eyes" [1]. This ultimately challenges the Enlightenment's ocularcentric discourse of the sublime in which sight identifies otherness, and the masculine bias inherent to this. A posthuman approach to design, therefore, allows queer bodies to fashion themselves away from dominant modes of presenting the heteronormative body, realising the affective potential of fashion to encourage considerations of the body beyond 'Western' binaries. The empowering effects of Okazaki's designs can be seen on the cover of *attitude* magazine (2021), where transgender drag performer Gottmik (also known as Kade Gottlieb), is pictured in a dress from Okazaki's Fall 2022 collection. The voluminous ruffles transcend gender altogether, mimicking instead the delicate leaves of an orchid, used often as a symbol amongst intersex people who do not fit the binary. As Gottmik (she/her in drag, he/him out of drag) "opens up about embracing her identity as a femme trans man" [15], Okazaki's dress compliments rather than validates the identity of the wearer through its repudiation of gender binaries.



**Fig. 3.** *Ryunosukeokazaki*, Tokyo Spring 2022. source – *Vogue Runway*

## 6 Conclusion

To conclude, the deeply personal and thoughtful designs of Okazaki, evoking elements of his spirituality, childhood, and appreciation for the natural world, form a posthuman approach to fashion, particularly in his interaction with the feminine sublime. Witnessing the destructions and restrictions of humanity's interaction with the Other, whether in relation to Western/non-Western, human/non-human, male/female, Okazaki harnesses the power of fashion and its potential to both perpetuate and challenge dominant modes of

perception. By embedding my analysis of Okazaki's work within early understandings of the sublime in comparison with Zylinska's feminine sublime, I show how the progression of posthumanist ideas of the self and the Other can be materialised through fashion, but also how it can rethink mainstream capitalist notions of fashion as a commodity to be mass produced. Okazaki encourages us all to adopt a more thoughtful, considered approach to fashion, as well as to question the structuring of the world around us, with its hierarchies and binaries.

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# Exploring Symbolic Effect of New Media: The Impact of Bilibili on Gen Z's Cohort Identity and Aesthetic Choices in Fashion

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**Abstract.** This study examines Bilibili, a leading video community for Generation Z in China, known as 'B-site'. The paper proposes a conceptual framework to explore how the platform provides entertainment features that enable Gen Z users to establish digital connections with the internet. The study aims to explore that Bilibili's unique features, such as barrage culture, user-generated content, interest-based communities, and differentiated content, have facilitated the formation of a strong sense of community among its users. This has influenced their cultural decision-making in fashion aesthetics and beyond. The paper draws on qualitative data generated culturally from, statistical information, and digital-field surveys to provide insights into Bilibili's rise and impact on Chinese youth culture. The study found that Bilibili grown from an ACG niche video channel has become a prevalent application in the daily lives of Chinese youth, forming a Gen-Z cultural community and defining 'their fashion'.

**Keywords:** Bilibili · Gen-Z Identity · Fashion Aesthetics · Barrage Culture · Symbolic Power

## 1 Introduction

The term Generation Z was first coined to refer to the cohort that grew up in the late 20th century and early 21st century, also known as the Internet generation. According to United Nations statistics, in 2020 the population of Generation Z (also called Gen Z/Gen Zers, born after 1995) exceeded one-third [1]. This group differs from traditional 'digital natives' in their thinking, hobbies, and values. They are not only active in the usage and functions of the Internet proficiently, but also have a desire for novelty. Gen Z demonstrates a propensity to construct their own cultural identities through social networks, which serves to facilitate their self-realization and self-worth [2].

Furthermore, with the continuous development of new media, including social media, people, including Generation Z, increasingly rely on digital platforms for obtaining information due to their diverse and richer sources. This shift is driven by social needs and technological advancements. As the Internet matures, the emergence of new media has had a significant impact on traditional media. Consequently, people are no longer

content with passive information from traditional media but prefer actively seeking information through new media.

Undeniably, based on the aforementioned characteristics, Gen Z has become the primary target of most business models, compelling industries to devise commercial strategies aimed at this cohort on digital platforms. In the context of China, as of November 2020, the number of active internet users of Gen Z in China exceeded 300 million. They are a significant presence on the internet and a prevalent player in the digital economy [3]. Video platforms with new media communication forms such as *Youku*, *Bilibili*, and *iQiyi* have emerged as the trend. In the third quarter of 2022, Bilibili's average monthly active users reached 333 million [4]. Of Bilibili's users, almost 90% are under the age of 35. Accordingly, Bilibili is described as a highly-dense cultural community and video platform that is popular among Gen Z in China.

This research concentrates on the Chinese Gen Z population and their inclination towards using Bilibili, a platform-based digital entertainment, to investigate how its media culture shapes their cohort identity and their fashion choices. This generation, who have come of age during a period of economic prosperity in China as opposed to the 2008 financial crisis in the West, are known to be self-assured and well-educated in comparison to earlier generations. With a population of 400 million, their preferences and consumption habits are of significant importance for foreign brands looking to succeed in the Chinese market.

It should be noted that the succeeding generation, Generation Alpha, is considered to be even more digitally native than Generation Z, with no memory of using DVDs. Both of the latest generations are referred to as the internet-native. The successive two generations are even converged to be termed "Gen Zalph" [5], those individuals who have grown up with and have been immersed in digital technologies and the Internet for their entire lives. However, the focus of this research pertains to the essence of B-site and its relationship with Generation Z in China, a distinctive cohort that was an early adopter of Bilibili when it functioned primarily as a barrage channel. The user group interested in ACG (referring to Japanese Anime, Comics and Games) is comparatively limited in number, however, they are recognized for their steadfast loyalty to their interests and community. The advent of ACG led this group to coalesce around Bilibili, and subsequently, to cultivate a unique subculture of new media referred to as 'barrage culture'. During this period, it is important to note that Generation Alpha was not part of this particular cohort.

## 2 Materials

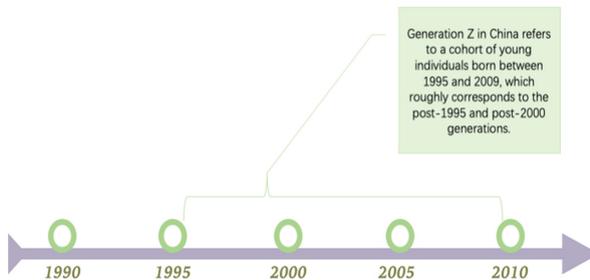
### 2.1 Key Materials/Literature Review

#### Research on Gen Z

There has been extensive academic research globally conducted on Gen Z, covering various fields such as demographics, culture, education, politics, economics, and technology. A study titled "Generation Z Goes to College" conducted in 2014, identified key self-identification characteristics of Gen-Z students as being loyal, compassionate, considerate, open-minded, and responsible [6]. Turner (2015) characterizes Gen Z as having a "digital bond to the internet" and posits that this may assist young individuals

in overcoming the mental and emotional challenges they experience in their daily lives [7].

In China, research on different generations tends to group individuals into 10-year intervals, such as the post-60s or post-80s, resulting in a scarcity of studies that specifically focus on the demographic referred to as Gen Z, which is a broader term for a certain age group. Ren (2021) examines how Gen Z expresses themselves online and analyzes the forms and characteristics of their internet discourse. He investigates the underlying group, social, and cultural motivations behind their online behavior [8]. He argues that the unique subcultural landscape of Gen Z's online expression not only reflects the group dynamics and social interactions of young people on the internet but also reshapes social expression, ultimately impacting internet culture and the cultural ecosystem as a whole. The forms and features of their internet discourse also shape their behavior in online social interactions and are closely linked to the characteristics of the cultural community of Generation Z (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Age Distribution of Generation Z in China (Conceptualized pattern by the author)

Like digital native in all other countries, Generation Z in China is a group that has grown up entirely in a digital environment. They are highly proficient in using various digital technologies, and they use social media platforms extensively to communicate and interact with others. Other than it, the most important characteristic of Chinese Gen Z is that they grew up in a time when the Chinese economy is booming. Thus, the Gen Z's consumption tendency prioritizes experiences over careful budgeting and pragmatic spending. As described in media coverage, a 1997-born postgraduate student expressed that most of their expenses are spent on their hobbies such as buying blind boxes and Lego. The student also indicated that their age group is normally likes to watch anime at station B, preserving membership for B-site at least 5 years [9]. This as well reflects Gen Z in China is highly e-commerce savvy, with a significant portion of their consumption taking place online. They are adept at using digital platforms to research products and make purchases, and they are comfortable with mobile payment systems.

### Research on Gen Z

Youth culture is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the psychological and spiritual needs, lifestyles, behavior patterns, and values of young people as a social group [10]. Focusing on Chinese Gen Z, Yue (2015) examined the development of youth culture in the era of media convergence using a CCTV program as a case study. She highlighted that

contemporary youth culture has three main characteristics: media culture has become an integral part of it; cultural forms are inter-integrated; and the influence of idol culture is increasingly established online within youth culture [11]. Similarly, Li (2020) researched how contemporary youth express themselves in online virtual communities and identified the ACG culture as a significant influencing factor [12]. He found that the social activities of members in these communities are subjective and that they tend to construct their image to achieve their goals and meet their needs.

Generation Z, as the representative of today's youth groups, relies on multiple new media platforms to produce a variety of youth subcultures. Fiske (1992) examined the culture of idolizing stars and, from a psychological perspective, explained why young people are drawn to them. He also noted that the formation of many youth subcultures is often linked to resistance against mainstream culture and mainstream value systems [13]. Additionally, the primary motivation for young people to use new media platforms is entertainment, and as a result, the cultural characteristics of youth subcultures often include elements of depression and decadence. Conversely, the more relaxed, simple, and free the cultural content is, the more likely young people are to engage with it.

### **Research on the Bilibili Video Barrage Website**

B site, also known as Bilibili Video Barrage Website, has grown from an ACG niche video website to a cultural community and video platform with a high concentration of Chinese young people since its establishment in 2009. Wang (2016) used B site as a research object to analyze the development of demassified video websites, pointing out that there are four main differences between demassified and mainstream video websites in terms of commercial modeling, video sourcing, content positioning, and organizational structure [14]. Demassified video websites focus on niche interests and attract users with clear positioning and specialized content. The video content mostly comes from user-generated content, while the revenue mainly comes from financing, operating online games, and selling peripheral products.

Research on Bilibili is a popular topic among scholars, as evidenced by the 1,497 related documents found on CNKI, a Chinese academic research engine. The latest publication date is in 2022 and the earliest is in 2015, which coincides with the period when Bilibili was developing toward mainstream culture and becoming increasingly popular. Furthermore, most of the research on Bilibili is done from the perspectives of barrage videos, video websites, and new media, and these studies use Bilibili as the research object to derive keywords such as barrage, ACG, and youth subculture. These are closely related to the characteristics of Bilibili and the context in which it developed.

Referring to the bullet-chatting culture, Deng (2015) applied sociologist Randall Collins' interactive ritual chain theory to analyze the barrage video viewing behavior of Bilibili users. The research found that the popularity of bullet screens created a new mode of video viewing [15]. ACG culture enthusiasts use bullet screens to break the traditional sluggish reply interaction state and create an instant virtual interactive scene, which allows for easy interaction, communication, and expression of emotions among users through the network. This mode of interaction allows the individuals participating in the interaction to receive a lot of emotional support and sharing, making it the most ideal state of interaction. Similarly, Yuan (2017) analyzed nearly 6,000 barrage texts related to the documentary *I am repairing cultural relics in the Palace Museum* on

Bilibili, and found that the audience on Bilibili provided a lot of supplementary details and personalized comments through the barrage [16]. Yuan indicates that the expression of opinions enriches the meaning of the documentary on Bilibili. This situation also represents that as an important part of youth subculture, barrage culture evolves alongside traditional culture in mutual differences.

Based on the research sources and literature, it can be inferred that the cohort culture of Gen Z will have the basic characteristics of youth culture, form a diverse array of youth subcultures, and become an important part of shaping youth culture through interactions. To understand the characteristics of the cohort culture of Gen Z in China, it is crucial to consider the context of the era of media convergence and the distinctive characteristics of contemporary online communities, which differ from traditional social environments.

## **2.2 A Literature Analysis: Bilibili's Cultural Intervention in Chinese Gen Z**

Bilibili, as the most popular video-sharing platform in China, is a significant new media that has had a considerable impact on the daily lives and cultural practices of Chinese Gen Z. In this context, the function of media intervention suggests that Bilibili's role transcends being just a platform for media consumption. Instead, the platform has intervened in various aspects of Chinese Gen Z's lives, shaping their cultural practices, influencing social interactions, and even affecting values and beliefs. As such, Bilibili represents a new paradigm in media consumption and social interactions for Chinese Gen Z, introducing new forms of media consumption and social interactions that were not present or as prevalent in previous eras.

The daily life of Chinese youth in the context of online platforms is particularly reflected in the marketing effectiveness of Bilibili and the film and media culture of the platform. Within this field, subcultural phenomena thrive and are largely autonomous. The platform's columns are organized thematically, with a particular emphasis on the ACG subculture. It has been observed that the subculture originally driven by Japanese pop culture has gradually gained a more prominent position, such that even governed "The New Journey" of the governmental propagandas on Television productions are relegated to the periphery.

First, taking a specific PVC figures as the case to examine the marketing effectiveness of Bilibili, the products are particular popular among Chinese Gen Z for it originates from Japan's animation character models and are now collectively referred to as figures in China. This popular literary and artistic work has now become the focus of collections by fans of anime and games. iResearch, a professional marketing research institute, has reported that Gen Z, a small group of PVC Figure consumers, displayed a relatively high annual spending on figurines in 2020, with an average per capita expenditure of 2022 yuan and around eight figurine purchases per capita. The market size is projected to exceed 9.12 billion yuan by the end 2023. Among the platforms that offer high customer satisfaction in purchasing figurines for Gen Z, particularly those born after 2000, Bilibili membership has emerged as the preferred choice [17].

Based on an online survey conducted by iResearch in February 2021, the Gen Z consumer group in China is predominantly male, with over 40% being students. This group also tends to have a higher level of education, providing them with greater exposure and acceptance towards new cultural phenomena and products. As the market continues to

expand with more cultural intellectual property, there is a promising consumption potential within this group. The concentration of Gen Z consumers is mainly in economically developed regions such as Guangdong, Beijing, and Shanghai, with over 80% residing in first-tier and new first-tier cities. At present, hand-made commodities, which combine both spiritual and material consumption, are more popular in these regions.

Bilibili's media culture is centered on film and television, marking a shift from catering to a narrow audience to offering diverse content for web users. Initially, Bilibili focused on animation, games, comics, and other ACG content sourced from Japanese TV stations, with user-generated content comprising the rest. However, as Bilibili evolved and diversified its content, users from different backgrounds settled in, leading to an increase in professional user-generated content and the entry of professional institutions and official accounts. Bilibili is now venturing into producing its own variety shows, web dramas, and documentaries, with some of its self-produced content receiving critical acclaim. Bilibili is categorised as a niche, vertical video website, providing content that aligns with the needs of the Z generation group. Bilibili has well-defined content divisions with different vertical classifications, including living, gaming, animation, and technology. Additionally, Bilibili has added online live broadcasting, game centers, and peripheral shopping malls as vertical supplements (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Station B's Content Verticals: Common Partitions and Classification Sections China. (Integrated by the author)

Partition	Vertical Classification
TV series	serial animation, animated drama, information, official extension
Local Creation	domestic-created animation, domestic original related, puppet show
Screening Hall	documentaries, movies, TV Dramas
Classroom	examination, language learning, general science popularization, design creation, lifestyle
Animation	MAD-AMV, MMD-3D, short film, script, dubbing
Music	original music, cover, performance, VOCALOID · UTAU
Dance	indoor dance, street dance, star dance, Chinese dance, dance tutorial
Games	stand-alone games, e-sports, mobile games, online games
Knowledge	science popularization, social science, law, psychology, humanities and history, finance and business
Technology	digital, software application, computer mathematics, science and engineering machinery
Sports	basketball football, fitness, competitive sports, sports culture
Cars	car life, car culture, motorsports
Life	comedy, home real estate, handicrafts, painting, daily life
Gourmet	gourmet production, food detective, food evaluation, pastoral food
Animal Circle	cats, dogs, giant pandas, wild animals
VLOG	popular video, planting grass, campus, travel, couple
Kichiku	kichiku training, sound MAD, human VOCALOID, kichiku theater
Fashion	beauty and skin care, clothing, fashion trends
Entertainment	variety shows, entertainment talk, fan creation, celebrity comprehensive

### 3 Methods and Results

#### 3.1 Qualitative Data of a Case Study with the Cultural Analysis

This study uses a case study approach with cultural analysis to gather qualitative data on Bilibili that is now considered a leading active content platform for the demographic of Gen Z. The data sources for this study include formal and informal documentation, statistics, student reports, and digital field surveys.

- Propositions: Three-dimensional key factors involved

The foregoing discussion highlights three dimensions that are involved in the association for this study, such as Gen Z, cultural community, and platform-based digital entertainment.

The following propositions are developed as part of this research:

- (1) The culture of bullet-chatting has a significant impact on the formation of cohort identity and digital bonding.
- (2) Platform-based digital entertainment plays a crucial role in reinforcing the media effects that shape cohort identity.
- (3) Through the intersection of ACG, bullet-chatting interaction, and the Gen Z cultural community, Bilibili has been legitimized as a ‘cohort field’, leading to the formation of distinctive fashion representation.

The key argument:

- The key argument:

The use of Bilibili’s new media platform, particularly its bullet-chatting culture and ACG media culture, has a significant symbolic effect on Gen Z’s cohort identity and aesthetic choices in fashion. By facilitating digital bonding and shaping a collective identity, Bilibili’s platform has the power to influence the cultural decision-making of young people, that is gradually affecting in the realm of fashion.

#### 3.2 Results: An Analysis of Bilibili as Generation Z’s Cultural Community

This study examines Bilibili as a cultural community for Generation Z, exploring its unique features and digital operations. Through analysis of user features, the study identifies four key aspects of Bilibili’s role in fostering a sense of community and collective identity among Gen Z users. The study aims to provide insight into the impact of Bilibili on Gen Z’s cultural decision-making, including in the realm of fashion.

- Barrage Culture: Bilibili’s barrage culture enables real-time comments during video watching, creating virtual interactivity and unique communication. This feature is integral to Bilibili’s identity, enhancing the user experience, especially for Gen Z, who value innovative online interaction.
- Business Model: Bilibili has a distinctive business model that sets it apart from other mainstream video websites. The majority of its revenue comes from financing, operating online games, and selling peripheral products, which allows it to operate independently and continue to provide unique content for its users.

- **User-generated Content:** Bilibili's focus on user-generated content differentiates it from other platforms, providing diverse content that caters to Gen Z's interests. This approach fosters engagement and community, promoting an autonomous identity for Gen Z's user-generated content. This trend has the potential to enhance creative expression and cultural decision-making in fashion and beyond.
- **Interest-based Communities:** Bilibili's focus on interest-based communities, with differentiated content and clear positioning, aligns with the preferences of Generation Z for digital interaction and community building. This has enabled Bilibili to attract and retain a substantial user base who share common interests and hobbies. By leveraging interactive mechanisms and digital communication, Bilibili has fostered a strong sense of community among its users.

#### **4 Crucial Findings: Media Effect in Framing Bilibili as a “Gen-Z Cultural Community”**

Over time, Bilibili has transformed from a niche platform serving a small group of subculture enthusiasts to a new media giant that centralizes most social resources, thanks to its increasing number of younger users and Gen Z's empowerment. As a digital platform exclusively catering to Gen Z, Bilibili is constantly improving by transforming its audience into digital users through a diverse range of content, developing popular culture in a circle-based manner, using interactive features to enhance social identity, and encouraging user innovation to optimize platform diversification. This developing trend demonstrates the crucial findings of this research that as represented as the most popular new media among Chinese Gen Z, Bilibili possesses symbolic power to mediate contemporary popular culture in China. The youth cultural community formed within Bilibili acts as a dynamic field where diverse subcultures are allowed to express freely. Within the symbolic power, Gen Z, as part of Bilibili's social resource, performs social actors to express autonomous identity by its role of content creators and contribute to forming the youth cultural community and fashion's unique aesthetics on the platform.

##### **4.1 Bilibili: A Cultural Field for Autonomous Identity Expression Among Gen Z in China**

The emergence of B-site as a new cultural field for Gen Z in China is characterized by its unique barrage function and ACG media culture, which enables Gen-Z users to create their own cultural identity amidst the age of information fragmentation. Despite the growing number of young users at B-site, such as the 16-year-old Alpha generation, who are still in pursuit of current trends, the current Gen Z is believed to have formed relatively mature judgment in aesthetics. As a result, they have a more powerful voice and often spontaneously regulate the behavior of the Alpha generation within this community.

Furthermore, the youth cultural community formed at B-site is not merely a subculture attached to mainstream Chinese culture. Rather, it represents the appropriation and reconstruction of Japanese popular culture. In China's unique social context, mainstream culture is still regarded as a higher-level value. For instance, the Column, “The New Journey”, on B-site generally promotes socialist values such as patriotism, prosperity, civilization, and harmony. Nevertheless, with the advent of new media and the

empowerment it offers to the digitally native Gen Z, the platform has become a representation of postmodernism, allowing for independent judgments on what should be popular and what actions to undertake. Consequently, there is an abundance of non-mainstream cultures on the platform.

## 4.2 Bilibili: Unique Fashion Aesthetics Through ACG Influences

The influence of Bilibili on the fashion choices of Generation Z in China is reflected in their unique fashion aesthetics. Bilibili's fashion column has retained its distinct characteristics, and the ACG media culture remains a crucial frame of reference for this multicultural community. Fashion culture is most prominently expressed through the styles of JK, Lolita, and Hanfu within Bilibili, which are also the most popular among users. JK and Lolita are the styles deriving from Japanese youth's fashion. Hanfu has risen to prominence with the recent success of Guochao, a fashion trend that uses traditional Chinese garments to represent national awareness. The B-site fashion representation has thus opened up ACG aesthetic choices among the mainstream fashion trends. A term 'unique fashion aesthetics' is therefore an appropriate description of the distinct fashion style of Chinese Generation Z that is inspired by Japanese manga. The influencers on B-site fashion appropriate Japanese cosplay and ACG culture to express local culture. For example, the "Three Bankrupt Sisters" (JK, Lolita, and Hanfu) have become a signature feature of the fashion district of Bilibili, and the influencer Xiaomaer has successfully incubated the independent Hanfu brand "Thirteen Yu". In a recent beauty video, Mrs. Baojian also showcased her interest in Hanfu and Chinese fashion elements [18].

The official website of Bilibili recently featured a headline reading "Guide to the beauty of ordinary people", indicating that the platform is using its unique digital technology to lead fashion trends. Among its content verticals, *Fashion* has become one of the most popular new columns. According to data from the *BILIBILI Fashion Big Data* report, the fashion column currently has 1.63 million videos, 10.6 billion broadcasts, 700 million screen interactions, and nearly 260,000 content tags, covering a variety of categories such as cosmetics, clothing, and fitness [19].

Having been good at increasing user engagement, B site has launched *The Fashion Star Program* to explore more trendy and interesting content and UGCs, providing various resources to support new fashion influencers [20]. Bilibili has always kept a focus on young users and has a high sensitivity to the virtual community on the platform. This allows B site to capture the booming content trends in the community and expand the advantages of fashion categories through platform support. Therefore, the active content ecology on the platform makes 'fashion' a new label and forms a strong attraction to youth based on unique community characteristics. Reacting to this prosperity, the CEO of Bilibili, Chen Rui (2020), stated in public that he hopes that Bilibili can become the cultural lifestyle for Chinese young people; where users can be happy, make friends, stay up to date with the latest entertainment trends, and even learn [21]. It's worth mentioning that the international fast-fashion brand SHEIN has rapidly gained popularity in the global market in recent years. This may suggest that China's Gen Z population prefers to see the globalization of local brands that they identify with, rather than international brands.

## 5 Conclusion

Based on the findings presented, it can be concluded that Gen Z in China is not only proud of their national identity but also embraces a unique cultural identity shaped by their digital engagement. Bilibili has emerged as a significant platform that has enabled Gen Z to express their autonomous identities through content creation and interaction with like-minded individuals, forming a multicultural community. The ACGN media culture and barrage function of Bilibili have allowed Gen Z to create a distinctive fashion aesthetic, drawing inspiration from Japanese manga and other non-mainstream cultures. Moreover, Bilibili has facilitated the development of their popular culture by providing the conditions for the sustainable growth of their cultural community. Overall, the emergence of Bilibili and the unique cultural identity of Gen Z in China demonstrate the transformative power of digital media on cultural production and identity formation.

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that the influence of platform-based digital entertainment, such as Bilibili, extends beyond cultural and national identity to fashion and style. The popularity of fashion styles like JK, Lolita, and Hanfu among Bilibili users reflects the platform's impact on fashion representation and the development of a fashionable cohort identity. In conclusion, the online community has become a hub for cultural exchange and creativity, allowing for the amplification of expressions and group characteristics of Generation Z, and reinforcing their unique cultural identity.

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# Clothing as an Element of Identity and a Trend of Self-completion in Generation Z in Colombia

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**Abstract.** This article presents the synthesis of the research on the clothing practices that are trending in the Z generation or centennials in Colombia, and that communicate with the largest audience represented in likes and downloads and views in the social network *TikTok*.

The problematic is given by the questions: how are the most relevant trends and identities of young centennials shaped? How are their clothing practices?

This research is qualitative and interpretative, a semiotic perspective was taken to identify tangible or intangible objects that reveal how identities and trends are shaped, as well as their narrative.

In this sense and under the theory of Susan B. Kaiser on identity and the theory of symbolic self-completion of Wicklund and Gollwitzer.

This study analyzed how dressing is an element of self-completion of identity and diffusion of the trend, in this sense, identity is mediated by the interaction that makes an effect that replaces the face-to-face look, so the result or effect of this helps to shape or confirm the aesthetics of identity, reception, revealing the vulnerability, conflict, and influence of this generation of nomadic identity.

**Keywords:** Dress · fashion · Colombia · centennials · identity · Self-completion

## 1 Communicated Trends and Identity

In a constantly changing landscape towards a more connected world, young people naturally integrate aspects of the human experience into the digital world with an ease unprecedented to other generations, shaping the ways in which social media platforms are used and their limits. Young people from the age of 12 seem to understand the new rules of interaction within social networks such as TikTok or Instagram and condition their social activity within them. As the ‘home turf’ of Generation Z (Maguire 2021; Wallaroo Media 2021) and a key space for collective expression of youth online (Lerat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019), it is a valuable window into attitudes and perceptions of young people, including their expression. Generational identity. TikTok allows us to observe the process of generational self-definition in a social context, bringing out the self-representations shared by and for those who make up this generation (Cheng Stahl, 2022, p. 2).

Among the different expressions of centennials, the phenomenon of fashion trends and the communities associated with them that express through short videos their infatuation with the symbolism associated with elements of clothing seen within fashion trends are of particular interest. This cult of groups expresses the association of dress practices with an identity built from content within TikTok and that distances itself from the mass fashion scene for these young people. All these marginal, alternative, niche aesthetics that do not fit the model bring into play the other element of clothing that dialogues with fashion but is distinguished from it, which is style. (Kovadloff, 2019, p. 12) Thus creating a fascination for acquiring an appearance that ultimately demonstrates a complex and interesting identity for those young people who begin to discover themselves as people and want to positively differentiate themselves from their environment. It should be noted that this is not a recent phenomenon, and that, on previous occasions, adolescents have resorted to digital media to make changes and modifications to their appearance from clothing and makeup, and a clear attitude of preference is maintained towards the feeling of differentiation by originality and simultaneously the affiliation to a social group. The relationship between adolescents and social networks is given thanks to the ease of use that allows the creation of virtual presences not restricted by the obstacles of the physical world, the control of interactions with others, and the few repercussions that may cause shame, rejection, or social alienation. As in fashion blogs, on TikTok you can also share videos and photos of yourself, activities of interest, and your own speeches in a controlled manner and prioritizing the prominence of your body, clothing, space, or message and capitalizing on your own currency from the social network; likes, followers, comments, and views. So even when Chittenden refers to the popular fashion blogs of the early 2010s, the same concepts apply to young TikTok users when he says “fashion blog spaces don’t just give girls a place to showcase their cultural capital. Materialized and objectified, but also provide them with infinite potential for social capital from millions of Internet users” (Chittenden, 2010, p. 511).

According to Guillaume Erner (2009), trends are defined as: “A behavior temporarily adopted by a substantial part of a social group that perceives it as socially appropriate for the time and situation” (Erner, 2009, p.14). Similarly, they have been related to the collective ideas and beliefs of a generation, usually the youth, this phenomenon is known as the “zeitgeist”. This spirit manifests itself in clothing styles that are curated and communicated through social networks which allow the contagion of trends on a global and accelerated scale, but which are appropriated and adapted according to a social and local context with their own unique symbology and meanings.

Regarding how trends are adapted, Erner (2009) proposes two main theoretical perspectives; the first, the individual is manipulated by forces that overtake him and incite him to adhere to certain trends; the second, trends are the consequence of aggregate individual decisions, i.e. the individual acts rationally. In any case, trends seek to satisfy two feelings that seem contradictory; the need for distinction and the desire to belong, as proposed by Bourdieu and discussed by Erner (2009).

An individual’s participation in fashion is a personal experience and depends on factors such as purchasing power, culture, and attitude towards change, to name a few. If one looks at some fashion trends adopted by young people and communicated on

different popular platforms, one can identify the relationship with popular art, music, and a particular philosophy or thought related to these fields.

In the case of Colombia, platforms such as TikTok have allowed the adoption of varied trends accessed by new social groups with access to information and great interest in the fashion and entertainment industry, trends drip from outside influences and evolve little by little as they are affected by prevailing social trends. As a result of the encounter with foreign influences and the Colombian context, new localized fashion interpretations are created in which Colombian adolescents exhibit these forms of dress according to their resources, visual references, and ideas.

## 2 Fashion Trend as a Symbolic Self-completion of Identity

In *The Social Psychology of Fashion* (1997), Susan B. Kaiser presents identity as the organized set of characteristics that an individual perceives as representative or defining of him/herself in a given social situation, this situation being the world of social networks for example. Identities are distinguished into attributed and achieved identities, the former, attributed identities are those that are assigned to individuals, while the latter, achieved identities, are those that the individual creates for him/herself. Within the virtual circuit, attributed identities do not exist, not with the same weight as achieved identities. The latter needs the genuine to exist and be accepted.

On the other hand, the authors Robert A. Wicklund Peter M. Gollwitzer in *Symbolic Self-Completion Theory* (1981), from a psychological and social perspective, explain human behaviors concerning identities and symbols; thus, an individual with a defined objective will engage in specific behaviors related to the associated desired identity, so that by acting in a certain way he symbolically proves that he/she already has that desired identity. Self-completion symbols are the objects that individuals require to communicate their ideal version of themselves, be they clothing, accessories, make-up, consumption habits, and ways of behaving to name a few.

When one possesses a wide variety of symbols in line with the self-defined goal, the individual will not seek additional ones, on the contrary, if a perceived lack is present, greater efforts will be made to display symbols that restore fulfillment. A person engages in self-symbolization, or the use of symbols to construct and retain a complete self-definition when he or she senses a lack of completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982, p. 31 as cited in Kaiser, 1997, p. 176).

Susan B Kaiser argues that some conditions must exist for a subject to symbolically self-complete, she describes the process as follows:

1. A person must be committed to a self-defining objective.
2. There are symbols available within the person's culture that pertain to self-definition.
3. The person experiences a sense of lack, inadequacy.
4. The person has access to at least one route to self-symbolization. (Kaiser, 1997, p. 176).

### 3 Young Gen Z and Tik Tok, from Global to Local

With the arrival of a new generation, those things that were taken for granted, obvious, and established begin to rewrite, mutate and evolve under new innovative perspectives. In this sense, Centennials or Gen Z (generation Z), as it is called to individuals born between 1997 and 2006, that is, between 12 and 22 years old nowadays (Arango, 2022), are distinguished from previous generations for being 100% digital natives, resulting from a childhood lived during the peak of the technological era. Their relationship with technology is organic and the way they interact is different from previous generations.

Platforms such as TikTok have allowed this generation to reinterpret and create concepts and ideas of their mediated reality, including fashion as an important status symbol and identity. This platform has been very well received in Latin American countries, and in Colombia specifically, there are around two million registered users among children and adolescents according to the country's Superintendence of Industry and Commerce (2021).

Many of these young people are from different socioeconomic strata, evidencing the democratization and popularity of these applications, some use the platform as a means of nonconformity and expression, and the discourse they handle and their way of communicating responds to a childhood of economic crisis, social movements, climate change, and a hyper-connected world, which have resulted in a generation of young people with greater social, environmental, political and ideological awareness compared to their predecessors.

TikTok stands out for the high volume of teenagers from different backgrounds, compared to other age groups due to its peculiar mechanics that consists of recording and editing short videos, from a few seconds to ten minutes, and for its highly personalized content, the result of TikTok's Artificial Intelligence. By the way Gen Z portrays itself on TikTok, it is obvious to acknowledge the role of the platform in this group everyday communicative practices (Cheng Stahl, 2022). As for self-image and identity, it is constantly evolving and under construction, they are highly critical and highly sensitive. Research shows that social media offers youth personal empowerment, increased access and connections, community and identity development, opportunities to organize their social lives, and many opportunities for interaction that can be constrained by physical spaces and adult-mediated spaces (Fu and Cook 2020; Gangneux 2019). While these young people present themselves as genuine people with the aim of sharing fragments of their life with similar people, it can be glimpsed how the identity is changing is affirmed or changes according to the reception or views of the videos.

Obtaining validation in the form of large numbers of likes, shares, and comments is a currency that has little to do with economic gain, especially in a public that is just beginning to think about economic independence, and more with the idea of creating a reality that represents the individual as a personal brand without thinking much about the repercussions that may occur in the real world. A reality manufactured to exist within the network is another of the ways in which identity is reinvented for modern youth, therefore, this group of young people is not afraid to follow trends because it is a way to follow not only a lifestyle but also aspirations, and on the other hand, it allows them to boost themselves in the networks to become very recognized people (Arango, 2022).

About identities and social networks, Kaiser identifies processes regarding the way young people construct and communicate their identities. On the one hand, the process of Self-identification where individuals locate and express their identities, as seen in the action of consuming specific content regarding makeup techniques or a fashion brand, for example. Two exercises arise from Self-identification; Self-disclosure, as a form of Self-identification is presented to others in a public context, such as the conscious decision to dress in different styles to meet with friends or visit family relatives; and Self-reflection, another manifestation of Self-identification occurs in a private context (Kaiser, 1997, pp.186–187), often seen in the clothes one might wear when home alone. The dynamics of TikTok as in other social networks such as Instagram and BeReal, operate under the premise of Self-disclosure where audiovisual media and the interaction of others with the photographs and/or videos of the authors, who are aware that they are being observed, predominate. Even when the content is uploaded on TikTok, it is uploaded with the intention of being seen, and it is there where the dilemma of being seen and acting conscious and unconscious of that fact simultaneously prevails.

Kaiser introduces Carl Rogers' concept of Self-schema, which is a structured thought process that organizes, modifies, and integrates qualities assigned to oneself that include visual images. Visual images and the concept of aesthetics are a current hobby of Generation Z, accustomed to communicating through figures and symbols, obvious to them, and meaningless to their parents or other viewers.

TikTok aesthetics can be studied, especially when viewed from the perspective of identities created within and for the internet, and which have a root in the real world, although it is independent of its unfolding in the real world. The theory of identity proposed by Stryker (1980) originates in the vision of symbolic interaction that society influences social behavior affecting the individual, which he calls Self. This Self may be the result of social interactions from which the individual begins to define roles and acquire knowledge about them, thus generating a symbolic interaction. In the theory of interactionism, Stryker (1980) proposes that the so-called Self is composed of different elements called role identities, for the different dispositions in which society places the subject. Role identities are part of the cognitive processes, Self-concepts, and referents that the individual attributes to himself, which is seen in the collective interactions in TikTok through comments, followers, and likes. One can identify the many roles one identity can take while scrolling through a teenagers TikTok account, going from friend, to fashion icon, to potential lover, to activist in a matter of seconds.

## 4 Methodology

The methodology applied for this study is qualitative and interpretative. The axis of this research lies in the visual analysis of different clothing trends of generation Z in Colombia, and what they communicate through the social network TikTok.

To establish the methodological structure, the study on “the aesthetic response” (1998) proposed by the American professor Marilyn De Long, Ph.D. in Dress Studies, who defines the aesthetic response as the resulting experience and corresponding to the implication of the effect of being looked at; thus the style will depend and will be selected from the expressions or preferred looks (p. 339).

To understand this response it is necessary to know about the physical and cultural context of the observer. To analyze and contrast this study of this response, four fundamental stages are carried out: observation, differentiation, interpretation, and evaluation (DeLong, 1998, Chapter 3).

With the aid of the Google Trends tool, data such as volume of content, visualizations, and searches on concepts and recurrent fashion trends in generation Z in Colombia and the world were reviewed and identified.

Subsequently, an inquiry and compilation of videos in Tik Tok related to the global and local trends mentioned were made, of these, the most popular among young content creators were the concepts of Coquette, Y2K, and Grunge as the most representative ones being trends of interest for this study.

For the analysis of the visual and narrative content of each trend, the method of Roland Barthes (2012) of denotation and connotation conjugated with the concept of symbolic self-completion developed by R. A. Wicklund and P. M. Gollwitzer and deepened in the fashion studies of self-symbolization and identity by Kaiser (1997) was taken into account, for this different symbols and signs that can be tangible or intangible that are associated with these trends as youth identities are taken.

Based on these conceptual and methodological perspectives mentioned above, an analysis matrix was created that includes variables to study the meaning of the three trends in Colombia, identification symbolism and modes of expression: young people, attire, accessories, places, forms of expression, background music are important to understand the discourse that fashion produces.

The videos to be analyzed are compiled and organized in a body of images within the microblogging platform Tumblr.

Image Bank: <https://saisaki34.tumblr.com/>.

## 5 Trends Metrics

The results of Google Trends show that Coquette and Grunge have been fashion trends with intermittent interest in the last five years globally, it should be noted that both aesthetics were already present within Tumblr, the social network preferred by teenagers during the mid-2010s; while the Y2K trend is more recent and its takeoff occurred between December 2021 and January 2022 according to Google Trends data, this trend is in full swing worldwide as Coquette. For its part, the Grunge aesthetic has had ups and downs in the last five years, having a resurgence in November 2020.

Instagram's search engine shows that the hashtag #coquette and its ilk have more than 10,000 posts each. The hashtag #grunge and related hashtags have at least 800,000 posts and reach up to 4.7 million posts, the word Tumblr stands out in one of the hashtags, it is possible to infer that such high numbers because the grunge community is more long-lived and established than the other two trends due to its notoriety on the Tumblr platform and because of the connection it has with various musical styles and bands several decades ago. The hashtags related to the term Y2K range from 50,000 posts to 3.6 million, as it has been highly covered and exploited by the fashion and entertainment industry. It is necessary to clarify that these hashtags represent the worldwide publications on

Instagram and that the Y2K at the international level and the Y2K that takes place in Colombia differ in some things from the one that occurs globally.

On TikTok, the hashtag #coquette amasses 4 billion views and hashtags of the same trend go from thousands to millions of views. The same hashtags but now with Spanish words included, such as #estilocoquette gathered 2.2 million views. The hashtag #grunge has 5.6 billion views, and other hashtags referring to makeup, outfits, vlogs, and music exceeds 10 million views each, except for #estilogrunge which has 3.4 million. Lastly, international #y2k hashtags start with 100,000 views and rise to 9 billion. The hashtags #y2kcolombia, #colombiay2k, and #ropay2kcolombia concentrate 1.1 million, 11,700, and 75,600 views respectively. Although a significant percentage of the content collected is from foreign content creators, this does not mean that there are no Colombian content creators, simply the videos with more than thousands of views, likes, and comments are the ones that the algorithm promotes and recommends to users in certain regions. The role of foreign tiktokers is important for this study and the communities within TikTok due to the Trickle-Down phenomenon that occurs in fashion and the communication and adoption of trends in Colombia.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 Colombian Coquette Trend

This trend is made up of a collective of young women and teenagers gathered around their taste for a romantic essence centered on everyday experiences and a hyper-feminine archetype of seemingly positive attitudes. The content of the videos is varied and ranges from clothing and makeup to daily routines and decorating tips.

The coquette identity tells the story of the game between childish innocence and hidden seduction which naively shows the submissive, sexually and romantically inexperienced woman pursued by men, thus deepening the idea of the ultra-romantic woman, the damsel in distress and the femme fatale combine in an amalgam of flirtation, prudence, and domination.

Through pearls, ruffles, lace, hearts, and bows the identity is constructed and self-completes, a sweet image that takes elements from different eras to represent a young woman perfect in her physical appearance. This identity takes colonial references, focusing on specific countries such as France, Spain, England, and Italy during the 20th century, specifically the 1920s, 1930s, 1960s, and 1970s, with allusions to an elevated and sophisticated lifestyle by today's standards. There is a certain nostalgia for a Catholic and monarchical Europe, then free and dreamy.

Consistent with the submissive vision, the idea of the princess, beautiful, comfortable, and well-dressed, subject to a system that infantilizes her but with enough power to impose herself, although she deliberately does not make use of it, comes into play in the game of references.

The clothing is characterized by light tones, with floral motifs, lace and hair accessories and jewelry, simulating luxury, short skirts, crop top blouses and dresses, tight to the body, jeans or tailored pants, shorts, and long skirts. Accessories range from small handbags, lace or ruffled stockings, bracelets, necklaces, chokers, rings, headbands, and

hats. Makeup varies depending on personal tastes, highlighting the preferred features but always highlighting large eyes and a flirtatious and feminine look.

The contradiction between their values is a statement of the current feminine role to which teenage girls aspire to possess at an early age an eroticized and docile image as a positive aspect, far from understanding their alienation and subalternity (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** *Look Coquette.* Note. Collage of screenshots of videos from users @nbva\_911 (left), @naotomitombo (center), and @cherrymell666 (right) on TikTok.

The coquette symbols are imported from countries such as France, the United States, and Japan and constitute both the Self-schema and the exercise of self-completion through inspirational images for content creators and content consumers. Tangible symbols are clothing, footwear, accessories, and other objects such as CDs and decorations. Intangible symbols are the ability to comb one's hair, apply makeup and skincare, take pictures, listen to a particular type of music, interest in certain activities, and the adoption of mannerisms to behave more delicately (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** *Inspiration Coquette.* Note. Collage of screenshots of the video by user @xoxolaunesa on TikTok.

The coquette identity is reinforced through entertainment media, becoming an archetype in its own right. Series like *Gossip Girl* and *Dynasty*, and celebrities like Lana Del Rey promote in their content the fantasy of the American dream, which translates into clothing allusive to, again, periods of the history of economic stability and traditional values. Celebrities such as Lily-Rose Depp and Kendall Jenner demonstrate in their public lives the comforts of being born into a high social class with abundant connections to support their professional careers and material and spiritual needs.

The process of self-completion of a potential teenage coquette in TikTok would be described as follows:

A young woman becomes aware of the inequalities experienced by ordinary women within the social, political, economic, and cultural structures in Colombia.

These inequalities conflict with the presence of women in positions of privilege who do not experience being a woman in the same way. To avoid being a victim of the same

inequalities, consciously or unconsciously, a young woman turns to symbolic objects that represent a privileged woman and commits to adopting them.

## 7 Grunge Trend

The grunge identity lies in the modern adaptation of various expressions of the alternative or underground resulting in a mixture of feelings of rebellion, rejection of the popular, and a strong aura of artistic superiority over other popular trends on the Internet. It makes use of the archetype of the misunderstood artist, the big-minded individual in a small town, and also the snob; essentially that teenager or young adult whose personal tastes and ideas do not fit with those normalized in their immediate environment, commonly related to expressions of art and grows to resent their society for lacking the good taste that he or she naturally possesses. Grunge is not a recent identity, it predates even other platforms such as Tumblr and MySpace or Hi5, and its most current version accommodates the more diverse cultural landscape of young Colombians and their experience with music and fashion. Within mainstream Colombian culture, the idea of embracing historically acclaimed niches abroad continues. Rock, metal, punk, grunge, rap, and techno are musical genres popularized abroad, and by the time they arrive in Colombia, they already bring with them a series of clothing practices and behaviors of their own (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** *Grunge.* Note. Collage of screenshots from the videos of users @784e3 (left) @laesposademitsuya (center) and @mariqueadx (right) on *TikTok*.

Tangible symbols are present in clothing, however intangible symbols such as philosophy and acquired behaviors are unclear due to little or no focus on them in the videos. They differ from punk in that they are not anti-capitalist and their attitudes do not demonstrate concern for the state of society in the way of a pessimistic or nihilistic attitude. Adolescent pessimism is replaced by the exaltation of the “different”.

The clothing stands out for the use of dark colors, especially black and red. Clothes can vary, but there is a repetition of board skirts, sweaters, tight or wide black pants, and shirts with designs and logos. The accessories have more prominence in this trend, being the ones that complete the look and give it the distinctive touch of rebellion. Chains, studs, spikes, and leather stand out, evoking a feeling of danger or threat. The historical references are much clearer in this trend, dating from 1970 to 1990 in the United States with direct relations to youth movements such as Grunge and Punk (Fig. 4).

Punk, Goth, Metal, and Emo cultures are referenced but only visually and from their most recognizable pieces by the general public; abundance of black color, metal



**Fig. 4.** *Grunge Accessories.* Note. Collage of screenshots of the videos of users @laespososademitsuya (top left), @juxxnrz (bottom left), and @mariqueadx (center and right) at TikTok.

elements, wear, aging, and unconventional makeup but these groups are never explicitly mentioned nor their affiliation to them. TikTok grunge users resemble other subcultures but are not part of them.

The grunge identity marks a “them and us” differentiation, in the sense that the videos and what users express through their content draws a dividing line between those who are part of the trend and those who are not. Here the pretentious aura, the feeling of moral superiority in the format of a few seconds, is retaken. The trend takes pleasure in dressing differently, acting differently, and listening to musical genres that are not as popular as reggaeton and pop within the country.

This trend also possesses a Self-schema composed of images that obey Eurocentric standards that exalt whiteness, thinness, androgyny, and a certain level of economic comfort that fits the economic situation in North America during the 1980s and 1990s. As well as an attitude of disinterest towards what is considered normal and local, preferring the more exotic brought from abroad, commonly accompanied by a discourse centered on wishing that Colombia (the country itself) was a power in the artistic industries or that the others (other teenagers who differ from grunge or the population in general) have more refined tastes. These comparisons are repeated with certain consumer products such as television series and movies from the United States, South Korea, and Japan; music, art, and fashion from the aforementioned countries but not only limited to those.

The self-completion process of a potential grunge teenager in TikTok would be described as follows:

A young person is exposed to artistic manifestations (music, animation, movies, art, fashion, etc.) coming from abroad and starts consuming them regularly. He consciously or unconsciously appropriates the discourses within the content he consumes and creates a sense of attachment to the foreign culture. The feeling of attachment leads him to draw comparisons between foreign cultures and his own in which his own culture is disadvantaged by factors such as technological backwardness, lack of opportunities, nepotism, corruption, etc. In order to separate himself from the rest of the population that consumes “bad taste” art and a system that does not support “good taste” art, he resorts to the symbolic objects present in the entertainment content he consumes, which he relates to sophistication and opposition to his cultural and social reality.

## 7.1 Y2K

The Y2K identity tells a story of social, racial, and even political and economic inequalities overcome through talent. It is essentially a discourse of self-improvement that seeks to justify the gradual disconnection of the most affected individuals from those who were allowed to climb the social pyramid and cheat the system. From rappers to athletes, the archetype of the poor made rich is presented, emphasizing the work and effort that conquer any difficulty, even systematic poverty, and which are then rewarded with luxuries and a legacy that inspires more unfortunate young people. TikTok's Y2K adopts this discourse almost to the letter, especially in the visual aspect associated with this archetype that exists not only in literature but also in fashion under the name Hypebeast, the guy who stands in long pre-sale lines to get the latest pair of exclusive collaboration sneakers, someone adept at logos and brands, at distinction and luxury, but not the luxury of white elites but the luxury of the street, of his peers, the luxury justified by inequalities and hard work.

Like the urban music and art circuits, the Y2K on the platform is also composed mostly of young men who enjoy the company of their peers, whom they call gangs, and with whom they share tastes such as music, fashion, and sports. The influences of urban culture are strong not only in clothing but also in body language, music selection, and preferred activities. This corresponds to the relationship between the hype beast and the concepts that refer to the past, in fact, the dates to which Y2K refers are very clear, from 1980 to the mid-2000s and the United States as the main reference (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** *Air Force 1 and Air Jordan used by users.* Note. Collage of screenshots from the videos of users @jonathanreaf (top left and right), @pipepgzx (bottom left), and @johanax011 (bottom right) on *TikTok*.

The narrative built around historically African-American musical genres focuses on the systematic oppression of ethnic minorities in the United States and the obstacles that must be overcome to achieve a decent quality of life, culminating in the creation of new cultural circuits that generate millions in profits to this day. This aesthetic, unlike the two previous ones, is the one that has the most connection with the context of young people of middle and low socioeconomic levels in Colombia. It communicates the difficulties at the levels of the country's political structure and the popularization of a fashion culture that in the past was considered poor and in bad taste for the rest of the population. Its impact on society has reshaped public opinion about the existence and importance of culture born within society's most vulnerable populations.

The symbolic objects of Y2K lie in clothing and are especially important for the relationship between the trend and the individual to have a real impact on how they present themselves and what they think of themselves. It is a trend composed almost entirely of tangible self-completion symbols. Men's attire consists of skinny or baggy jeans, T-shirts with logos or graphic designs of sports brands or multicolored designs, unicolor hoodies, puffer jackets, sneakers, caps, sunglasses, gloves, scarves, leather or beaded belts, and assorted jewelry. There is a clear preference for U.S. brands, especially those that specialize in sports or outdoor clothing, such as Nike, The North Face, and Bape, however, not the active line products but the cult or premium design products such as the two most used Nike models: Air Force 1 and Air Jordan; best sellers of the brand with their own communities of collectors and fans. Another popular garment within the community is the Bape brand's zipper hoodie, specifically the one that closes the hood, completely covering the face and showing the brand's shark design in pink and blue colors. A standout accessory is the rhinestone-covered Texan belt, oversized and styled in a way that makes it stand out, wearing it with the pants down or with the shirt tucked in. At other times it is paired with rhinestone necklaces and/or chains, or sometimes accessories include chains, rings, piercings, and gloves.

American brands are indispensable and the "blin blin" for the young Colombian Y2K, not only represents a certain purchasing power that contrasts with their socioeconomic situation but also evidence of the disruption of the unfair relationship between social strata and the inherent tastes of the individual, a direct rejection of the class habitus of the middle and lower classes in Colombia.

The essence of this style can be described as a luxury of the street, born from musical genres such as rap and hip hop, adapted to reggaeton and trap in the country. These young people mark the difference between Y2K and Cyber Y2K with another style called Drip, demonstrating a clear sense of belonging to the adopted aesthetic and unconsciously the need to follow a series of rules to express Y2K correctly, among them the acquisition of expensive clothes, even if they are imitation products. Their influences drip from the clothing of famous singers, and exponents of the aforementioned musical genres, who in turn pay tribute to their predecessors in the industry, specifically those whose peak of fame was between the late 1990s and mid-2000s.

The videos seen on Tik Tok share certain repeating characteristics. The content revolves around showing the attire or "outfit" as well as the physique (either face or body). Half are shown in an intimate setting, their bedroom or other living spaces, the other half are in public places, shopping malls, and parks. Although most are shown solo (video 4) with the choice of audio and what is shown allows us to see that they are a community outside of TikTok and that they enjoy meeting and spending time with other like-minded young people.

The Y2K identity aims to be an aspirational centennial fantasy, which moves away from the past fantasy of escaping poverty and rejecting it once a higher lifestyle is achieved. None of the users in their videos directly express not wanting to be poor or wanting to be a millionaire, it is more an attitude of comfort in showing themselves to the public and defining their style and way of acting with certain guidelines. This aspirational fantasy celebrates fashion expressions that in the past were castigated by the general public for being a visual representation of poverty in Latin America, while

today it is a style celebrated and recreated by fashion brands and upper social classes, and redefines the possibilities of success for young people at the bottom of the social pyramid outside the status quo.

The Self-schema that the young Colombian Y2Ks in TikTok manage bears some resemblance to the situation in Colombia today. Local or regional artists such as Bad Bunny, J Balvin, and Feid, and a smaller presence of foreign acts such as Travis Scott and XXXTentación, all make use of similar aesthetics and allude to a comfortable lifestyle that does not completely forget their roots.

The self-completion process of a potential Y2K teenager in TikTok would be described as follows:

A young man grows up exposed to the constant rejection and prejudice that his society shows towards the artistic manifestations of the lower social classes in Colombia and conversely, the rejection of the artistic manifestations of the higher classes in Colombia. He internalizes that being poor as well as being rich is frowned upon in the country. He is present and old enough to participate in the wave of reggaeton, trap, and other urban genres, gaining strength worldwide and being accepted as a desired lifestyle. This young man aspires to the acceptance and exaltation of this new identity and adopts the behaviors and practices of artists and celebrities that symbolize success and social equality.

## 8 Conclusions

The study confirmed that fashion and clothing practices are both symbols and signs as a means of communication in the case of many young centennials in Colombia. In this sense, clothing is presented as a tool for self-completion of identity, which is achieved through the use of signs that can be tangible, evidenced in their communications, clothing accessories, decorative elements of interior spaces, and makeup, but also intangible, such as dances, postures, body expressions, which together are curated by these young people in private and public spaces, finally obtaining a route of self-completion and symbolic differentiation. This idea is supported as Thornton argues that it is 'impossible to understand the distinction of youth subcultures without some systematic investigation of their media consumption' (p. 203) (Thornton, 1997, as quoted in Chittenden, 2010, p. 510).

The trends, on the other hand, allowed these people to easily identify those popular routes with their symbolic elements and appropriate them from a position of security based on the observation of general acceptance and characteristics of communities with similar appropriation processes, being able to recognize Through the volume of likes, visualizations, comments and followers of users, and likewise, recognition, the foregoing affirms how the social relationship is replaced by interaction, and that this is a first indicator of a successful symbolization exercise. Therefore, a desirable and/or celebrated identity.

Although these trends are not born within Colombia, it was identified that many of the signs used by these people are imported from European and North American countries, but interestingly, when adopting them in the country, Self-schemas are generated as a result of the experiences of each young person, lifestyles and cultural context, combined with the ideals, archetypes and aesthetics that drip from the prevailing trends,

generating a very particular identities of the young Colombian centennial that oscillate between the total assimilation of external imaginaries and the adaptation of these from a local perspective. For example, the Coquette is usually an eroticized young woman who breaks the traditional stereotypes of some regions of Colombia, but who seeks to build a romantic identity that is self-symbolized from signs brought mainly from Europe and ancient references, usually communicating in private spaces. Or intimate through acts of suggestion and mysticism. In the case of the Grunge trend, young people use mainly tangible signs brought from musical references belonging to the same musical genre, which leads to narratives that are rooted in “the different”, communicating disagreements with local politics, the lack of development in the country, and discontent with their cultural and social reality through non-tangible signs and in mainly public spaces. In the case of the Y2K identity, the young Colombian centennial uses tangible signs such as garments characteristic of urban tribes such as rappers and reguetoneros, and non-tangible signs such as body expressions, emulating the maximum representatives of these musical genres, but in their process of self-symbolization and Self-schema, they manage to communicate a lifestyle of success and social equity in private and public spaces.

Finally, it is evident that this centennial generation is vulnerable to the contents and trends that are highly disseminated in TikTok platforms, and which, in many cases, are appropriated and adopted in a symbolic way, which makes these young people decide to play with routes of self-completion resulting in the creation of nomadic and changing identities, this can be explain when Chittenden (2010) proposes that “the opportunity to try out different looks, and to ‘fail’ with minimal consequence, provides teens with opportunities to play with the impression they make and learn to use resources creatively” (p. 512). Therefore, two critical points can be identified, the first, the generation of an internal conflict by wanting to define oneself quickly and frequently without considering the possible repercussions of adopting short-lived trends subject to the fast-fashion consumption model in the textile industry and endow them with a hyper-specific personality, and the second, the generation of this content without a clear distinction of the original target audience that pushes the youngster to the limit, which can experience feelings of frustration and depression when finding himself unable to emulate different actions associated with the trend such as the consumption of certain objects and the performance of leisure activities, since they do not have enough capital and/or their environment presents sociocultural and economic barriers that prevent it; In some cases, it reaches a state of sexualization of itself or normalization of behaviors that disparage the image as a result of consuming content that favors the physical appearance of users and a set of particular features that are not always revealed as part of surgical procedures or simple makeup techniques, and in others to the adoption of rebellious attitudes that can lead to acts of violence, which is why an opportunity for future interdisciplinary research is presented.

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# Communication of Fashion Sustainability in the USSR and Modern Russia: What Does the Young Generation Know About Ecological and Social Agendas in Fashion?

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**Abstract.** Fashion sustainability is promoted and is slowly developing in modern Russia; however, this concept used to be popular back in the USSR under the notion of “saving”. The research objectives are: 1) to give an overview of social and ecological practices in the USSR and modern Russia; 2) to determine the current awareness of youth about fashion sustainability, and (3) to define what actions young Russians take to follow this trend. For these purposes an online survey was conducted between October and December, 2022 among Russian students. It showed that the respondents do know some of the practices of fashion sustainability, even without following fashion trends in general, and they practise them; however, their priorities, while buying clothing, are price, quality and comfort. To conclude, the communication of social and eco-agendas in fashion should be enhanced in Russia, brands should prioritise Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Conscious consumption and ethical attitudes to fashion should be encouraged and maintained at all levels, including businesses (brands, mass markets, etc.), Non Profit Organisations (NPOs), bloggers or influencers on social media, educational initiatives, and cultural and historical events (fashion shows, museums, etc.). The broader the coverage of the issue from different perspectives, the more engaged consumers will become.

**Keywords:** Fashion Communication · Sustainability · Conscious Consumption · Eco-Fashion · Ethical Fashion · CSR

## 1 Introduction

Sustainable fashion is a wide terrain which has numerous definitions. The term “sustainability” can be defined as the ability of the system to be maintained at a certain level, where people, the planet and profit can coexist in harmony without compromising one another. A business can be considered sustainable if it is targeted to make a positive environmental, social, and economic impact [1]. This is also known as the “Triple Bottom Line” (TBL) of sustainability [2] with the addition of culture to these three components [3]. Consequently, sustainable fashion (SF) is a wide notion including both

environmental and social (ethical) issues. SF should include both eco-fashion and ethical fashion, which promotes a decent attitude to people who are engaged in the fashion industry and consumers to whom fashion is directed [4, 5]. Mora et al. (2014) focus on the importance of immaterial contents which should promote inclusivity, equality and other ethical values [6]. “Sustainable imagery should combine the principles of equality, fairness, and humanity” [7, p. 241]. In general, sustainability is becoming one of the main trends within our society and “online communication is crucial to influence customers and to deliver sustainable purchase behaviour” [8, p. 188]. According to Brydges et al. (2022), “a robust understanding of sustainability should be participatory and a practice-based approach that further outlines actionable tasks and is linked to consumer centered strategies rather than calling on brands for static definitions of sustainability” [9, p. 367]

Nowadays, the three Rs principle (reduce, reuse, and recycle) [10] is commonly known and closely connected with the concept of CSR which cannot be underestimated. Researchers discuss what is more important: business ethics and profit maximisation or corporate social mission. Those companies which are oriented primarily towards financial gain are more concerned about their image and reputation in communication with stakeholders [11, 12]. However, companies which prioritise ethical issues in building their business strategies (CSR) succeed more in having loyal customers and expanding stakeholders in the long term. Studies show that it is important for businesses to implement sustainable initiatives, especially in market-sensitive industries [13]. According to Clarke and Clegg (2000), “sustainability is becoming a key business imperative, as the eternal search for domination over nature is replaced by the challenge of achieving environmental balance” [14, p. 46]. Li et al. (2014) emphasize the beneficial relationships between CSR and fast fashion supply chains [15].

There is not enough literature about SF in Russia. Therefore, the objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to trace how the communicative practices of conscious consumption have changed from the time of the USSR to the present Russia, on the basis of verbal artifacts (posters, texts, websites, etc.), brand policies, and different projects and initiatives; (2) to understand whether young Russians are aware of the fashion sustainability agenda, and (3) how they estimate their involvement in eco initiatives.

## **2 Environmentalism and the Economic Spirit of the USSR: An Overview**

Although sustainability is slowly becoming a trend in modern Russia, it was widely practised in the USSR, especially after World War II due to its devastating effects, poverty, and scarce resources. According to Brain (2010), “environmentalism survived – and even thrived – in Stalin’s Soviet Union” [16, p. 93].

The statement “The economy must be economical; this is a requirement of the time” became the slogan that was voiced at the XXVI Congress by Brezhnev [17]. This idea permeated many posters of that time, both visually and verbally, and encouraged people to save natural resources such as water, electricity, etc. Figure 1 shows the poster printed in 1981 in the USSR on the topic of cost control. A strong hand of a person is depicted, with a sharp movement lowering a chopper switch with the slogan “For economy and

frugality!” Mismanagement, Extravagance, Losses and Waste scatter from a huge spark. This Soviet poster has the following piece of poem: “In labour, learn to be thrifty. Join the fight for savings! [18]” Fig. 2 depicts the poster that says: “Save electricity”, demonstrating a man who is obviously doing the opposite. He is criticised by the words: “Do not save it in this way unless you want to become broke” [19]. Figure 3 shows the poster from 1944, and belongs to the wartime promotion of saving electricity: “Everybody at home should remember to save light since limiting is the policy of war and it helps the front” [20]. Figure 4 [21] is dedicated to saving water. “Take care of everything that our motherland is rich in”– this slogan was used in all spheres of life [22]. In times of scarcity, saving was not just a norm but a way of life: the three Rs were implemented everywhere.



Fig. 1. For economy and frugality



Fig. 2. Save electricity

“Reuse” was a popular concept of Soviet times: every woman knew how to sew, knit and the approach to different fabrics and materials which corresponded to modern DIY slogan. Knitted items were easily modified and turned into new combinations (upcycling and downcycling).

The Russian fashion magazine, *Marie Claire* [23], points out a number of Soviet habits which are popular nowadays and bear the name of sustainability. First, the phenomenon of sharing things or renting, starting from dishes and large household appliances and ending in communal apartments and car-sharing which appeared back in 1956 in Moscow and was called “Rent a car without a driver”. Second, waste sorting: pioneers were encouraged to gather paper for its recycling. There were also points for collecting glass bottles for recycling. In addition, vending machines which supplied shared glasses for water or soda were used. Next, the analogue to second hand shops were “*komissionka*”: an exclusively state-owned shop with two groups of goods: ordinary things and scarce items, which citizens brought from business trips from abroad, or from exclusive stores.



Fig. 3. Save electricity (light)



Fig. 4. Save water

People went to food stores with their own bags, in most cases reusable string bags (*avoska*) due to the lack of disposable plastic bags. The word “*avoska*” comes from the Russian adverb “*avos*”, which means some expectations “what if” or “perhaps”. The term appeared during the time of deficits of consumer goods in the USSR. In 1970, a popular Soviet comedian, Arkady Raikin presented the bag to the audience with the words: “And this is a what-iffie. What if I found something to buy...”. *The avoska* was a representative cultural phenomenon of Soviet routine and could be traced in Soviet films such as “Diamond Arm” (1969). The origin of this bag goes back to Czechoslovakia in 1920. Usually blind people wove string bags at the enterprises of the All-Union Society of the Blind in the USSR. The standard string bag is woven in 14 rows of 24 cells and can withstand the maximum load of 70 kg. [24]. With the popularisation of plastic bags, *avoskas* gradually fell into disuse, but recent environmental trends in support of banning plastic bags have revived them [25].

### 3 Overview of Current Russian Brands, Projects and Other Initiatives Promoting Fashion Sustainability

#### 3.1 Brands’ Sustainability

Below are presented some current Russian brands which communicate SF.

**Love Republic**, the Russian brand, founded in 2009, offers program Love Republic 2.0. “Give your clothes a new life”. The brand points out that recycling and philanthropy are one of the many ways to achieve the goals towards a sustainable future by collecting old clothes and bringing them to their stores [26].

The **Alena Akhmadullina** brand, founded in 2001, in St. Petersburg [27] does not communicate directly the concept of sustainability on its website; however, indirect communication of conscious consumption can be traced in four major aspects: 1) the materials used in the collections are predominantly natural fabrics, or modern mixed materials of high quality and increased durability; 2) the colours look natural (mostly

green, pastels, and blue); 3) tailoring (product customization); and 4) digital clothing during the Covid-19 pandemic [28].

**BOYARI**, the apple leather Russian-French designer brand, which started a “fruit revolution” in April 2021, at the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week Russia with the clothing collection made from apple leather and other eco-materials. The brand follows the principles of slow, premium, and SF. It is supported by the Russian Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives and is the leader of the Association for the Development of Sustainable Fashion in Russia, which consists of more than 100 member organisations [29].

**Renovadress** is an upcycling laboratory in Novosibirsk. The brand specialises in sewing clothes and bags from donated old jeans [30].

### 3.2 Projects (Clothes)

There are different projects which are involved in the three Rs principle. For instance, **Veshchevorot (Clothes Recycling)** is a social entrepreneurial project [31]. **Spasibo (Thank You)**, based in St. Petersburg (2010), develops a charitable and environmental sector, creating a system for the circulation of unwanted clothing [32]. **Nichego Novogo (Nothing New)** is the resale and digital clothing platform about a new culture of consumption dedicated to exploring the fashion industry in search of breakthrough technologies, useful services, and responsible brands and companies. [33]. **Voskresenie (Resurrection)** is a charitable fund initiated by the Russian Orthodox Church [34]. The Russian affiliation of **Fashion Revolution** is a part of the global project, established by Carry Somers and Orsola de Castro as a result of the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013, which is organised to unite local designers, communities, and activists who are driven by a sustainable future in fashion [35].

### 3.3 Art and Cultural Projects

**The Museum of Holes and Patches** is located in Uchma, Yaroslavl region. The material basis of the exposition is the clothing and everyday life of local fishermen and peasants. The museum has a philosophical vision of the hole. Holes and attempts to patch them are about our whole life: about medicine and nature, about human relationships, losses and discoveries. A hole should not be perceived as something negative, since it allows a beam of light to go through. The exposition describes not the poverty and difficulties of the village people, but their ability to appreciate what they have [36].

There have been a number of **fashion shows** with the use of trash as a way to communicate fashion sustainability. One example is a fashion show in Novosibirsk on 5 June, 2019 which featured 40 collections of dresses made of plastic cups, and a robot suit made of foil, paper, and cardboard [37]. Another example is a fashion show at the Artmuz Museum of Contemporary Art on 14 January, 2022. All the outfits were made from waste accumulated in the city over the holiday weekend. During the parade of each fashion model, the presenter announced the name of the street where the garbage was collected to create her outfit [38]. The main task of the creator in fashion shows in the style of “trashion” is to rethink garbage in the image of high fashion and to create values for old things.

### 3.4 Marketplaces

**Lamoda** – an online shopping platform which launched the sale of clothing items in 2020, with care for the planet (Lamoda Planet) selling items which correspond to the principles of sustainable development according to six categories: 1) recycle and innovations; 2) eco-composition; 3) items with care for animals; 4) vegan goods; 5) brands saving the planet; and 6) goods to help the needy [39].

### 3.5 University Initiatives

Universities in Russia have started to promote and discuss the issues of fashion sustainability with academics and students. For example, in 2020, there was an online conference on “**Sustainable Fashion 2020: the Swedish experience**”, which was organised in cooperation between the HSE Art and Design Faculty in Moscow and the Swedish Embassy, including Swedish practical and academic experts [40].

Another initiative was from 5 June to 5 July, 2022 Clothing Repair Practices at GES-2: Cultural Reflection with the Community **Mendit Research Lab**. Mendit Research Lab is a community of fashion researchers and anyone who is interested in fashion and conscious consumption that includes, in particular, mending—the transformation of clothes with the help of all kinds of repairs and customization [41].

## 4 Methodology

A mixed research method is used: secondary data, case studies and an online survey. The qualitative part of the research was conducted to investigate what the youth know about practices of fashion sustainability in Russia (open-ended questions in the survey), the importance of SF to young people and what they do to maintain sustainability. The qualitative part of research is also presented by the overview of case studies of contemporary Russian brands and Soviet practices regarding the issue of sustainability. The quantitative part includes the estimation of the number of young Russians who know fashion social and eco-initiatives in general, and those who are engaged in this fashion agenda.

The online survey is designed for young Russians (generation Z) chosen randomly from different universities and departments. The online survey was launched on 20 October and was active for two months until 20 December, 2022. The main aim of the online questionnaire presented on Google is to realise whether the young generation is aware of social and ecological initiatives undertaken in Russia. The survey consists of 12 research questions and seven sociodemographic questions about their gender, age, major, university, level of education, city and financial status. Seven research questions have multiple options and five are open ended questions designed for this survey to get individual responses in order to estimate the youth’s involvement: (1) What do you do with your used clothes? (2) Where do you redirect them to? (Specify places, funds, organisations or projects). (3) What stores and recycle points do you use for used clothes? (4) What social and ecological initiatives in fashion can you name? (5) What brands, market places or influencers do you follow on social networks? The research

hypothesis is that young people in Russia are generally aware of ecological and ethical issues promoted by brands but conscious consumption is not the first priority for them. The level of fashion sustainability awareness influences directly the three R principle.

## 5 Results

The online poll gathered 267 responses from Russian students from Moscow (40%), Nizhny Novgorod (23%), Magnitogorsk (28%), less than 10% from St. Petersburg, Voronezh, Chita, Smolensk, Perm, and some other cities. The respondents are mainly undergraduates (aged 18–23 years old, 75% under the age of 20) and mostly female (72%). The majority are students from the HSE University, Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Pushkin Institute of the Russian Language and the Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod. Most students major in social sciences and humanities: Economics and Business, Economics and Politics, Asian Studies, International Relations, Social Studies, Pedagogics, Philology, and Design of Architectural Environment and Construction.

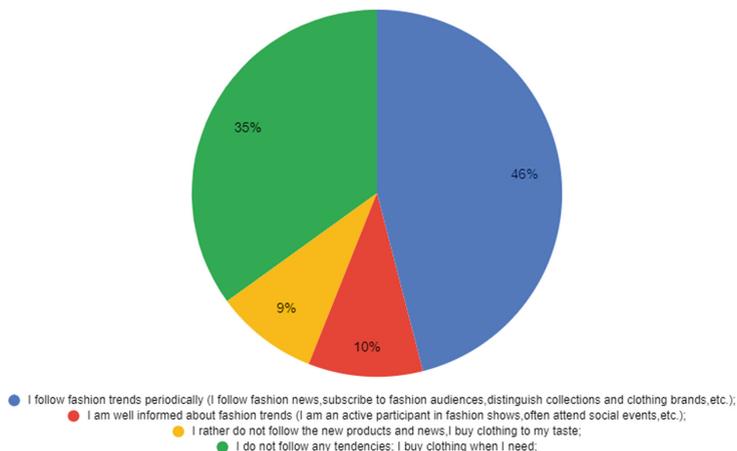
The results show that the young generation is generally aware of some projects in SF (58%) but struggle to specify them. 14% have not heard about brand CSR projects and the rest find the question difficult to answer (28%). They seem to be informed about Russian and foreign brands' initiatives concerning the issue discussed (for instance, respondents mention specific eco-programs of different foreign brands: Gucci, Adidas, Nike, Converse, Levi's, Calzedonia, Uniqlo, Lush, H&M, Zara, and local brands: Love Republic, Zarina, Befree, Gloria Jeans, Tvoe, etc. including marketplaces: Avito and LaModa and some projects: Veshchevorot (Clothes Recycling), Spasibo (Thank You) and Voskresenie (Resurrection). In total, 42% of students managed to name eco-friendly brands and initiatives, proving the fact that communication of fashion sustainability is visible and influential but not engaging enough.

Around 46% of young Russians do not usually follow fashion trends buying clothes to their taste. 10% do not follow fashion at all buying clothes only when they need to. 35% of respondents follow fashion trends periodically, and 9% consider themselves to be completely immersed in fashion (Fig. 5). 38% of respondents are subscribed to different brands correspondingly, the rest do not read brands' accounts on social networks or find it difficult to specify them. They are subscribed to foreign brands such as Zara, Nike, Adidas, Dior, Gucci, Prada etc., and Russian ones (Tvoe, Gloria Jeans, Zarina), market place platforms (such as Ozon, Wildberries etc.), fashion magazines (Vogue and Elle).

The majority of respondents consider their degree of immersion in the eco-agenda to be average. Generally, respondents consider themselves to be not immersed in the eco-agenda. The overwhelming majority of respondents (63%) claim that they have heard about environmental and social projects of the brands that they use even without following fashion trends. All in all, they are aware of recycling programs, charity organisations and other initiatives. According to strategic communication principles, brands can become conduits of the values of sustainable development. Those brands which promote CSR are becoming memorable and can be named even by non-active consumers.

As for donation practices, 32% of respondents do not donate used clothes and 31% find it difficult to answer the question. Those who donate clothes (37%), give them to

The level of awareness about fashion trends, %.



**Fig. 5.** The level of awareness about fashion trends, Choose the answer option that can best characterise you, %.

churches, religious institutions, charity foundations, or relatives and friends who are connected with the above mentioned organizations (Table 1).

Young Russians prefer to donate to charitable foundations, religious institutions, orphanages and other needy people (30%). Only 3% use special containers, recycle points in the city. 3% of respondents give clothing to family and 1% to friends who are connected with charities (Table 1). In general, the respondents showed their concern about needy people and consciously redirect used clothes. Nevertheless, according to the results of research, the culture of sustainable consumption is not integrated into society so well since 32% of respondents do not donate things or give clothes away. Although recycling and resale platforms are not numerous or very popular among the respondents (0.5%), they have prospects for rapid development.

The respondents were presented with the question: Which types of social and ecological initiatives provided by brand are you familiar with? The question contained different options. 65% of respondents are informed about recycling and reuse projects in fashion. 30% of respondents know about projects dedicated to the protection and care for animals and projects promoting eco materials. 7% are not familiar with any type of initiatives from the brands they use. 5% have heard about all the types of initiatives including recycling design, inclusive projects, gender equality etc.

The respondents were asked to prioritise quality, comfort, price affordability and sustainability goals promotion. 21% of respondents confirm the importance of brands' sustainable goals promotion as an influential factor while choosing clothes; however, the primary importance was quality (56%), comfort (53%) and price (29%).

**Table 1.** If you donate things or give clothing to those in need, specify to whom and where do you donate (an open ended question, %)

If you donate things or give clothing to those in need, specify to whom and where do you donate (an open ended question, %)	Answers, %
No answer, difficult to answer	31
I do not donate things or give clothes away	32
I give to hospitals	1
I give clothing to my friends who are connected with charities	1
I sell on Avito (an online marketplace)	0.5
I give to animal shelters	0.5
I give things to relatives	3
I give away clothes personally for someone in need	6
I give to orphanages	7
I give to religious institutions	8
I give to clothing stores	1
I use special containers, recycle points in the city	3
I give to charitable foundations	9

## 6 Discussion

The Soviet sustainable practices under the name “saving” presents a wide range of initiatives which are popular and essential nowadays. However, there is an obvious shift from forced economy, due to the devastating post war situation, to conscious economy as a result of ecological and social issues. Real life practices in the Soviet Union were implemented everywhere at all social levels of life (starting from families and kindergartens, proceeding with schools, and following up with work places). Self-restraint was considered as necessity and commonness, an ordinary thing not to lament about.

Current trends in Russia in SF show a large variety of sustainable initiatives and practices, though Russia is far from the leading position in this issue. Despite this, innovations are being used successfully, for example, the luxury brand, BOYARI is the first Russian manufacturer of apple leather clothing. Sustainable practices include different social projects, projects to communicate about the problems of fashion sustainability, such as Russian affiliation with Fashion Revolution, art projects such as a Museum of Holes and Patches, fashion shows, market places, and educational initiatives such as conferences and workshops. The more communication channels and diverse practices are involved to serve the purpose of CSR and sustainability promotion, the more people are aware of this problem and, consequently, the more engaged they become.

The results of the online survey prove that the issue of sustainability is being tackled in Russia gradually with some achievements and have high prospects for future development. Young Russians are mostly aware of different initiatives launched by brands at

home and abroad or charitable institutions connected with used clothes. However, they undertake only a few sustainable practices themselves.

The study confirms the problem of a gap between awareness of sustainable initiatives and real engagement in them. This attitude-behavior gap refers to the clash between positive consumer attitudes towards sustainability and inaction or unsustainable behaviour in purchasing [42-46]. Despite the fact that consumers support and share the ideas of SF, they are not ready to spend more money on SF clothes [47-51] or do anything. This conundrum is called the Fashion Paradox [48, 52, 53].

Sjölander and Norstedt (2021) offer numerous managerial actions in order for managers to successfully address this attitude-behavior gap, for example, “managers should focus on developing an internal culture that incorporates concern for the environment, and long-term environmental strategies should be developed and influenced by corporate culture” [54, p. 53]. Moreover, a *holistic green marketing approach* [55, 56] is recommended which can incorporate both internal, strategic, and tactical perspectives.

Riesgo et al. (2022) claim that to circumvent the price obstacle and encourage consumers to buy SF clothing, the burden of price for SF should be shifted from consumers to companies, which in its turn should receive compensation from the government for sustainable practices, for example, in terms of tax reduction. For study purposes they also recommend differentiating consumers into different clusters: Sustainability Rejecters, Sustainability Neutrals, Sustainability Believers and Sustainability Enthusiasts [51].

Not only purchasing behaviour is important; after-purchasing practices are crucial too such as long-term usage, recycling, upcycling or downcycling, and redirecting clothing to others. The fact that young Russian people redirect their used clothes to different charity funds shows their altruistic behaviour to help those in need and it is an example of after-purchasing SF.

## 7 Limitations

The study has a number of limitations. First, not all Russian cities are represented. Consequently, a wider map of respondents would be beneficial. Second, most of the youth who took part in the survey are from Moscow. Their awareness of fashion sustainability might be higher than those from other cities. Then, the data collection period was limited to two months. The data collection method was an online survey implemented in Google Forms. We assume that the respondents answered honestly, as the poll is anonymous and does not influence their personal values. Another issue is that there might be a gender bias since more females took part in the survey; however, we tried to design the questions to be gender neutral. The majority of the respondents are from Humanitarian fields of studies. Finally, the survey showed that most respondents feel financially secure and estimate the material income of their families as enough for buying clothing, cars, and household appliances (67%); and enough for buying new cars and houses (25%). This financial stability might have an impact on grading their priorities while buying a new piece of clothing or awareness about brand initiatives concerning sustainability.

## 8 Conclusion and Recommendations

This research can be the basis for a more in-depth study of SF issues in Russia in general and Russian consumer purchasing and after-purchasing behaviours and practices. Further research should focus on how the attitude-behaviour gap can be bridged. Several steps should be worked out on how to engage Russian youth more in social and ecological agendas in fashion, in educational institutions, and in extracurricular activities, through advertisements, the personal experiences of influencers, and other projects. To reach a greater level of engagement, the problem should become more visible and embrace different networks of agents.

According to Manzini (2022), fashion should communicate and advance sustainable qualities. He adds that “fashion, in its maieutic function, should enable new practices of caring with the focus on relational role, being a promoter for the creation of networks of people capable of operating as transition agents” [57, p. 465]. The network of businesses, academic institutions, opinion influencers, customers and other stakeholders is crucial in developing sustainable consciousness.

This research might be of interest to fashion practitioners and fashion academics. The responses about fashion sustainability can present special value in understanding the world’s picture of the youth’s attitude towards this issue.

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# The Political Potential of Glamour: The Example of Underwear

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**Abstract.** This research project aims to investigate the symbolic and cultural meanings behind an underwear targeted to women in order to analyze the glamorous elements of a garment which is often presented in scenarios that allude to sexuality and transgression. The focus is on the underwear production of the last ten years, as the fashion world has lately been hit by discussions around the need to make fashion accessible for non-normative bodies. Now that fashion is called to play a role in terms of inclusivity on the symbolic as well as on the material level, the question behind this research is: what kind of relationship can be found between an inclusive underwear and glamour? The first part of this research will provide a complex definition of glamour, an ambiguous phenomenon that can either be conservative or subversive. The study will then proceed with an analysis on the relationship between glamour and underwear in the case of the two mainstream lingerie brands Victoria’s Secret and Calvin Klein. Finally, such relationship will be then investigated in the realm of a newborn inclusive lingerie brand named Chitè through an in situ ethnographic investigation.

**Keywords:** Underwear · Inclusivity · Empowerment · Glamour · Female Fashion

This project aims to investigate the symbolic and cultural meanings behind an underwear targeted to women in order to analyze the glamorous elements in a garment which is often presented in scenarios that allude to sexuality and transgression. Because of its peculiarity that consists of being in direct contact with the body, this type of garment raises relevant questions around the concepts of body ideals, femininity and intimacy. It’s no coincidence that the Italian term to indicate underwear is *intimo*, which refers to its main way of use. Sometimes, however, underwear might become outerwear and change its function: when it is exhibited it can take a subversive function, because it breaks with the taboos linked to hiding certain parts of the body. On the market a rich variety of underwear is available, proposing different designs that produce different modeling effects on the body. Such distinctions in the designs are accompanied by different iconographies on the symbolic level.

This research aims to provide new contributions in the field of fashion studies by investigating the relationship between sustainable and inclusive underwear brands born in the last ten years and glamour. This time span is not arbitrary as the fashion world has lately been hit by discussions around the need to re-evaluate its role in the context of social commitment. For example, an excessively fast production model has been

questioned due to the repercussions it entails on the environment, but also on all the people involved in production. But it is not only what happens “behind the scenes” that needs to be reconfigured, but also the surface. This applies, for example, to the extension of the surface of the garments, which can and must be enlarged to fit “non-normative” bodies. The rethinking of the surface concerns on the one side the designing process of the garment to fit more diverse body; on the other side the surface concerns also the media-sphere where oversized and non-white bodies have traditionally been granted a very limited presence.

As this is a very recent period, detailed studies on the latest underwear developments are lacking. Studies on underwear from a historical perspective certainly represent significant sources to draw upon, however the more traditional costume studies have often isolated the dress from its situations of use and focused on its material structure. Then, with the rise of cultural studies, fashion studies were strongly influenced by the human sciences and tended to favor an analysis on the symbolic level. This excessive propensity towards the material in spite of the symbolic - and vice versa - has often led to unsatisfactory results because it has been lost of sight the fact that certainly dress is understood in a specific cultural context, but it is also its materiality that plays a significant role in defining its social role.

In this regard, Kaori O’Connor’s study (2011) is exemplary because it demonstrates that it is possible to offer a study that overcomes a dichotomy between material and symbolic. O’Connor explains how DuPont had already tried to launch various lycra garments on the market starting from the 1950s, but it was during a time when the use of rigid underwear, which mainly involved the use of the girdle, was considered essential. The success of lycra occurred more than a decade later, in parallel with some social changes, in particular women’s access to the sports, as well as the rise of a fitness culture and a youth culture. DuPont’s success, explains O’Connor, occurred on two levels. One was undoubtedly linked to a successful communication strategy, centered on the association of the properties of this fiber with ideals such as those of youth, movement, dynamism, modernity. But such communication wouldn’t have been as convincing without the effective properties of such garment, i.e. elasticity and low maintenance.

Therefore, starting from the assumption that fashion is called to play a role in terms of a social commitment, and this must happen both in the communication as well as in the production, the question that this research poses is: what kind of relationship can be found between a socially engaged fashion – and in this specific case, a socially engaged underwear – and glamour?

To answer this question it will be necessary to first provide a complex definition of glamour, a phenomenon rarely addressed in academic discussion.

Glamour is an aesthetic code massively employed in the realm of fashion, to the point of seeming to signify the same thing, yet fashion is not always glamorous. What makes then fashion glamorous?

In this regard, Carol Dyhouse in *Glamour: Women, History and Feminism* (2010) identifies ultra-feminine and sparkly attire as the quintessence of a glamorous fashion, which has been seen strongly showcased in the context of the old Hollywood cinema. Dyhouse pays attention to the most recurring types of fabrics and decorations, as well as to the typical silhouette of some types of clothes, as in the case of the so-called slinky

dresses, made of silk, therefore shiny and luxurious, and conceived to fit the body to highlight the female's curves. Red lipstick, diamonds, furs and shiny fabrics compose the most typical repertoire of glamorous items. However, such elements can be either understated or overstated, showing two different faces of glamour. In fact, glamour can be delivered through elegance and good taste, or through exaggeration and overt sexuality. Glamour is a word of uncertain significance characterized by a certain ambiguity: it can be subversive or an expression of the status quo.

When showcased in an exaggerated manner, glamour appeals to queer practices, becoming a "fashionable act" that questions the "natural order" of things and the binary concept of gender (Krause-Wahl; Löffler 2021). Shiny garments deviate from the more traditional fabrics and colors of Western fashion, such as natural fibers like cotton or wool and a neutral color palette. The use of glamorous garments by the queer community expresses a voluntary decision to make oneself visible to the others.

Glamour appears to be a "quality mainly attaching to women" (Gundle 2008) as the most emblematic figures of glamour are female. Glamour plays then an important role in the construction of a precise ideal of femininity: in this regard, the most immediate example is the Hollywood diva.

The transmission of this hetero-normative model of femininity and of a consumerist lifestyle has been a controversial matter inside the feminist movement, originally meeting the resistance of the second-wave feminist movement. Such positions find their culmination in some protests, such as the one in September 1969 in Atlantic City against the Miss America contest: in such occasion, feminist activists threw inside a bin called the "freedom trash can" objects such as bras, lipsticks and fashion magazines. Glamour consists in the crystallization of a moment that is stripped of all its contradictions. This patina –that of the narrative and iconographic world of glamour – would, according to the militant feminists of the second wave, do nothing but keep women out of political commitment and enslave them to an unattainable aesthetic ideal. However, it can be seen that in a very short time this feminist discourse evolves causing ideological divisions inside the movements, because the positions of an intransigent and militant criticism against the canonical models of female beauty and the consumption of luxury goods don't satisfy a part of the movement, which proposes a more articulated and dialectic approach where it is indeed possible to incorporate glamorous and frivolous elements. For the so-called sex-positive feminists even in pornographic practices the power relations between genders can be redefined in an empowering sense. In the moment when the importance to consume explicit material by women is conceived as a potentially liberating act for those who have behind them a history of repression of their sexual wills and fantasies, then the role of women and of the female image in the consumer society needs to be further debated. Some specific items of clothing, such as fashionable underwear, bring out a type of femininity that won't be necessarily labeled anymore *tout court* as objectifying.

After a critical reconstruction of the phenomenon of glamour in the first chapter, the second chapter will offer an analysis based on two well-known underwear brands: Victoria's Secret and Calvin Klein. Such analysis will be based on the garments and the advertisements included in the collections from the late 1990s until the first years of the 2000s.

In the case of Victoria's Secret, it will be explained how the fidelity to a more traditional aspect of glamour was maintained through specific choices in the iconography, i.e. in the mimicry and appearance of the models as well as in the materiality and designs on the garments. Particular attention will be paid to the fantasy bra that embodies the concept of exclusivity, as it is a unique piece, not intended to be sold; and of sparkle and luxury, as it is totally covered with precious stones.

In the book *At Home with Pornography* (Juffer 1998), the author reflects on how Victoria's Secret advertisements convey the message that the consumption of lingerie is mainly an individualistic female desire, and that the desire to satisfy a male desire does not lie primarily in the purchase of these items. Such analysis is aimed at acknowledging an empowering aspect in the purchase of sexually charged items, however the author doesn't deepen the issue related to the exclusion of non-normative bodies from such messages. This emerges clearly in the casting of the models, who are predominantly white-skinned and with conforming bodies. In the rare catalogs where dark-skinned models appear, they are never portrayed in domestic places, but rather in exotic places wearing atypical outfits for the brand. Such choices clearly reinforce racial stereotypes according to which dark-skinned populations are genetically predisposed to a "wild" sexuality, thus unable to "domesticate" it.

Calvin Klein departs from glamour and appropriates the aesthetics of subcultures. On the material level, this happens through the choice of a minimal, unisex, elastic and sparkle-free underwear. The facial expressions and the body types of the female models are very different from the ones seen in Victoria's Secret photographs. The scholar Katharine Wallerstein (1998) glimpses a queer potential within the brand's aesthetic codes that fall under the category of *heroin chic*. What we see in these photographs is a body that rejects the normative categories: it is neither that of an adult nor that of a child, neither that of a woman nor that of a man. The setting provides a documentary aspect to these images, which aren't supposed to be perceived as retouched.

In the third chapter the analysis on the material and medial dimensions of underwear in relation to glamour will shift from international brands such as Victoria's Secret and Calvin Klein to a more niche and recent reality, the one of the made in Italy lingerie brand named Chitè.

Chitè offers a peculiar service, which is the possibility to produce a customizable underwear. According to Paolo Volonté (2021) this can be one of the frontiers for a greater access for consumers with oversized bodies. In this regard, Volonté interestingly asserts that the so-called "tyranny of thinness" lies its roots in the dynamics of mass production because in order to multiply the availability of garments it has been necessary to use prototypes that privilege certain types of bodies to the detriment of others.

The chapter dedicated to Chitè will consist of the results emerged from the interviews and observations gained on site, therefore inside the company, through an ethnographic method of investigation. In order to overcome the dichotomy between material and symbolic, the interviews will involve heterogeneous figures responsible on the material as well as on the symbolic-communicative level.

It is planned to follow Chitè during promotion initiatives, in particular during the photoshoots to observe and collect interviews about the castings for the models and the storytelling behind the shootings.

The interview will involve also those engaged in the logistic and production sector, who promote an artisanal and made in Italy production, making it possible to reconstruct a precise “geography of fashion” (Crewe 2017) of the brand.

The designer will be asked to explain what kind of considerations lead to choose specific fabrics and shapes; thanks to such answers it will be possible to reconstruct the “cultural meaning” that Chitè’s team attach to certain fabrics and designs. More generally such answers will make it possible to identify the aesthetic codes of Chitè and how they reveal a presence or a lack of fascination towards glamour.

The answers and the observations in situ that will be collected emerge will allow to answer the initial question: in which aspects does an ethical brand with a focus on inclusivity engage with glamour?

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# **Images of Fashion**



# Fashion Shows: The Greatest Show on Earth

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**Abstract.** Fashion shows are one of the most important communication and marketing tools through which fashion brands their brand image, personality, values, and culture. Also, Fashion Shows give brands high visibility online and offline. This study presents the evolution of Fashion Show studies through the literature review and proposes to return to the four elements –model, location, theme, and final– that make up a great show and the spectacle effect explained by Duggan, 2001, with the aim of proposing a systematization of the analysis of Fashion Shows from the perspective of communication and marketing. Therefore, the research presents the analysis of the Balmain Spring Summer 2023 Fashion Show, studying the validity of the four elements and how these elements are developed nowadays.

**Keywords:** Fashion Show · Fashion · Luxury · Communication · Balmain

## 1 Introduction

In 2001 Duggan defined Fashion Shows as “The Greatest Show on Earth”, linking one of the key events of fashion brands to the performing arts and likening designers as “designer-as-artist” [1]. This vision is still totally valid more than 20 years later. On the one hand, Fashion Shows are nowadays big shows that generate a lot of expectation, and the figure of the designer has been transformed into that of creative director, influencing the decision making of all the communicative elements of the brand [2].

The Fashion Shows are also called “Runway shows” or “Catwalks Shows”. They can be defined as “marketing events for fashionable clothing (both with regard to stylistic innovation and production), often related to fashion weeks held biannually” [3, p. 34].

Carolina Evans [4] developed a detailed study of the evolution of the Fashion Show, starting with the fashion shows that resembled theatrical plays with the themes of the designs of the haute couture houses in Paris and the strict fashion shows in the couturier’s salons or hotels (1950–1960); to the production of major spectacles in the 1960s, which saw the rise of prêt-à-porter, men’s fashion and the communication of fashion through specialised magazines. Evans highlights great precursors of fashion shows as spectacles such as Lucille and Poiret, Jean-Paul Gautier or Vivienne Westwood.

With the introduction of digital technologies, fashion shows have witnessed numerous changes [5]. The most important one is the change of their target. If fashion shows

were originally created for buyers and fashion journalists, the Internet has opened a democratization process also in the runways, consumers can now buy what they see on the catwalk through the model: ‘see now, buy now’ [5].

Besides, influencers are now first protagonists in the front rows, replacing the traditional target of buyers and members of the press. Therefore, it could be claimed there is no reason to have fashion shows anymore, and “it might seem that fashion shows were doomed to disappear” [5, p. 277].

Then, the pandemic came and made things even more complicated. There was no possibility to have fashion shows and brands started to launch their collections first as live broadcast and after that with more creative digital formulas [6]. However, this new scenario originates a big opportunity to connect with the audiences; spectacular productions as the well-known show of Jacquemus spring/summer 2020 in the lavender fields or a mix between fashion shows and fashion films introduced by Dior replace the position of fashion as a dream and evasion in a moment of social suffering.

Precisely, this idea of recovering what fashion is about (aspiration, desire) was the leading one once the pandemic period ended. Now, fashion shows are living a new golden era of spectacle, visual impact and great productions. Fashion shows are relevant communication tools for brands, at least in the luxury sector. Therefore, this paper tries to explore how brands are using fashion shows to communicate their values and to introduce some methodology to analyze them.

## 2 Fashions Shows and Communication

Fashion shows are one of the most important communication and marketing tools through which fashion brands their brand image, personality, values and culture through the senses [7]. “Fashion shows give high visibility to brands” [3].

For Strömberg [3] these shows have a primary commercial goal: present new collections to media and Fashion buyers, but at the same time, as Evans [4] explained, now contemporary designers work with conceptualized collections, and through the Creative Director [2], the Shows are associated to marketing strategies and “become a vital part of the orchestration of the garments as a cultural statement” [3, p. 35], being an essential part of the communication of brand values.

“Today, fashion shows often, but not always, take place in the context of fashion weeks in Paris, Milan, London, New York, and a growing number of fashion cities. Others are individual events outside of the fashion week circuit. These include the so-called destination fashion shows that brands organise in emerging geographic markets or exotic places to promote their cruise collections” [8, p. 479].

There is a variety of academic literature that analyzes the subject of Fashion Shows from very different perspectives, directly or indirectly, and mostly with theoretical analysis or qualitative research. Some of these studies analyze the relationship between fashion shows and communication and marketing.

Sung & Know [9] explained the importance of Storytelling in Fashion Shows as an element to transmit brand values and the story and inspiration of the fashion show. Their aim was to design a method of fashion storytelling as a strategic instrument for building a fashion show with art and popularity.

Xu [10] points out that the functions of marketing in Fashion Shows are brand promotion and sales, and proposes to analyze fashion shows by applying the 4P perspective: product, price, place, promotion. Rocamora [11] highlights the Fashion Show as an element of mediatization, and how individuals are increasingly exposed to information about fashion shows and brands. In the same perspective, Pichera and Rinallo [8] also highlight how parades have developed a crucial role in the processes of mediatization and in the development of the iconicity of parades in the market, especially with the advent of social networks. “The core of today’s fashion shows is a succession of models in clothes complemented by accessories, parading down a catwalk to music to promote a fashion brand’s new collection to an audience of buyers, journalists, influencers and, ultimately, consumers” [8, p. 480].

Shu & Tzu [12] study the Fashion Show from the curatorial perspective and its relationship with experiential marketing, in their study they affirm: “Fashion show is to connect clothing, performers, story situations, in specific space with hardware equipment, carrying extra skills, to achieve the design of the creative theme and purpose of the presentation” [12, p. 479].

With the development of technology and social networks, we find studies on social media analysis on Fashion Shows [13], where it is explained that shows are now broadcast by a mix of media. The relationship between videos and fashion shows and the role of YouTube [14] have also been explored. Similarly, a recent study analyzes the “Instagrammability” of the runways, highlighting the importance of architecture and scenography for the communication of the shows [15], and refers to Fashion shows as a spectacle of digital influence.

### 3 Methodology

Having seen the evolution of Fashion Show studies through the literature review, this paper proposes to return to the four elements that make up a great show and the spectacle effect explained by Duggan, 2001. The latest research on fashion shows does not present any methodology, theoretical framework or variables that allow researchers and professionals to systematically analyse fashion shows from a communication perspective. Therefore, this paper makes a first approximation to propose a methodology for the present and future analysis of fashion shows.

To this end, we first examine the validity of the four elements: model, location, theme, and final. Secondly, we analyze how these elements are developed nowadays and how people can perceive them through the evaluation of a Fashion Show.

Therefore, the elements are explored through the official video of a particular Fashion Show, since it is the platform through which most people see the Fashion Shows and are part of these spectacles [14]. The fashion show for the study is the Balmain Spring Summer 2023 Fashion Show in Paris, the central capital of fashion for the Haute Couture collections. Selected video is one of the most viewed videos on YouTube [14].

## 4 Communication Perspective of the Fashion Show

A Fashion Show is first and foremost a show. “Designer shows that fall into the category of spectacle are closely connected to the performing arts of theatre and opera, as well as feature films and music videos. As with stage performances, shows created by spectacle designers feature far more than garments. In most cases, they read as mini dramas, complete with characters, specific locations, related musical scores, and recognizable themes. Often, the only element setting fashion shows apart from their theatrical counterparts is their fundamental purpose—to function as a marketing ploy” [1, p. 246].

Shows have an entertainment function that can reinforce the idea of fashion beyond a simple information transmission function, i.e. an eventful character that can attract the attention of the audience [16]. Nowadays, fashion shows are used as a central tool of communication, emphasizing the visual and performance aspects of modern media. The actual fashion shows exclusivity must not be preserved but can be used as a marketing tactic. Furthermore, the installations do not simply illustrate that these fashion companies are digital innovators but promote the use of media efforts on its own sake [17]. When analyzing and developing a fashion show, it is important not to forget the elements related to marketing and communication strategy. Therefore, the constancy and continuity of fashion shows every season work to consolidate the brand and position it in the market.

As mentioned above, in a fashion show there is no clear limit between what is fashion and what is art. All the elements that a fashion designer uses, such as popular culture or historical precedent, promote the integration of fashion and performance [1]. There are four main elements that all designers can work with in order to make a unique show: model, location, theme and finale. The Spectacle effect can be added to these four, with other implicit elements such as music and lighting.

### 4.1 Model

There are many types of models in the fashion industry and they can be used for different purposes. For each Fashion Show the brands try to choose the right ones for the project. We can find: Runway models, Fit models, Glamour models, plus-size models or Alternative models. When the brands work with the models they have to take into account if they work with agencies or representatives, if an exclusivity contract is desired or what is the licence fee [18].

Some researchers point to Gianni Versace as the person responsible for the rise of the supermodel, which gave rise to the association with celebrities especially during the late 1980s and early 1990s [19, p. 1]. The model possesses a leading role in the show where the subject is not only a mere wearer of the garments as an object of expression but also shoes, accessories and branding. In addition, they play the role of showing the costume through their actions and movements on stage. Therefore, at the communication level, the models are also a key element to create attraction towards the event, to generate news and virality [20].

### 4.2 Location

Beyond seeking novelty through unconventional models, designers also experiment with the location of their shows. The stage where a show takes place is of great importance

for the designer and the brand. The shows associated with the official fashion week calendars are located mainly in: Paris, Milan, London, and New York. Each brand searches within these cities for the best place in relation to the inspiration of the collection, the media power or allowing a wide audience. Brands also organise shows outside of the fashion week circuit shows, known as cruise collections or ‘destination fashion shows’. In these runways, the location is an essential element to attract the media. “Sometimes the location is related to national or regional origins of a label and are often centred on mythical fashion cities” [15, p. 9]. Many cities present a symbolic capital that helps shape the Storytelling of a brand or a collection [15]. “In the case of the runway shows, concentrating on the house’s geographical origins is not the only way to create added value for a fashion brand. Increasingly, in addition to the birthplace of the house, other more exotic locations are used as fantasy projections and mythological reference points” [15, p. 9].

### 4.3 Theme

The theme of the show is the source of inspiration for the designer, the theme can be specific or abstract. The theme is an essential element in communication and marketing as it not only determines what the collection will look like, but also its communication, from the press conference and invitations to all the production of communication and sales materials, such as events associated with the shows. The theme will be the hook for all audiences: experts, media and consumers. As Evans (1999) explains, one of the first designers who gave great importance to the theme was Elsa Schiaparelli, who gave each collection a theme, two of them very renowned, inspired by the Circus Collection and the *Commedia dell’arte* [19]. Other great renowned designers were also highlighted by the themes of their shows such as Alexander McQueen, John Galliano or Karl Lagerfeld. The theme is associated with “StoryTelling”, which is the technique of telling stories through Fashion Shows. Sung & Know [9] explain that it is an essential element to transmit the brand and the history of the show and that it can be described as: “Story” = Fashion Design; “Telling” = Show. In other words, every Fashion Show must have and be a Storytelling, since people associate fashion design with the substance of a story, a show with the way of telling and a fashion show with the storytelling.

### 4.4 Finale

For Duggan [1] all shows, and therefore also fashion shows, have to pay special attention to how the event ends. This is one of the points where the Fashion Shows come more in connection with other arts such as theatre. The finales have to be designed to produce a great impact on the attendees that makes that show memorable and also generates conversations and news. The conclusion and the tone of the end of the show become determining factors for the audience, where the designer’s creative idea is reflected.

### 4.5 Spectacle

Fashion designers or Creative Directors tend to turn their Fashion Shows into big spectacles. For this purpose they usually focus on specific themes, create large stages, take care

of the lighting, music, staging. They seek to produce visually impressive performances tied to a particular theme, time, and place [1]. Sometimes, fashion shows also feature great choreography that tries to effectively showcase the theme of the fashion show and make an impact on the audience. In fashion shows, choreography also involves how the models walk and their facial expressions, enhancing the image of the show [9]. In this paper we associate to the Spectacle variable all the elements related to the experience of the audience in the Show. Fashion shows are a form of multisensory stimulation [7].

## 5 Balmain Fashion Show Analysis

In the framework of Paris Fashion Week, Balmain, under the creative direction of French designer Olivier Rousteing since 2009 [20], achieved one of the most viral moments of the event. Not only thanks to the show's mobile photographic experience, but also to the presence of the American actress and singer Cher as a special guest.

The maison's successful Spring/Summer 2023 proposal inspired by French, Italian and Swedish picturesque works did not leave the public indifferent [21]. According to Olivier, "a statement of intent to society, a love letter to the land and to our origins" [22]. So much so that the savoir-faire of the brand founded by Pierre Balmain in 1945 [23] around Rousteing is reinforced in each collection.

### 5.1 Model

The fashion show was attended by an army of models of the brand where Cher was undoubtedly the great and unexpected star. Among the cast of the 100 looks that paraded through the show, the other great face known and cheered by the attendees was the revolutionary model Ashley Graham [22], who wore a blazer style dress with renaissance and 'arty' print, where the pictorial prints took great presence. In its defense of diversity and inclusivity, the firm continues to bet on a diverse casting, made up of models of different sizes and ethnicities [24].

The 76-year-old actress kicked off and closed the maison's runway show with a surprise appearance, Cher, who wore a latex ensemble composed of black fitted pants with metallic details, a matching bodysuit that highlighted her figure and closing the look chunky boots from the collection with black fingerless gloves [25]. It is not the first time that the singer has been part of the image cast of a fashion brand, she did it once before with Versace [26].

Among the selection of celebrities and "it girls" in front row seating included Nicola Peltz and Brooklyn Beckham, Kylie Jenner, Dove Cameron, Barbier Coralie with Stromae, singer Nathy Peluso, Bretman, Hiba Abouk and player Achraf Hakimi, model Jon Kortajarena, Ajani, Devin Way, Jesse James, Emily Carey and footballer Neymar [27]. All of them wore designs from the collection. However, they did not count with the presence in the SS/23 collection of the model, businesswoman and image of the brand, Kim Kardashian, nor the attendance of the singer Carla Bruni who paraded for the firm in the previous edition of SS/22 [23].

## 5.2 Location

The show took place at the Jean-Bouin stadium, next to the Parc des Princes of Paris Saint-Germain in the French city of Paris. The start was delayed by one hour and the show was almost thirty minutes in long. A total of almost 6,000 people attended. The renowned French stadium is a space that combines design and spaciousness [28]. The firm opted for a renaissance and sustainable style for its décor, giving all the attention to the models. A catwalk reproduced with marble and large totems in the background that changed color as the show progressed framed and contextualized the fashion show of the French firm in a very Olympic panorama [29]. The choice of space is a milestone that generates a lot of expectation for lovers of the brand. Balmain chose once again a large space that began as an outdoor catwalk and is now known as the Balmain Festival [25].

## 5.3 Theme

Olivier opened the show at last fashion week with the following statement: “I want to create something that lasts forever”. The designer presented his joint ready-to-wear and couture proposals for Spring/Summer 2023 under what is known as his most sustainable collection to date. Futuristic (3D) and architectural designs and a lot of craftsmanship have taken the firm as a reference in its material inspiration for a collection that looks back to Renaissance art under the artistic works of painters [30]: The French Jean-Baptiste Frédéric Desmarais, the Swiss Jean Étienne Liotard and the Italian Paolo Veronese [22]. An example of this is the sculptural silhouettes that can be seen in the footwear of the collection.

Michelangelo’s cherubs, Da Vinci’s drawings and Galilei’s doodles were also sources of inspiration. Despite the strong presence of Renaissance motifs, the way in which he combined craftsmanship with ancestral transculturality and sustainability made the collection’s theme stand out from previous editions [23]. It should be noted that this collection experiments with wide-brimmed hats, great protagonists in the Dior Cruise [31] 2023 fashion show, and graphic prints in pieces where the model’s naked body becomes the pattern of the garment.

Delving further into the creative director’s DNA and following the success of the documentary about him, “The Orphan Prodigy” (Netflix, 2019), one can also appreciate the great influence on the recent collection designed by him for the firm Jean Paul Gaultier [32]. Serving as a closure to the theme chosen as inspiration, Olivier wanted to echo the renaissance men who preceded him, trying to seek science and push art to understand the world by involving Egyptian artisans in the creation of the pieces of the collection [23].

## 5.4 Finale

As a finale, Balmain chose garments characterized by silhouettes, feathers and embroidery. Despite the inspiring creations of the firm, the big surprise was the unexpected appearance of the American singer and actress Cher, who under the chords of her theme

song *Strong Enough* (1998) strutted the catwalk wearing a tight jumpsuit from the brand [23].

Despite the delay in the start of the show, the surprise factor -the presence of the pop star- made the audience go crazy before ending in an effusive hug and farewell with an emotional Olivier. The brand took advantage of the moment to make it the resource for the show's communication campaign. Unlike many attendees, there were many editors, critics and press people that penalized the brand by leaving the show before Cher even arrived [25].

## 5.5 Spectacle

The French luxury fashion house Balmain, celebrated its third edition of the "Balmain Festival" called "The Moment" coinciding with Paris Fashion Week, a show where in addition to presenting their new collection, they offered musical concerts and gastronomic experiences [25]. The result was the creation of a unique and ephemeral atmosphere that orchestrated the SS/23 collection and where the practice of dandyism was appreciated on the catwalk.

Without ever losing sight of the theatricalization of fashion, the French designer defends a more democratized fashion, thus replacing the more conventional closed-door fashion shows with macro-events where thousands of admirers gather every edition. For the creative thread of the "performance" [4] show known as Balmain Festival, the great star of the show was Cher, who welcomed the attendees to the fashion show through a video that showed that the star will be the image of the campaign of the new handbag of the maison, *The Blaze*. The delicate piece was built in 3D thanks to the work of the Spanish production company *Olímpic*, focused on sectors such as fashion, sports and music [29].

## 6 Conclusion

After the analysis of the show, we can affirm that the four variables proposed in this study are adequate in evaluating the communication of a fashion show. The collection reproduced a revolutionary encounter between the African craftsmanship of Rousteing's roots and the essence of the European culture that permeated his life.

Without losing its emphasis on novelty and spectacle, the show became a walking identity of its creative director, where through insignificant details and spectacular events he fused reality, fiction, and idealization. It should be noted that the importance of a fashion show is not just each individual collection, but instead, it's that special feeling that continues even after a show ends, such as what happened in the case of the Balmain fashion show.

The digital show was the other big show that the brand showcased through its various social channels. The panorama of new technologies is not alien to the world of fashion but is part of it, including behind the scenes of the show. Growing the impact and what is more important, the expectation towards the collection. Balmain's most relevant social networks and platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, showed the Festival live to their community [33].

The fashion industry is known for changing the status quo and an example of this was the creation of the new launch in three-dimensional format [31]. Through the maison's social networks, following a content planning and a very careful aesthetic, the brand was revealing different details of what happened in the big show, dividing the show experience into: pre-show, show and post-show.

The proposal of analysis based on the four elements validates their importance in the fashion shows and opens a path to future research. Given the proliferation of brands that want to make fashion shows as a communication tool, or the ability to perform in a more democratic way with the digital shows, it could be interesting to systematically analyze those elements that make the Fashion Show a unique communication or marketing action. Fashion Shows can not only be a moment where the new collections are shown. For the creation of brand experience for the followers and buyers of the brand, it is relevant also to highlight the elements that make this event unique.

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# Virgil Abloh's Cinematic Fashion Shows for Louis Vuitton's Men's Collections on YouTube

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**Abstract.** The mediatization of fashion explores the ways in which fashion practices (production, consumption, distribution and dissemination) are articulated and depend on the logic of digital media. The aim of this research is to show that in addition to the changes that the traditional fashion show has undergone due to the influence of mediatization, other effects are emerging, such as the appearance of autonomous audiovisual productions on YouTube, characterized by a narrative expansion of the curatorial purpose of the collection. The paper analyzes the case of Virgil Abloh's film productions for the presentation of Louis Vuitton's men's collections.

**Keywords:** fashion show · catwalk · Virgil Abloh · Louis Vuitton · YouTube · innovation · communication

## 1 The Mediatization of Fashion Shows

The interdependence between changes in the media and social change has caused a paradigm of interpretation known in communication studies as mediatization. The study on mediatization has become one of the most fruitful fields of academic research in communication, especially in the last decade, to such an extent that authors such as Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby point out that “the emergence of the concept of mediatization is part of a paradigmatic shift within media and communication research” [1: 314]. Mediatization has an important potential to explore changes in specific sectors or institutions of contemporary culture. Thus, alongside more general approaches -which speak of the mediatization of culture and everyday life- It is worth recognizing the existence of this phenomenon in areas such as politics, education, religion, science, music, sports, health or diplomacy [2–11], as well as in fashion [12–18].

According to D'aloia, Baronian & Pedroni [19] mediatization affects fashion mainly in three types of transformations. The first level of mediatization affects, first of all, social agents in their role of fashion consumers. The second level of mediatization affects the “places” where the display of fashion comes (magazines, catwalks, events, stores...). According to Torregrosa, Serrano-Puche and Sánchez-Blanco [18], at this second level,

mediatization explains three major interdependent issues. First, those related to the technological evolution of the media for producing and distributing content. Secondly, those related to the new genres, formats and languages created by these media. And third, in the changes in fashion communication as a strategic element -not only a tool for dissemination- for the definition of brand identity. The third level of mediatization refers to the transformations of the fashion industry as a social institution. The industry's ability to control, create, use and work with digital media logic has consequences on business models and the rules of the game in the sector.

The study of fashion shows belongs to the second level of mediatization mentioned above. The mediatization of fashion shows supposes that they have turned into "media events" [14]. The catwalks are no longer a mere exhibition of collections in the aisle that gave them their name, to become events broadcast and digitally recorded with a broader purpose: to share the universe of the brand. In other words, they have gone from being exclusive events in a delimited time and space, whose repercussion was conditioned by the brand's decisions and the mediation of the specialized professional, to disintermediated mass events that find in the digital environment a more intense influence and interaction.

The main changes that mediatization has brought about in fashion shows are: a) live broadcasting through brands' social networks; b) digital archiving and online availability for on-demand consumption in space and time. The free availability of content has eliminated the rigidity of filters between the presentation of collections and consumers. Digitalization makes it possible to build a relationship with consumers without intermediaries; b) the involvement of influencers as conversation accelerators. Influencers are the top models -they have doubled their role because in addition to parading they share content through their social networks- and celebrities, actresses, singers, bloggers or instagrammers who participate as models or as front row. They participate minimally in the conversation but achieve a high degree of engagement. According to Christianne Philipponne [20], fashion journalist for Forbes magazine: "the marketing strategy of influencers walking the runway might prove to be here to stay, because of its effectiveness in raising talk on collections and raising sales for brands". c) the design of the garments. The designs are as much an image that will be disseminated globally as a garment that is worn; d) the design of the catwalks. The online dissemination of the fashion show brings it progressively closer to the performing arts. Not only because, as in dance, theater or circus, the body is a means of artistic expression, but also because the fashion show is a scenic representation of an action, of characters, in a specific space that gives meaning to the collection and feeds the aesthetic universe of the brand. The aim is to achieve a total sensory experience, with a staging marked by music and lighting and recorded by cameras strategically located to capture different shots (from close-ups to panoramic), achieving a global vision of everything that happens. The theatricalization of fashion shows is an effective strategy in a space like the digital one where attention is a scarce commodity and brands compete to generate memorable and differential content. With all this, the online dissemination of the fashion show turns it into a popular cultural expression that gives meaning to the collection and feeds the aesthetic universe of the brand; e) the practices of fashion photographers adapt to the formats of social networks, mainly Instagram; f) the sale of products. The fashion show is no longer only for

specialized journalists and retailers, but for the entire public. This affects brands' sales methods, generating omnichannel strategies; g) Fashion shows are co-creation events of the brand's universe to which an unlimited number of users contribute. Brands coexist with a culture of participation where the consumer is now a prosumer. A user not only consumes content, but also produces it. In this sense, the fashion show is open to a different kind of public participation than usual. The public records the fashion show event with their cell phones and shares it through their social networks. The fashion show expands through videos and snapshots that circulate on social networks and can be tracked by following the hashtag proposed by the brand. Moreover, according to Mafucci [21], as the parade is available online, "the viewer can stop it by extracting a segment of the file to share it. A single file can be isolated and reused as a short animation". The official video is no longer the only perspective. This democratization multiplies, extends the face-to-face experience of the fashion show and turns it into a multidirectional communication tool that has a much wider reach. In this way, brand identity is also influenced by the circulation of this content.

The consolidation of digital technologies as communication tools transforms old routines and experiments with new possibilities. The consolidation of the online environment as a new communication space enhances the production of content according to the usual practices of each platform. Brands adopt their languages and follow the prevailing logics in these spaces. Fashion shows are no longer simply presentations of new collections, "they are global platforms where they can build their brand identity and attract new consumers" [22] directly.

In addition to the mentioned changes that the physical catwalk has experienced, there has also been an evolution, yet to be explored from the point of view of academic research, in the way fashion brands communicate their fashion shows on YouTube. One of the most evident transformations on behalf of brands is the development of transmedia products to replace the simple recording of the analogical contents of the fashion show in digital contents.

The overall objective of this research is to show that in addition to the changes that the traditional fashion show has undergone due to the influence of mediatization, other effects are emerging, such as the appearance of autonomous audiovisual productions on YouTube, characterized by a narrative expansion of the curatorial purpose of the collection. Therefore, according to this reasoning, it is born dependent on the physical show, but relying on the logics of the digital environment, it can be defined as an autonomous audiovisual product. This paper explores, based on the case of Virgil Abloh as creative director Louis Vuitton Men, these types of contents.

## **2 Virgil Abloh: The Presentation of the Louis Vuitton Men's Collections on YouTube**

In 2018, Virgil Abloh, a civil engineer and architect, became the first African American artistic director in charge of Louis Vuitton's menswear collections. According to Alexandre Marain (2021) [23], writer for *Vogue*, Abloh redefined the luxury codes of Louis Vuitton Menswear collections with his emblematic streetwear while still maintaining the house's heritage and *savoir faire*. Many assert that thanks to his particular

background and unique emergence in the fashion world, Abloh signified a new era for the french brand, full of jauntiness, freshness and clashing new paradigms [24]. In *2ème Étage*, a documentary film that follows the making of Virgil Abloh's first collection at Louis Vuitton Menswear, made by director BAFIC and street artist, Jim Joe, Abloh states: "The elephant in the room is that I come from a different place, into this lineage of fashion. (...) I come from this place, this place usually labeled as streetwear (...) there's nuances from my architecture background, DJ background and art world background" [25].

His artistry was very much based upon his background, including his personal life and experiences. This is why, beyond the distinctive aesthetic elements that came along with his unconventional upbringing in the fashion field, his conception of streetwear contained a deeper narrative linked to his early life in Illinois with his ghanaiian immigrant parents. Virgil Abloh embedded the cultural scope of African American culture in his work, making an effort to fight towards the democratization of luxury through the appreciation of the influence of black culture in fashion. He utilized important personalities of the black community, like Micheal Jackson as inspiration. He also incorporated new ingredients distant from the brand's tradition: playfulness, surrealism and the helm of imagination and dreams now imbue Louis Vuitton designs through cultural allusions to other art forms such as the 1978 musical film, *The Wizard of Oz*, starring an all black ensemble cast.

Throughout his eight collections, both in his designs and the outline of the fashion shows, he kept both the racial and ludic aspects as key, conjoined elements that constitute a new speech for the brand; in a sense, a new brand identity now in tune with today's world.

This brand reorientation brought along new communication strategies. Abloh began adding a theatrical dimension to his fashion shows and incorporating components to the traditional elements of catwalk. As it was customary, all fashion shows were recorded and later uploaded to the brand's YouTube platform. One of Abloh's biggest contributions was the full exploitation of YouTube to better develop the communication breadth of the fashion shows.

The emergence of the pandemic made traditional fashion week impossible, prompting an inevitable turn to digital. For the presentation of the Men's Spring-Summer 2021 Men's collection, Abloh directed the video *The Adventures of Zooom with Friends*, posted on Louis Vuitton's YouTube channel. Shot around the ancestral Paris home of the founder, the film follows movers packing up Louis Vuitton shipping containers and loading them onto a barge, which sails down the River Seine and leaves Paris. On it, a colorful crew of animated characters called 'Zooom with friends' are hiding as stowaways. As Abloh explains in his show note number 5: "Zooom with friends turned tradition on its head, painting the town and the hallowed halls of Asnières" [26].

Abloh's concept expands the scenography; now it opens up to the city of lights, showing more clearly the intention of merging Parisian tradition and Abloh's street style and edge. The description of the YouTube video explains: "The Men's Artistic Director imagined a virtual and literal journey across the globe that begins at the Maison's ancestral home in Asnières. Follow a colorful crew of animated characters tucked away as stowaways and stay tuned for the collection's next stop in Shanghai next August

at <http://on.louisvuitton.com/6052GTMap>” [27]. This YouTube content, thanks to the technical aspects involved in the obligation to move to a digital format, came not only as a more mature sense of storytelling, but in a fully cinematic form. This cinematic form allows the messages, concepts and new meanings that Abloh wants to convey and associate with the brand to be conveyed in a much more tangible way. In accordance with Alexander Astruc this is due to the fact that film is a “language, that is, a form in which and through which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions in exactly the same way as is currently the case with the essay or the novel” [28].

On 6 August 2020, after crossing the oceans, the shipment arrives in Shanghai and the Louis Vuitton Spring-Summer 2021 men’s runway show unfolds. On the same day, August 6, the YouTube brand’s channel published a three-minute video that gives continuity to the first and the narrative surrounding these characters: time travel, diversity and playfulness. This prelude sets the tone for the show and becomes an impactful statement of the ideas and intents behind the collection. On September 2, the journey continues in Tokyo, where a third show is performed, which also has its audiovisual production posted the same day on YouTube. This is a video that is specially made for on-line viewers because it is a cinematic clip with fictional contents to introduce them to the creative contents of the collection. The experience of the viewer shifts and is enhanced by the addition of the cinematic language that owns a narrative dimension as it in itself is experienced distinctly. According to Epstein [29] the effect of film is such that the human being is placed in a position where he must operate with his whole living person, while forgoing its aura. He claims the cinematic experience is corporeal, meaning that cinema is an apparatus of vision of and into the body. Meaning that cinema has a submerging effect upon its viewer.

For the presentation of the Fall-Winter 2021 collection, Abloh continues to explore the possibilities offered by the presentation of the collection on YouTube. The brand is releasing a stand-alone audiovisual production on the day of the show, in which the on-site show begins with the film *Peculiar contrast, perfect light* and in which the footage of the Paris show has been embedded and edited as if it were part of the film, with the addition of footage produced specifically for the viewer on this platform. In this manner, the traditional video of the fashion show, a recorded event to later be uploaded to YouTube, has now been transformed into a fully scripted, theatrical composition in which every element is rigorously formulated to convey a message, not only the curatorial speech of the collection but also the new brand identity.

Also in the spring-summer 2022 collection, Virgil Abloh uses a cinematic presentation of the collection and/or the fashion show, taking into account that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between them in the case of audiovisual production. In the spring-summer 2022 film, entitled *Amen Break*, the resource of a door is used to connect the fictional story with the physical fashion show. The characters enter and exit through them generating a narrative continuity, where what happens in the physical set is no longer a priority in the story.

### 3 Analysis of Louis Vuitton Men's Fall-Winter 2021 and Spring-Summer 2022 Cinematic Shows on YouTube

The study of these two digital contents is relevant because they are the clearest expression of these experimentations that Abloh performs in order to make his creative decisions more tangible. The parallel analysis of these contents is necessary to draw complementary conclusions and therefore, determine a wholesome view of the matter. Table 1 below shows the data relating to the two videos analyzed.

*Strange Contrast, Perfect Light* is an adaptation of *Stranger in the Village* by African-American novelist James Baldwin, in which he creates an allegory about the racism he experienced as the only black man in the small Swiss town of Leukerbad in the 1950s and his life as an African-American in the United States. With this prompt, Abloh's intention is to depict the challenges that come along being an African American artist, as it is explained in Abloh's show note number 6: "*Stranger in the Village* also illuminates the experience of being Black in Europe, and being a Black artist in the birthplace of European art". Abloh makes use of the narrative as a resource to express the collection's curatorial speech: "Tourist vs. Purist: society's established structure of outsiders vs. insiders, manifested in broad civilization as well as individual domains of knowledge such as the arts" [26].

The film begins with Yasiin Bey looming in between the snow-covered Swiss mountains and reciting verses: "In this white wilderness the construct of purity is sullied with every step. The evidence I carry, the hidden sun in every breath. My blacker self whose whiter death is luxury. I'm no stranger anymore. The world is love to me. The snow will melt, the ice will fall and make it up to me". He's a foreigner, a visitor who foresees he will no longer be alienated from his context. The story told by Baldwin is now charged with a new meaning. Under the lens of Abloh's speech, it is now a "demonstration of the themes of artistic provenance and ownership studied within the collection, expressed in the figurative idea of a heist: the established art world's re-appropriation of foundations of cultural heritages different to their own" [26]. The outsider now dominates the esoteric art form traditionally mastered by the insider.

On the other hand, *Amen Break*, named after the drum break that served as a foundation for Hip-hop and electronic music genres like jungle and drum 'n' bass, serves as a metaphor that intends to represent one of the most groundbreaking moments for black art and culture. The film is an 'abstract interpretation' as Abloh calls it, of the story of Lupe Fiasco, an American rapper. His story is branded by his childhood, as he grew up in the Southside of Chicago in the 70s and 80s, amidst the black and hispanic gang expansion. His father, Gregory Jaco, an activist, former member of the Black Panther Party, offered youngsters martial arts classes as an alternative to gangs. According to Abloh, he was "a local legend, his work in the community served to neutralize archetypical preconceptions and open a gateway of opportunity previously obscure" [26].

As detailed in the show note 7 from the Spring-Summer 2022 men's collection, the story goes about a father and a son "united by an unnamed loss, crossing a dream world to deliver a message to the other side. Along the way, adversaries conspire against the child, heroes emerge to guide him, and great sacrifices are made to get him across the divide. The film observes life's supporting figures: those who embark on long journeys

**Table 1.** Technical information for Louis Vuitton’s Men’s Fall-Winter 2021 and Spring-Summer 2022 YouTube videos

Data	Peculiar contrast, Perfect light	Amen Break
Brand	Louis Vuitton Men	Louis Vuitton Men
Collection	Men’s Fall-Winter 2021	Men’s Spring-Summer 2022
Designer	Virgil Abloh	Virgil Abloh
Duration	15:11 min	17:06 min
Video URL	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV_QoQD_nrA&amp;t=106s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV_QoQD_nrA&amp;t=106s</a>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsgfCzAQtb4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsgfCzAQtb4</a>
Curatorial Speech	<p>“Investigating the unconscious biases instilled in our collective psyche by the archaic norms of society, the collection’s presentation is thematically informed by James Baldwin’s seminal 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village.” Through his experiences as an African-American visitor in a Swiss village, Baldwin’s essay serves as a leitmotif for Abloh’s explorations of a familiar present-day experience by reflecting society’s established structure of cultural outsiders vs. insiders.” (Louis Vuitton, 2021)</p>	<p>“The film explores ideas of transmission: the act of passing something from person to another, activating waves of change across generations, and impacting the lives of others.” (Louis Vuitton, 2021)</p>
Segments	Introduction, collection presentation and Credits	Introduction, collection presentation, more filmic content and Credits
Directors	Virgil Abloh and Moved by the motions	Virgil Abloh, Mahfuz Sultan and Chloe Sultan
Locations	Introduction: Swiss mountains Collection Presentation: Paris inspired marble set	Introduction: Deserted Mountains Collection presentation: A set decorated as a forest More filmic content: A karate school

*(continued)*

**Table 1.** (continued)

Data	Peculiar contrast, Perfect light	Amen Break
Starring	Yasiin Bey and Saul Williams	GZA, Goldie, Saul Williams, Issa Perica, Caleb Femi, JIM JOE, Kandis Williams, Thelma Buabeng, Octavia Burgel, Lupe Fiasco, Julian Eugene Tsukasa Williams, Damian Eugene Nagisa Williams, Shabaka Hutchings and Malik Le Nost
Musicians and performers	Music direction: Benji B Musicians: Harp: Ahya Simone Saxophone & Flute Tapiwa Svosve Cello & Piano: Patrick Belaga Drums: Mathieu Edward Additional Music Production by Daniel Pineda Additional Poetry by Kai Isaiah Jamal Final Musical performance by yasiin bey	Music direction: Benji B Musicians: GZA Benji B El michels Affair Nguzunguzu feat. Shabaka Hutchings Goldie
Set designer	Play Lab Inc	Play Lab Inc

*Elaborated by the author*

to make the passage less difficult for those who follow; who fight the battles for the future of others, break the boundaries, and dismantle archetypical notions" [30].

The video begins with the voiceover of a kid telling us his story: "When I was little, my father was famous. He was the greatest samurai in the empire (...) he cut off the heads of 131 lords, it was a bad time for the empire. The shogun stayed inside his castle and never came out, people said his brain was infected by doubts. He was scared of the shogun but the shogun was scared of him. That was the problem. Then, one night, the shogun sent his ninja spies to our house. They were supposed to kill my father, but they didn't. That was the night everything changed".

Everything has changed after this savior figure of a father came along. Everything changed after one person drew the line and disrupted the social constructs. Within such an interpretation of Fiasco's story and the narrative of the film, there's an evident message beneath: a metaphor to Abloh's intent as a creative director for Louis Vuitton, and his specific intent with this collection, the dismantling of archetypes in fashion and creating a path for opportunity.

Unlike the traditional fashion show, in both *Amen break* and *Peculiar contrast, Perfect light*, this content has a more obvious sense of storytelling. In both cases, the narrative functions as a parable, enhancing the curatorial discourse and the designer's intention

with the collection. Telling a story makes communicating the meanings behind a collection much easier. In addition, one of Abloh's great hallmarks has been the use of words to support the meanings of his collections, for example through the use of glossaries with definitions in his show notes. It is also seen in the storytelling of these digital contents, specifically in his use of narrators.

Another distinction of the live fashion show is the broadening of the audience's point of view. This can be evidenced with the different locations of *Peculiar contrast*, *Perfect light*, as it takes place on two settings: the Swiss mountains and a set in Paris decorated with green marble that symbolizes the fluctuating emotions of the 'stranger in the village'. Yasiin Bey concludes his performance by leaving his silver suitcase on the floor. The rap ceases and flute starts to sing in the background. One of the models begins performing a dance in the marble set in between the rest of models, who remain still. Suddenly, the image cuts to a hand held zenithal shot of the performer dancing in the middle of the snowed mountains, then, back to him dancing on set. The spectators are transported back and forth in between locations to show how the character, 'the stranger', is still alienated in both scenarios, just like the parallelism Baldwin utilizes in his novel. In Abloh's words: "The performance embodies the physical confrontations with the psychological conflicts explored in Baldwin's essay" [31].

It is important to remark that, before being used as a tool to add meaning and nurture the narrative itself, it is a way in which the digital expands the audience's experience and point of view. In this sense, in a live show, the viewers experience a single scenario. The audiovisual content and its montage allow them to experience different scenarios at the same time, in a single show. The montage and the union of different sequences, in different places, with different points of view, allow them to broaden our own perspective, which ceases to be linear and limited.

Along the same line, given that digital techniques allow the manipulation of reality perception, taking this case study as a base, another characteristic is the hybridisation between reality and iconic elements belonging to the brand's universe that bring along new aggregated meaning to the brand.

In *Amen break*, as it was mentioned above, the story is about a father and a son that cross a dream world to deliver a message to the other side. Considering this, the film shows the two characters, in cowboy-like assemblage, in the middle of deserted mountains, disappearing into thin air as they cross an archway. However, it is not just only a random arc, but an iconic doorway that Abloh has been using since the *Heaven on Earth* Fall-winter 2020 collection, when his shows began with the arc. It is an element that the designer made an effort to iconize as one of the brand's symbols, and in this film, he does so by not only using it as a diegetic device but also by doing so, he adds meanings to it, symbolizing it as the archway to opportunities, the door you have to cross to dilute preconceived ideas.

Furthermore, both cases are independent contents apart from the collection's live fashion show. Beyond being the dissemination vessel of a fashion show, these contents have become autonomous. As a result, this is a process of democratization on behalf of the brand, since it offers a product by itself, free of charge with open availability to everyone who has access to the internet. It is an attempt to bring the younger generations

closer, not so much for the purchase of a product, but the experience the brand offers through YouTube.

## 4 Conclusions

The way in which Abloh presents his collections in YouTube has opened the possibilities of the emergence of a new format due to its innovative nature in relation to retransmissions of fashion shows and the archive purpose in which the platform was used before. This is because Abloh generated an autonomous audiovisual product to present his collections.

This kind of Youtube content has a number of defining characteristics; first, there's a more palpable storytelling, because the show is driven by action and character, it has something of a cinematic approach. Such storytelling allows the curatorial speech to emerge more clearly into the show, it enhances the impact of the curatorial speech. Additionally, the point of view, the perception of the viewer, elongates within the experience of the cinematic expression of these contents. This is because, as opposed to the mere retransmission of the live show, through the editing and scripting of the footage, the viewer is now able to "travel" with it; he's no longer tied to the physical location of the show, but is as malleable and free as the narrative allows. Furthermore, these fashion shows allow for a better communication of not only the curatorial speech of a given collection, but also the identity of the brand. This is a consequence of the fusion of brand elements and reality thanks to technical tools such as the editing of the footage.

As a result, Virgil Abloh's cinematic presentation of the collection and/or the fashion shows on Youtube are a brand product in itself, free and accessible for everyone, that offers a genuine brand experience. That Abloh's deviceful manner to display his collections for the digital audiences might be the beginning of a new format, the cinematic fashion show, that it is yet to be determined if the brand and competitors will follow or not. In Andrej Lesniak's words, "Abloh's design strategies as an effective introduction of relative novelty production processes into the realm of fashion" [32].

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# Teleworking and Video-Meetings. Does Fashion Fit?

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**Abstract.** The Covid19 pandemic forced most companies to impose teleworking from home. Although individuals have access to many platforms in order to collaborate and to communicate with others, telework during the pandemic brought to light many challenges. Among these, personal appearance, and the setting in which videoconferences are conducted emerged as critical elements when working from home. Very few studies have researched the role of fashion in video-meetings. To address this gap, a survey has been executed, providing relevant insights into workers' videoconferencing practices. Findings show that individuals' appearance when doing online meetings with the camera on is very different from when they are in a professional setting. Furthermore, the desirability and prediction of use of digital elements/filters such as clothing, make-up, accessories, hair/beard, and home décor for professional settings are high. The implications of this study are twofold. Firstly, it provides novel insights on the role of digital fashion in the context of teleworking. Then, avenues for future research on digital fashion for videoconferencing in a post-pandemic setting are presented.

**Keywords:** Digital fashion · Teleworking · Online meetings · Personalisation

## 1 Introduction

Covid19 has impacted our lives drastically, challenging daily routines. Lockdowns and social distancing measures imposed by governments across the globe affected both social and work life, causing unprecedented disruptions to labour markets. Individuals were forced to work from home facing many challenges, including psychological and technological issues [1]. Before the pandemic, telework was growing slowly and it involved mainly workers in high skilled knowledge professions. The pandemic caused a rapid and major increase in telework and for many workers it was a new experience often conducted under challenging circumstances, such as the lack of suitable workspaces, inappropriate ICT tools and no access to childcare, raising an interesting debate on teleworking and its impact on individuals' well-being.

The fashion industry has been greatly affected by the severe restrictions which were implemented by governments to contain the pandemic, such as the closure of stores, and changing consumer behaviour due to no or limited occasions to leave the house. By having to spend more time at home, individuals started changing the way in which

they presented themselves, swapping their formal wear for casual clothes also for work activities.

Working from home entails also organizing professional meetings through videoconferencing systems, hence individuals were forced to familiarize themselves with videoconferencing, which involves consideration of personal appearance and the environment from which the video meeting is conducted [2]. Through technologies such as augmented reality, videoconferencing platforms are creating a new physical-virtual space, which offers the instruments to extensively personalise the video-call settings, from the background to the personal appearance of the individual, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy [3]. Arguably, as the time on camera rises due to videoconferencing practices, the digital self is becoming increasingly important [4]. Yet, few studies such as that by Zandan and Lynch [2] analyse the role of fashion in teleworking and, to the best of our knowledge, a conversation on such topic is still lacking in the academic literature. Due to the importance of social norms that guide consumers' behaviour and the way in which they present themselves [5], studying teleworking practices and fashion is expected to provide novel insights. Hence, this paper conducts an explorative study on the practices of individuals when it comes to fashion-related dimensions of professional videoconferences during the Covid19 pandemic, encompassing all dimensions that can be seen through a camera: make-up, hairstyle, clothes, accessories, and home-décor [6]. Additionally, it analyses the way in which fashion could be afforded by videoconferencing platforms through digital filters that can help individuals appear as if they were in the office, hence providing insights into the level of interest in digital filters for professional settings. Finally, it hypothesises a model, which could be tested in future studies, to explain individuals' intention to adopt digital fashion for online meetings.

## 2 Literature Review

The idea that work could be conducted away from the traditional office space emerged in the 1950s [7]. ICTs have had a central role in the evolution of working from home, linked to the introduction of personal computers in the 1980s, laptops and mobile phones in the 1990s, and subsequently to their wider access [8]. Telework is defined as “the use of ICT to enable daily work activities to be performed while being away from the office” [9 p. 1]. Access to information technology and its advancement enabled to remove the strict connection between work tasks and location, offering flexibility but also creating potential conflicts between work and home/family roles [10]. A stream of research focuses on identifying the motivations and advantages of working from home. At the individual level, benefits include higher productivity, higher work-life balance, and reduced commuting time. At an organizational level, advantages include overhead savings, higher employee productivity, lower turnover and absenteeism. However, teleworking entails also challenges and drawbacks. For employees, it might cause social isolation, lower visibility, reduced career chances, and difficulties in managing home space and resources. The transition between work and home roles can be complex and cause fatigue derived from unusual working hours [10, 11]. For organizations, it could result in lower control over employees and their activities, loss of team-work benefits, and difficulty in motivating workers [7, 9, 10]. Literature on teleworking before Covid19 focuses on workers

who voluntarily work from home for a percentage of their working hours, whereas with the pandemic workers were forced to work from home independently of their willingness. Moreover, workers had to work from home every day [1]. Ipsen et al. [12], who studied the impact of working from home during the Covid19 pandemic, found that the main advantages other than controlling the spread of the virus were reduced commuting time and flexibility. Whereas the main challenges were missing colleagues and inadequate conditions of the home office. Interestingly, these factors reflect the advantages and disadvantages of pre-Covid19 literature. Instead, reduced freedom of leaving the house highlights the forced home working condition during the pandemic. Additionally, another challenge hastened by Covid19 is the “always on culture” and the struggle to define boundaries between home and work activities as workers may be torn between the desire for flexibility and the need for structure. To overcome this struggle, individuals try to identify cues that enable them to transition between different roles, such as logging out of work equipment. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of ICTs challenges workers’ ability to switch off [10]. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has stimulated a change in consumer behaviour and the way in which they conduct work related activities. Yet, limited research has addressed the behavioural effects of teleworking. As stated by Waizenegger et al. [1 p. 429], it is important to research how individuals are experiencing working from home for “business as usual” through technology in order to identify how new digital practices can be developed in novel circumstances. To address such limitation, this study focuses on technological affordances, “the attribute of an object that permits or enables potential behaviours of animals or human beings” [13 p. 912]. The main difference between working from an office and teleworking is the environment from which the worker conducts activities. During the pandemic many workers experienced a withdrawal of typical environmental affordances as in presence meetings were replaced by online meetings afforded by videoconferencing platforms, which allow numerous possibilities to personalise both the setting of the videoconference and the personal look. The office environment can be replaced by digital filters which reproduce an office space or any other background [8]. Moreover, it is possible to modify the personal appearance through augmented/virtual reality technologies that enable to touch up our looks digitally. For example, make-up brands are developing filters that help us be camera-ready in just a few clicks by applying digital make-up [14]. Limited research addresses the ways in which videoconferencing practices are linked with fashion dimensions. A survey conducted by Zandan & Lynch [2] addresses questions related to videoconferences preferences and shows that, in terms of style, individuals’ most appreciated choice is business casual and neutral colours in order to appear as an “expert”, “authentic”, and “trustworthy” worker.

Therefore, this study aims to advance the literature on teleworking by analysing how videoconferencing practices might be afforded by digital filters. In specific, it aims to answer the following questions: how do people, who work from home, feel about turning on their camera? What are their practices when it comes to make-up, hair-style, jewellery, clothing, and home décor? Is there an interest for digital filters that might help individuals appear more similar to the way they look while in the physical office?

### 3 Methodology

An online Qualtrics survey was distributed through snowball sampling between February 23, 2021, and April 12, 2021.

The first section included demographic questions, such as age and gender. Then workers were asked work related questions, including job sector, seniority level, working hours, and the country in which their office/university is based.

The second section addressed questions on videoconferencing frequencies before and during the pandemic. Moreover, it collected information regarding the platforms and devices adopted for online meetings, including the use of lighting and filters. The subsequent section queried questions related to respondents' personal appearance during videoconferences. Participants were asked questions on their behaviour in terms of wearing and styling clothes, make-up, accessories, and hairstyle for meetings with the camera on. The final section measured whether and to what extent there is an interest in fashion-related filters for videoconferences, in terms of attractiveness and desirability measured with a five-point Likert scale adapted from Freling et al. [15] and the intention to use such filters measured on a five-point Likert scale adapted from Gordon and Bruner [16]. Moreover, a five-point Likert scale measured self-efficacy of using digital elements [16]. The survey concluded by asking the expected frequency of videoconferences post-pandemic and an open question to collect any additional thoughts regarding the use of such digital elements.

### 4 Results

Results are presented in the following themes: demographics, videoconferencing from home practices, camera behaviour and personal appearance during online meetings, interest in digital elements, and self-efficacy.

#### 4.1 Demographics: Workers

A total of 365 surveys were collected from individuals with teleworking experience. Of these, 297 were completed. The surveys that were partially completed ( $n = 68$ ) were considered for analysis only if at least 40% of the survey was answered ( $n = 11$ ). Hence, 308 surveys were considered relevant for this study. Among the respondents, 58% are females, 41% are males, and 1% preferred not to answer. Their age ranges from 21 to 80 years old. Most respondents work in the education sector (41%), followed by the media, culture, and graphic sector (16%), the commerce (10%) and the financial/professional services sector (10%). Half of respondents when teleworking from home are based in Switzerland, followed by Italy (28%), UK (6%) and US (3%). For 15% of the participants their office is based in a different country from where they telework. Arguably, this is justified by the fact that 78% of respondents who telework from Italy have an office based in Switzerland. Moreover, 7% of respondents only work from home and do not have an office. Most participants (78%) work full time.

## 4.2 Videoconferencing from Home Practices

Results show an increase in the number of videoconferences conducted from 2019 to 2020. In 2019 over 40% of workers almost never conducted videoconferences from home. Whereas, in 2020 respondents engaged in videoconferences from home several times a day (30%) or almost every day (34%). Most respondents worked from either a home office or the living room. Workers use more than one platform for online meetings, including Zoom (77%) and MS Teams (75%), followed by Skype (32%) and Google Meet (32%). Most individuals usually conduct videoconferences on PC/laptops (98%), phones (24%) and tablets (10%). Moreover, when preparing for videoconferences a large portion of workers (63%) do not use any features provided by the platforms. However, 37% of workers set, according to their preferences, at least one feature among filters, lighting, camera, and microphone settings.

## 4.3 Camera Behaviour During Videoconferences

This section presents the results regarding camera behaviour.

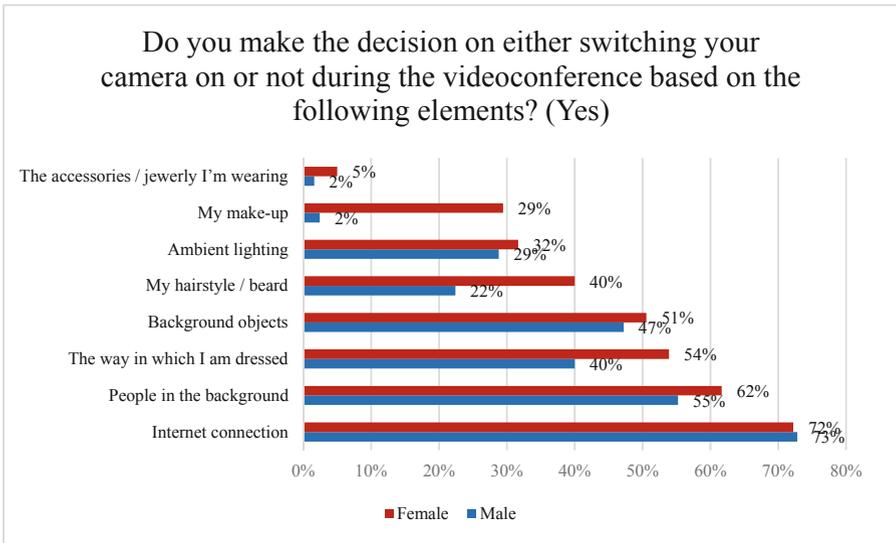
When conducting online meetings from home 35% of males and 24% of females always keep the camera on. It emerges (Graph 1) that workers' decision to turn on the camera highly depends – for both female and male respondents – on internet connection, people in the background, and background objects. For females, the decision also highly depends on the way in which they are dressed, their hairstyle, and make-up. For the workers who do not always keep the camera on, being the presenter or participating in formal meetings are important motivations to keep it on. Interestingly, feeling that they look appropriate is more important for females than for males. Whereas, internet connection issues, performing other activities, and a background that is not appropriate hold workers from turning the camera on. Moreover, the fact that it reduces the time spent to get ready is also a relevant motivation for females. Other motivations for not turning the camera on include technical motivations, the type and length of the meeting, a high number of participants in the meeting, and privacy concerns such as other people in the room.

## 4.4 Personal Appearance During Videoconferences from Home

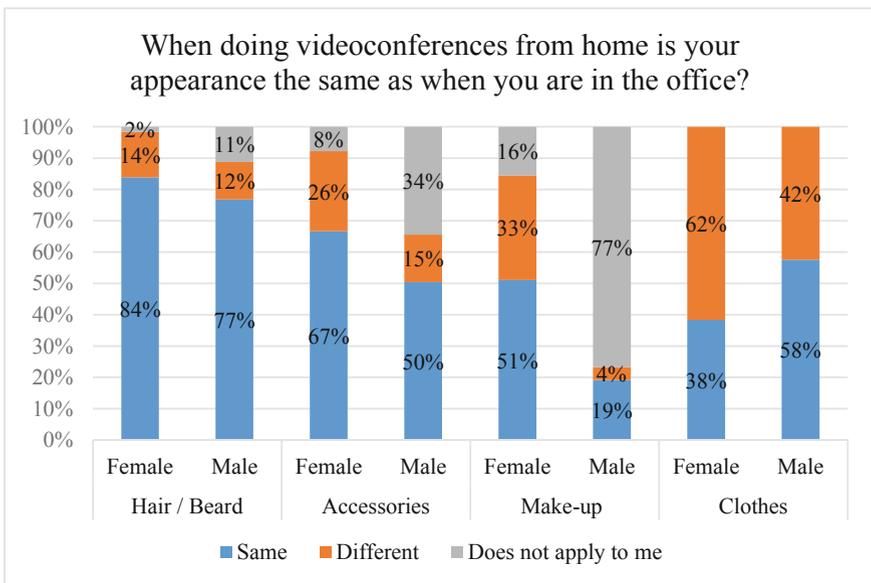
This section analyses workers' personal appearance when conducting videoconferences with the camera on from home. Graph 2 shows that workers' personal look is different when doing videoconferences from home. Workers state that they dress more casually. Not surprisingly, they focus mainly on the top which is seen on camera, for example by wearing a blouse or shirt, casual bottoms, and sporty or no shoes. In terms of make-up, they wear lighter or no make-up at all. Moreover, respondents put less effort in styling their hair. They style it more casually and wear it more natural, for example in a ponytail or in a bun. Furthermore, males do not shave as often.

## 4.5 Interest in Digital Elements and Prediction of Use

After the pandemic, workers expect that the frequency of videoconferences will not go back to what it was before the pandemic. Over 40% of respondents expect to conduct at



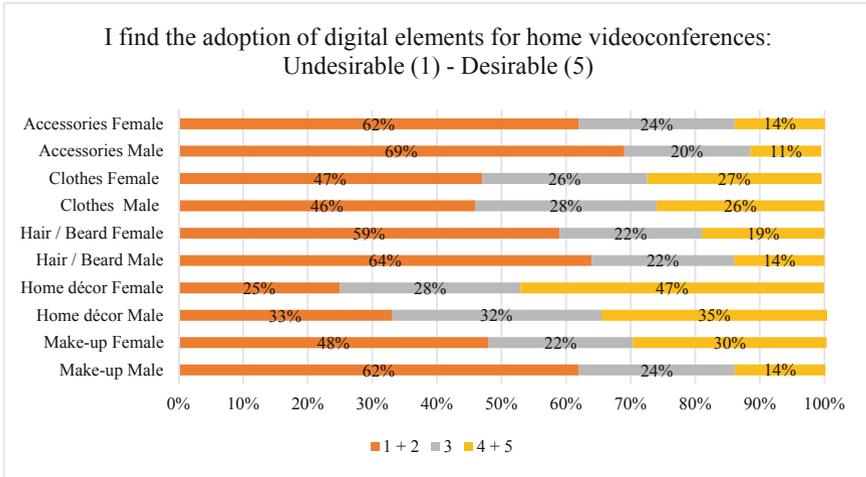
**Graph 1.** Camera behaviour



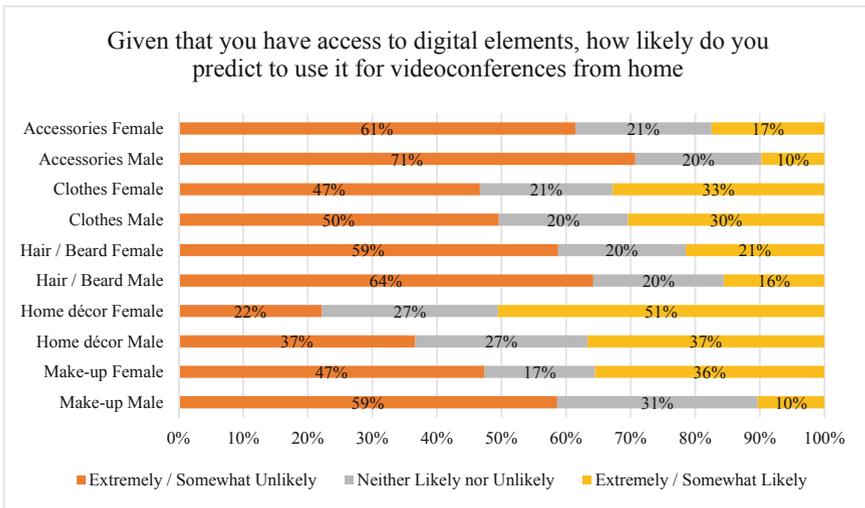
**Graph 2.** Workers' personal appearance during videoconferences

least a videoconference per week, hence the desirability and the prediction to use digital elements/filters are analysed.

Digital home décor and digital clothes are the most desirable elements for both female and male workers. Females also find digital make-up desirable. Interestingly, a desirability for the hair and beard element is identified for both males and females (Graph 3). These results are in line with their prediction to use the elements, as workers are extremely or somewhat likely to use digital home décor and clothes for videoconferencing (Graph 4).



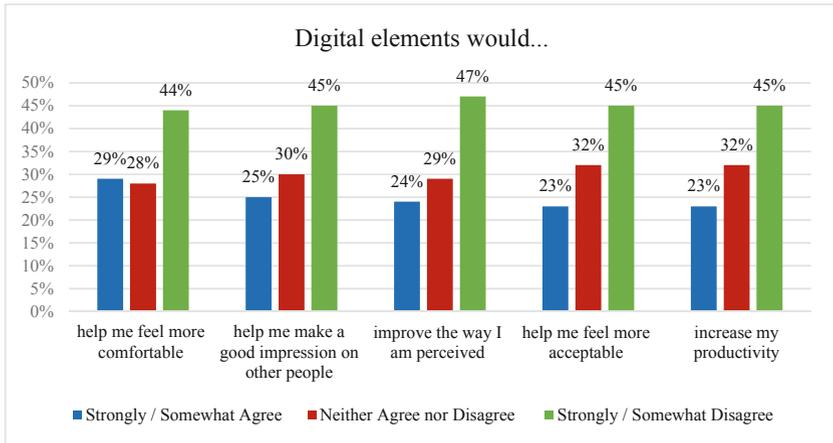
**Graph 3.** Digital elements: desirability



**Graph 4.** Digital elements: prediction of use

## 4.6 Self-efficacy

This final section presents the results regarding self-efficacy. 76% of workers strongly or somewhat agree that they feel competent to select the best personal look and 73% of individuals strongly or somewhat agree that they have relevant knowledge and expertise to make sound evaluations in terms of their personal look. Graph 5 shows that over 20% of workers believe that access to digital filters for videoconferences would help them feel more acceptable and comfortable, increase their productivity, improve the way they are perceived, and help them make a good impression on other people.



**Graph 5.** Self-efficacy

## 5 Discussion

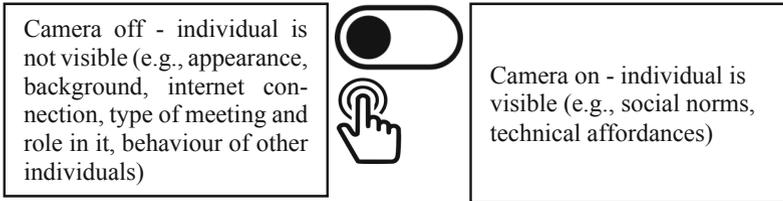
The vision that all phone calls would one day become video calls dates back to a demonstration by AT&T's Picturephone at the New York World's Fair in 1964. Despite the various attempts throughout the years, video calls struggled to attract interest as in business settings individuals believed that video added limited value. The rise of the internet and the access to devices with a camera made video calls more popular [17]. The Covid19 pandemic has drawn attention to research on telework and the role of ICTs, which are becoming the protagonists of individuals' everyday life [18].

This study provides significant contributions by analysing individuals' videoconferences practices in professional settings and their interplay with digital fashion elements, including clothes, make-up, accessories, hair/beard, and home décor.

Not surprisingly, the number of videoconferences increased drastically from 2019 to 2020 and expected telework frequency shows that work will not go back to what it was previous to the pandemic, highlighting the importance of the topic.

This research provides a first understanding regarding individuals' decision to either keep the camera off or turning it on during online meetings. The costs involved in turning

the camera are taken into consideration, such as their appearance, their background, their internet connection, the type of meeting and their role in it, company regulations, and the behaviour of other individuals. The cost of such factors is balanced with social norms, which might motivate individuals invest resources in improving their appearance and background in order to appear on camera. Moreover, technical affordances such as filters might reduce the cost of turning on the camera by improving the appearance (Graph 6).



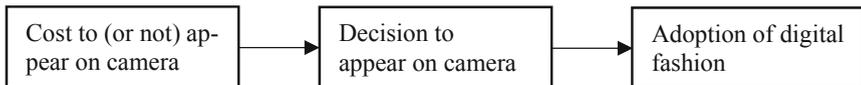
**Graph 6.** Dimensions being balanced in individual decisions to turn on/off the camera for online meetings

Digital filters are now part of beauty routines and they are utilized for self-expression just like make-up. Social media channels and teleworking tools have filters that give the illusion of wearing make-up through augmented reality. The interest in digital filters for online meetings is not surprising as when conducting videoconferences an individual does not only look at other people who are in the meeting, as it happens in face-to-face meetings, but she/he also looks at herself/himself on the screen. During online meetings, the individual is constantly presented with her/his own image, hence it could be that videoconferencing creates self-consciousness, justifying the interest in digital filters for professional settings [4].

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital tools for remote working and interactions as they can be a solution not only to overcome short-term challenges brought by the pandemic but also for medium-long-term solutions. The implementation of digital tools for B2B interactions is growing, evolving, and affecting many aspects of our daily lives, including the way we work, prepare, and present ourselves.

Although there is limited literature on fashion and telework, fashion afforded by technological advances is becoming increasingly relevant. As stated by Hacker et al. [8] web-conferencing systems should have features that enable individuals to make a good impression and feel more comfortable during online meetings. As shown by this study, there is an interest in digital fashion elements for work related videoconferencing practices. Moreover, some respondents believe that digital elements such as make-up, hairstyle, clothes, accessories, and home-décor could help them make a good impression and feel more comfortable during videoconferences. Digital fashion is still in its infancy, yet it is developing fast as firms are driven by the expected opportunities brought by the metaverse, a “new world” which is expected to offer immersive experiences in virtual environments. Such possibilities extend beyond the opportunity to entertain individuals through games and are expected to have a major impact on everyday activities, such as working, studying, shopping, and socialising. Teleworking platforms are embracing the metaverse opportunity by developing immersive workspaces and avatars that resemble

individuals' looks rather than cartoonish representations [21]. In this context, digital garments and make-up that can be virtually purchased in the form of non-fungible tokens and applied by individuals to their avatar represent an opportunity for fashion brands. The metaverse provides individuals countless possibilities to personalise their appearance by creating a fully digital version of themselves. The typical process of personalisation which involves tailoring an object to meet an individual's preferences and needs [22] becomes a process in which individuals themselves alter their image to meet specific preferences and needs. Hence, personalisation is not constrained to the process of applying a digital filter to our face for a videoconference; it extends to the development of digital versions of ourselves, reflecting the way in which we wish to appear in front of different audiences. Despite its potential, there are still many open questions regarding the use of digital fashion and its effects on consumer behaviour [22]. From the results of this study, it could be possible to argue that individuals' decision to appear on camera or not could impact the adoption of digital fashion elements. For example, if for a worker the cost of not appearing is high due to company regulations, she / he might take the decision to turn on the camera despite the cost of the activities to appear in the "right" way. This, in turn, could also impact the decision to adopt or not digital fashion to appear online (Graph 7).



**Graph 7.** Individuals' decision process to adopt digital fashion for online meetings

To conclude, a crucial theme that emerged from this study is that of ethical concerns and the possible negative effects of digital filters on individuals' self-esteem. The alteration of physical appearance is a critical ethical concern that the digital fashion industry must consider as individuals might not only feel pressured by ideals portrayed online but also worry about their own image not looking like the digitally self-created one. Indeed, digital filters enables everyone to personalise and alter their look as they wish and blur the boundaries between what is "real" and "fake" [14–23].

## 6 Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

Although teleworking is not a new phenomenon, the Covid19 pandemic enforced it for many workers, creating an interesting discussion in the field of teleworking. Yet, limited research focuses on the role of fashion in teleworking. This study addresses the gap through an explorative research and by opening a compelling conversation on digital fashion and teleworking. This study has some limitations that could be addressed by future research. Firstly, the countries and the fields of work of the respondents are not equally distributed. Further studies could consider these factors and other cultural dimensions. Moreover, this study highlights compelling findings that could be further explored such as the relationships between age, status, and videoconferencing behaviour. Also, the relationship between individuals' appearance, the decision to turn on the camera

during online meetings, and individuals' motivations for (not) adopting digital fashion elements is worthy of deeper investigation. Finally, it will be of utmost importance to continue studying how technological advances in virtual environments will affect individuals' telework experience.

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# Fashion Film and OBC (Online Brand Community): The Co-authoring Dynamics

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**Abstract.** The aim of this research project is to investigate how fashion brands and their online communities begin a co-authoring process in fashion films. Since the early days, fashion market has always enriched its dreamlike imageries with garments and images [1], with the advent of internet, those dressed bodies could move, tell stories and spur deeper engagement. In fact, fashion films are the direct digital evolution of the static fashion magazine images. Transposed on the web, such images can now reach online brand communities who often start a debate on both the fashion film and the brand, thus nurturing the brand contents. This results in a typical communicative flow that we can commonly observe on social media, which has also been object of study by some academics [2–4]. However, the dynamics and inferences produced are not fully clear: the OBCs are often similar to black holes. In order to gain more clarity on the topic, this study compares different types of fashion film with OBCs profiles. The final goal is to outline several classes of engagement and verify the contribution this process has in generating (cultural) contents.

**Keywords:** fashion film · OBCs · Online Brand Communities · digital consumer · images language · engagement · semiotics · net-nography · big data

## 1 Introduction

Fashion films are among the strategic tools used by fashion brands to build their own imagery [4]. They ensue from the contamination of diverse semantic systems (cinema, fashion and the Internet), each with a distinctive cultural and experiential heritage that contribute to elevate their overall value and communicative complexity [5].

These web-native short films forge new aesthetic forms. They keep the traditional exploration of the new frontiers of beauty alive, thus breaking the barriers between what is well established and what has turned into a cliché. Alongside this, however, fashion films support new value-based contents of the fashion houses, mapping the new luxury promises out. Nowadays, most fashion houses tell stories, whose recurring driving force are social issues. Moreover, the narrative patterns of this storytelling are far from those adopted by the traditional advertising “commercials”, mainly due to different narrative roles played by the product and their goals [6]. In fact, fashion brands make a large number of such digital videos, whose primary objective is sharing the fashion

house's imagery to boost their followers' engagement [7]. These new brand narratives generate ever-changing stories, but still attributable to an easily recognizable content-based universe. *The Bellhop* by Gucci (2022), directed by Tom Newman, is a case in point. Its aesthetic is strongly reminiscent of *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) by Wes Anderson; this fashion film promotes the digital gym created by Gucci – Alessandro Michele to encourage gamers' physical and psychological well-being. Continuing the legacy of this brand's philosophy, the imagery is always surreal and the value promoted is the quest for fun and well-being in the name of inclusion.

Fashion films can be inscribed among the forms of online *brand entertainment* [8]: indeed they stage a strong interaction between entertainment contents and brand world and reinforce the bond between Arts and fashion. Since the explosion of this new communication tool is connected to internet and social media growth, Online Brand Communities play a crucial role in defining their success or failure. Being a product meant for the web, the contribution given by netizens [9] in terms of *engagement* is vital [2, 10, 11].

OBCs [Online Brand Communities] [12] are the digital evolution of the traditional brand communities; they are both made up of people who claim to be great experts and followers of the brand, and who see the brand as the maker of tangible and intangible products. The main difference between the two concerns the purpose. The former expresses the commercial nature of their *raison d'être*, while the virtual communities are enlivened and driven by the exchange of contents, interests and passions referred to the value-based brand world.

OBCs live and thrive in a digital environment, where they encounter brands and their tales on distinct social media. This drives the narrative approach adopted by brands, namely fashion brands, known as transmedia branding [14, 15]. Starting from the transmedia storytelling theorized by Jenkins [16], it aims to strengthen the engagement of a brand's audience by following the dynamics of new media [3].

Transmedia storytelling is a process where, starting from just one narrative plot, many stories are created by breaking the barriers of each single medium; they offer different points of view but each story has to be attributable to the same nucleus of contents [17]. When this process is launched, the source of narration can be both the sender and the receiver, in a contamination and blend of roles. It is a creative practice using distinctive media and different environments, which is available to an unlimited number of content creators; it does not only work on the internet, but social media plays a strategic role, because of its interactive nature and great popularity among people. Negri [18] underlines another crucial aspect of transmedia storytelling: it implies working contemporarily on two different levels: narration and channels. Narration is now disconnected from the tale: narration shapes an idea of "world of stories" where each single story is placed in a recognizable context. In this manner, different factors coming from different channels generate distinctive and connoted narrative worlds.

Consequently, transmedia branding results in constellations of varied brand stories depending on unique, distinctive and peculiar contents of each brand's visual identity [19]. A communicative system that unceasingly promotes, fosters and shares new narratives [12]. As Moin points out [3], new brand stories intend to achieve "the hearts of their customers" through brand experience, brand engagement and brand consumption.

In fashion market, Online Brand Communities (OBCs) [13] represent the context where addicted or simply passionate fashion crowds can share their interests, without restrictions in terms of time or place, following the online brand activities. OBCs embody the transformation of *brand fans* [20], who transition from being *consumers* to *digital consumers* by developing a *digital consumer culture* [21, 22]. Such individuals seek and consume tangible as much as digital products; the web-based audience turns from target into a medium that enables brand communication [4].

Penetrating these communities essentially means acknowledging their identity to assess their impact on the formative dynamics of branded contents: analysing how internet users morph into brand communities and brand supporters is a critical aspect of this research.

These dynamics can be commonly observed on social media and they are studied by academics like Brogi, S., Calabrese, A., Campisi, D., Capece, G., Costa, R., Di Pillo [13]; Cunningham, Craig [2]; Du Plessis [12]; Moin [3]. However the consequential relationship between fashion films and OBCs activities has not yet been focused; the leading question is how the OBCs relate to different forms and fashion films, fuelling the brand imagery.

## 2 Research Purpose: The Study of Interaction Between Fashion Films and OBCs (Online Brand Communities)

This study aims to relate fashion films to the communities of followers, exploring the key drivers that give rise to the co-creation patterns of branded content.

Therefore, the research purpose is twofold. The first objective is to analyse fashion films, detecting their distinct languages and narratives forms by approaching a semi-otic perspective, to outline recurring and structural patterns. The second objective is to identify the OBCs profiles and prove their roles in the (cultural) production of branded contents, linking them to the manifold forms of fashion tales.

Fashion films are examined according to multiple levels of interpretation, using the levels of generation of meaning by Greimas [23] and the narrative structures by Eco [24].

As for the level of manifestation [23], this will be subject to careful examination through a further distinction that may lead to different types of engagement – the filmic language [25], having its own grammar and lexicon, and the iconographic language, set by precise aesthetic codes creating different imageries.

The latter pertains to a research conducted by two American scholars, Phillips and McQuerrie [26], before the rise and growth of the empire of digital images spread by social media such as Instagram. Their analysis focused on ad campaigns of paper magazines (i.e. Vogue USA), and explored how different languages develop different types of engagement. The two authors thereby proved the types and levels of engagement generated by the manifold languages of fashion advertising. This research project therefore aims to scale up the scope of the observation by updating the analysis and contemplating the digital language dictated by the web; how community comments possibly affect the creation of branded contents is also scrutinized.

Starting from the fashion film categories outlined, based on the narrative languages and forms, we proceed with the analysis of the existing relationship between them and the types of engagement they develop within the OBCs. Familiarizing with the profile and internal dynamics of OBCs allows for some considerations on levels and types of engagement. This connection is made possible by the use of netnographic approach [27]. In fact, investigating the interactions among netizens and between netizens and devices enables the comprehension of the content-generating processes. Keywords and recurring themes within the OBCs will be detected, thanks to specific algorithms, with the objective of defining autonomously generated micro-areas of content. Likewise, aim of this study is to identify the types of interaction established with the brand and its consequent possible response.

Data collection and processing aimed at mapping the main OBCs profiles, supported by systemic algorithms, will be the core of this phase. The research model proposed by Martinez-Lopez, Aguilar-Illescas, Molinillo, Anaya-Sanchez, Coca-Stefaniak and Esteban-Millat [28] represents one point of advancement.

### 3 Methodology

The research unfolds in 4 phases:

- 1) In the first phase, the analysis of some fashion films is completed. The enormous quantity of online contents promoted by fashion brands requires a precise definition of the research scope, which could be widened and completed in later stages. This initial stage focuses on analysing fashion films (available on the main social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook) belonging to two well-established fashion houses and two brands of emerging designers whose fashion symbolizes the *avant-garde*. The two leading brands are chosen based on the two types of narrative structure they develop, adopting a Greimas' semiotic approach [23, 29, 30]. Following this theory, there are brands that develop *state of being* stories and brands that opt for *state of doing* stories, being the latter a real novelty in the luxury market.

A set number of fashion films is explored for each year, making a data-driven choice.

A semiotic analysis of fashion films produced in the last ten years is conducted for each brand, making particular reference to Greimas' generative semiotics [23] and the levels of meaning generation together with Eco's interpretative semiotics for the distinction between open and closed stories [6, 24]. Fashion films are therefore analysed according to the following elements:

- Filmic language [5]
- Aesthetic codes [31]
- Narrative mode: state of being/state of doing [29]
- Deep values, with special reference to the Greimas' veridictory square by [23, 29]
- Narrative structures: open stories/closed stories [6]

This way, two macro-levels of interpretation emerge. The first, depending on language, and the second, depending on the brand narrative.

- 2) In the second phase, the OBCs analysis will begin for each fashion film and brand. Using a netnographic [27] perspective and a quantitative (*data-oriented*) approach (supported by a data analytics company), the definition of systemic algorithms will follow, which would allow to:
  - Outline and profile OBCs (through top followers analysis)
  - Record the level of engagement (data: comments and likes)
  - Assess the interaction (if any) among netizens and between netizens and brands, followed by a reflection on the contents proposed and shared within the community.
- 3) The third phase will study the relationship between types of fashion films and OBCs. This phase will try to draw conclusion on what has been observed to determine:
  - Whether a correspondence between the fashion film language and the netizen engagement may exist.
  - What type of response/engagement the different types of storytelling generate and whether data able to confirm an improved effectiveness of one over the other may exist.
  - What is the role played by fashion films, within a transmedia branding strategy, in sharing and co-generating brand imagery.
- 4) The fourth and last phase envisages the potential development of interviews conducted with some top followers, aiming at proving the findings and get new inspirations for further research enhancements.

This research project is being developed and will be completed in two years (2023–2024) at the IULM University of Milan (Fig. 1).

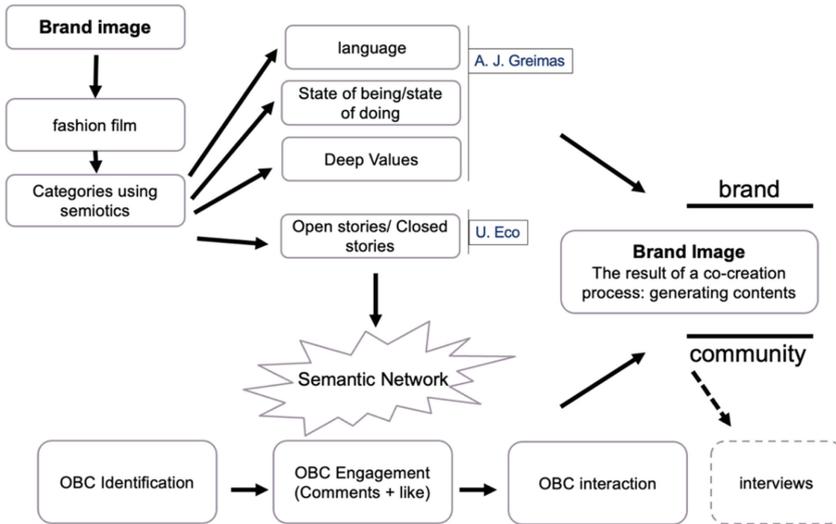


Fig. 1. The research structure.

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# Towards a More Elaborate Understanding of the Fashion Photoshoot – An Aesthetic Production with the Element of Age

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**Abstract.** While agendas of diversity and inclusion seem to flourish and thrive in many instances, we still often experience a gap between agendas and practice. Such is also the case in fashion marketing. We are witnessing a hesitant development when it comes to brands' usage of mature models, and it sparks curiosity as to the causes of the slow phase. Are we witnessing a resistance to a potential “silverization” in fashion branding, or is the production of marketing material more complex than top-management's decisions to signal diversity in tune with the times? As a step towards mapping the different elements constructing the visual marketing material and discussing the possible significance of age on the set, this work in progress shares the framework and the design of research with the purpose of engendering reflection of *how* we can investigate the aesthetic production of visual material in the fashion industry and discuss the significance of our findings.

**Keywords:** Fashion · Age · Aesthetics · Mature Models · Visual Communication

## 1 Introduction

Marketing material from the fashion industry is as abundant as the industry's production, but it does not always create the intended engagement in the form of a click or purchase. While the industry grapples with the requirements for sustainability, it is also struggling to find its feet in relation to the new agendas of diversity and inclusion. Gender and body type are two of the diversity forms quite regularly seen on screens and catwalks, but older age is still up-and-coming. It seems to be waiting in the wings for a major cast [16,20]. Academic studies of the contents and values of the fashion marketing in relation to age leave a series of unanswered questions because of the obvious impossibility of knowing *how* the marketing material was produced, and *why* the result was regarded desirable [1].

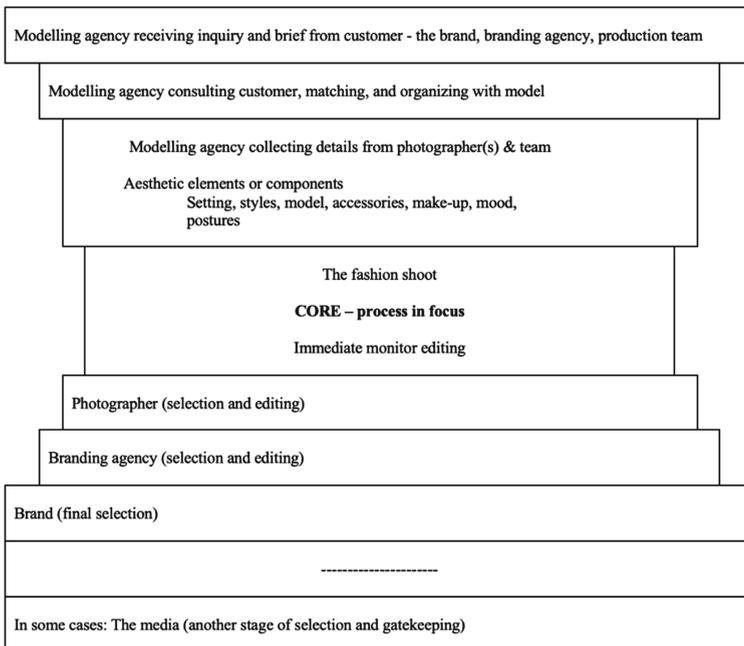
Consequently, *the final version of this article will explore the aesthetic process of the fashion photoshoot by mapping the different elements constructing the visual marketing material and discussing the possible significance of age on the shoot.* The article intends to dig deeper and go beneath the glossy surface in order seek an understanding of the elements, choices, and exchanges constituting the building blocks on the shoot. *The*

*contribution of this work in progress is to share the design of the approach and inspire reflection as to investigation into the area of aesthetic production. It seeks to contribute to creating a discussion of our findings from the fashion industry and its venture towards the construction of diversity in fashion marketing.*

## 2 The Fashion Shoot in Its Context

An attempt to understand the complexity of the aesthetic production process of fashion marketing calls for more than a deep dive into one of its elements. Regarding it in a production context, the photo shoot is one stage of what may be regarded as longer supply chain in the production of visual marketing material. The aesthetic production model in Table 1 gives an overview of the entire production process which may last for several months. The table has been developed based on the observation of the actions before, during and after the fashion shoots in 2021 and 2022 informing the preliminary work for the article and the framework for analysis. The final edition of the article will elaborate on relevant elements and perspectives of the table’s phases surrounding the fashion shoot.

**Table 1.** The aesthetic production model.



Whereas Entwistle reflects on specific characteristics of aesthetic economies and markets on her way to examining the calculations between the economic and the cultural

values in actors' journeys in the fashion network, this article has a distinct focus on the complexity of the fashion shoot. Entwistle follows the male models' journey through the network with an eye to how aesthetic value of models is created, accrued, and attributed in the network but in this work, the attention is on the production of visual marketing material. Furthermore, this article does not consider the position or reputation of participants of the aesthetic teams in the fashion network with a view to discussing their status "out there". It studies the process on the shoots as micro-networks to inquire into the aesthetic development of visual material [3].

The shoots where data collection took place produced commercial material for marketing in the categories B2B (mainly for sales to professionals in fashion retail) as well as B2C (the general public). The brands observed were Swedish, Danish, and Irish international brands, and the material produced was for usage on a variety of platforms and locations as illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Platform and formats of visual material produced.

<p><b>Online</b> Social media, corporate websites, web shops, instore digital, video marketing, e-mail marketing, newsletters, and TV commercials.</p>
<p><b>Print</b> Instore, out-of-home (billboards and posters), brochures, leaflets etc.</p>
<p><b>Formats</b> The commercial formats of the material ranged from image campaigns, seasonal campaigns, lookbooks to editorials in fashion magazines.</p>

### 3 Methodology

The study is comprised of 8 case studies which apart from producing an overview and discussion of the aesthetic process aims to shed light on the complexity of aesthetic production for commercial purposes. The final study also aims to establish if age plays a part, and if it does, which part does it play? The collection of cases as data carries an element of convenience sampling, as they were selected from the researcher's bookings as a model in the fashion and beauty industries [13]. They have however been selected from a larger pool of bookings fulfilling the criteria that on the set were at least two models of different ages, and that the session was a photo and video production rather than for example a fashion show. As the cases were not selected with a view to other characteristics or properties which could affect the contents and type of data input, the sampling method does not interfere with the purpose of the article.

The case study may be regarded as a linear process with repeated steps of collection, organization of data and reflection on design, and analysis [21]. The first two steps were carried out during 2022 in Denmark, Sweden, and Germany. The initial steps were preceded by participation in and observation on 11 photo shoots during the second half

of 2021 with the purpose of determining a preliminary data structure and identifying a draft for recurrent themes, or *observation points*, compatible to research. This reflexive prototyping process of constructing the framework for observing, organizing, and later analysing data was carried out with a view to provide greater stability in the subsequent processes of the final article.

As the model and the researcher is the same person, the collection of material entails elements of participatory research. However, the model is not part of the verbal exchange and decision making of the aesthetic process but active in front of the camera co-creating the aesthetics of the visual elements with the photographer. Given the combined situation of participation and observation, objectivity is a central concern. The notes from the shoots were produced after each session, and this helped preserve an objective angle on the observations. Additionally, the analytic focus is on the process and development not on the model's personal outcome which aids the preservation of objectivity. In this respect it may be noticed that the entire team has the construction of fashion marketing material as a common aim, and the limited time for the production minimizes focus on personal gains. Finally, the model is often the last participator to arrive at the set, and often some of the other contributors cooperate more frequently. For the final article it may be explored and discussed to which extent the fashion shoot can be regarded as a field as defined by Bourdieu with relations and its own logic [14, 15]. However, the aim of the article is not to investigate the power relations or struggle for capital. Consequently, also the considerations of field theory regarding participants' power are left aside, as is the case in the studies of Kuipers, Holla and Van Der Laan on value production in the fields of fashion [5].

With a view to analysis, the data is subjected to three phases. First, the data in the form of observation material (shoot notes) for each shoot was organized into the same design with a sequence of themes or observation points. The points are areas and phases which are present in most productions observed, and they function as a set of fixed and comparable phenomena which can support cross-case discussion [19]. The second phase, will be coding, reviewing, and comparing the data from the 8 shoots to gather and reflect on any patterns, similarities, or differences. The third phase entails analyses of the material with the purpose of examining the possible significance, meaning and effect of the observations in relation to the complexity of the aesthetic process.

The approach is exploratory rather than confirmatory, and this allows the researcher to pursue the data complexity with an inquisitive mind and address rival explanations in patterns as they may appear. As previous research into marketing with mature models in the fashion industry has pointed to open ends and room for further debate regarding the brands' intentions when including silver models, it is imperative that this work operates in an exploratory manner if a more detailed understanding of the aesthetic process is to be the outcome [1].

#### **4 The Fashion Shoot, Its Practices and Market Culture**

The fashion shoot may be regarded as cultural practice producing local versions of the contemporary fashion marketing aesthetics. Not necessarily local in the geographical sense but more residing within the norms of the fashion industry as micro locations

of taste and aesthetic choices while also embedded within the borders of the brand universe. The aesthetic team produce based on the cultural taste of all aesthetic workers contributing to the process at the site of production. Each team deliver their collective take into the meta-aesthetic of the fashion industry and may be regarded as a team of cultural, aesthetic contributors by the sum of their choices. Similar observations are made by Manovich concerning the production of social media photos in different geographical and cultural locations [7, 8]. It follows that the aesthetic workers all share a common cultural ground in the fashion industry which they are a part of. Presumably, they are all familiar with the industry's attribution of values and of the elements constituting the building blocks of aesthetic value. However, they have been hired to interpret and deliver their specialty into the overall culture. Consequently, what takes place on the set may be regarded as a cultural practice where the aesthetic workers are part of an exchange regarding taste or a creation process towards a product of taste. The application of the term and concept of *building blocks* supports the identification of the elements in the process and the discussion of their significance [4]. In this respect, the final article may benefit from a stratification in the discussion of the building blocks into a superficial level and a deeper level of meaning and significance.

Additionally, such discussion can be related to the state of age diversity in fashion as unfolded by studies considering the possible reasons for this. Research shows that when inquiring into advertising agencies executives' recommendations for ads to feature an older central model in the targeting of an older audience, as many as 37% would not recommend an older model in ads for clothing and cosmetics [19]. In addition, Schroder and Borgerson find that the customary ways of marketing construct a realism working as a foundation of identity construction for customers. A foundation with a conventional representation [18].

Also representation in fashion magazine illustrate a relevant dimension of the market culture. When analysing body image diversity in Australian fashion magazines, a study from 2015 found that only one percent of the visual representation could be classified as older [2]. Finally, in 2007 a visual content analysis of eight American fashion magazines demonstrated that visible signs of aging were absent from their photographs, even though almost all magazines had 50% or more of their readership above the age of 35 [6]. In relation to these findings, it is worth noticing that other studies of the fashion-conscious crowd show that they often have younger cognitive ages, are more ready to try new products and demonstrate different value orientations [11, 12].

## 5 The Framework of Observation Points

The framework of observations points applied for structuring and subsequently analysing the data is presented in Table 3.

In connection with the analyses of the data and the subsequent discussion of the findings, the framework of the data and the findings may be discussed in a reflection towards Schroeder's five variables for critical visual analysis [17]. These variables are also applied by McFarlane and Samsioe in their work with 50+ fashion Instagram influencers are: description, subject matter, form, medium, style and genre [9, 10]. As the practices of the fashion shoots deliver into a system of application where these variables

reside, they may serve as points of reflection in a discussion after a structured analysis, and they may guide as landmarks regarding the aesthetic material's practical application.

**Table 3.** Framework of observation points organizing data from fashion shoots.

<b>Framework of observation points</b>
<b>Organization of shoot</b> Primary scene-setter Level of detail in layout Moodboard, other visual preparation Booker of model
<b>Model characteristics in a diversity perspective</b> Age difference, model relationship, ethnicity, body type etc.
<b>Aesthetic process</b> Setting, styles, accessories, make-up, lightening, model, poses, mood Styling Make-up and hair – model character Responsible for outfit selection, styling preparation Who decided what – role and responsibility Negotiation and agreement Deviations from plans (outfits, styling, location)
<b>Who wore what</b> Age-related differences in outfit styles, hair, make-up etc.
<b>Application of material</b> Fashion editorial, image campaign etc.
<b>The story and style of the material</b> Synergy between setting, style, mood, vibe of the aesthetic components, positioning of models and model roles.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

This work in progress is relevant as a contribution towards more detailed insight into the aesthetic process at the fashion shoot as it is a step towards understanding the complexity of the aesthetic perspectives in the production of visual marketing material in a more precise and nuanced manner. In turn, the final article's analysis and discussion may serve as a qualified basis for further inquiry into more stages both before and *after* the shoot where numerous decisions are made as to the final selection, editing of style and mood of the material and its eventual usage and publication. This will guide us towards an appreciation of the development towards greater diversity as well as the reasoning, and the ascription of values in the aesthetic process producing the visual marketing of

fashion with the application of mature models. A central genre for our perception of the industry, its values, and positioning of people in relation to age diversity.

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# **Fashion Heritage**



# Rethinking Fashion Storytelling Through Digital Archives and Immersive Museum Experiences

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**Abstract.** The Italian fashion system is represented by a wide and valuable heritage that needs to be properly preserved and experienced by everybody, from fashion students to scholars, artisans and designers, etc. Although in the last decades there have been many attempts to create a museum dedicated specifically to Italian fashion, in the end, institutions or museums have not been able to carry out a valuable and accomplished project. One fundamental reason is represented by the Italian specificities in terms of the fashion-industry evolution and, more in general, by the complexity of the fashion system which has been built and continues to grow at the crossroads between different experiences, practices, and relations. As such, it has been studied from diverse disciplines and approaches ranging from art to design, from economics to sociology of culture, and so on. Moreover, when considering both the intangible and tangible fashion heritage, gathering them in order to preserve and share them becomes extremely difficult. The challenge is therefore to understand how to collect, preserve, and enjoy this heritage, combining the cultural pluralism of local traditions and their products, together with the creativity of artists and designers and the economic aspects of the industry, relating them all with the cultural and social features of everyday life-fashion. The aim of this paper is to address these issues starting from the preliminary reflections of the PNRR project (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, National Recovery and Resilience Plan) “Cultural heritage active innovation for next-gen sustainable society”, (CHANGES aims at promoting interdisciplinary research and inter-sectorial synergies to support the development of innovative long-term strategies for the interpretation, understanding, conservation, and valorization of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The extended partnership is composed of 11 Universities, 4 Research Institutions, 3 Advanced Studies Schools, 6 Companies, and 1 Center of Excellence (see <https://sites.google.com/uniroma1.it/changes/home>.) in order to discuss in detail the Spoke 2, “Creativity and Intangible Heritage” thematic line on fashion preservation and its musealization as developed by the authors of this essay.

**Keywords:** museum · archive · Italian fashion · digitalization · virtuality

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Toward a More Inclusive Idea of Cultural Heritage

Museums can be considered as a complex system which have in recent decades experienced numerous methodological revisions aimed at integrating the preservation and protection goals with an increasing attention to people fruition and experience and re-focusing activities and services on participation enhancement. The heritage preserved within a museum is both material and immaterial and consists of its collections and the knowledge of its scientific personnel who—as the well-known ICOM (International Council of Museums) definition states—acts in the interest of the community and its development by creating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge [1]. More precisely, intangible heritage was one of the crucial topics discussed within the Faro Convention in 2005, which defines it as a set of resources inherited from the past that a group of people identify with, regardless of who owns them, because they reflect and express values, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions that are constantly evolving. In other words, intangible heritage includes all those environmental aspects produced from the interaction between people and places over time [2]. In addition, in 2018 ICOM defined museums as permanent non-profit institutions serving society and its development. As such, they are open to the public and not only research the tangible and intangible evidence of humankind and its environment, but acquire, preserve, communicate and specifically exhibit it for study, education, and enjoyment purposes [3]. This definition, along with the ratification of the Faro Convention by the Italian Parliament (September 23, 2023), has contributed to further relaunch the debate on the nature of cultural heritage that must be understood as a collective and shared good as well as a legacy. Moreover, this perspective has concomitantly provided new impetus to the development of more theories and approaches to the social role of cultural places. According to these premises, the process of sharing culture, knowledge, and skills, is now considered the starting point of the consumer's experience of heritage, while the end point is precisely its preservation.

## 1.2 The Cultural Heritage of Fashion

Starting from the enhanced definition of cultural heritage we have mentioned above and inflecting it on fashion—in addition to arts, cinema, theater, dance, music, ritual and festive events—unsurprisingly, we can now include within its borders all those skills and practices of local crafts, involving the concept of fashion in its broadest sense so as to consider its relationship with social customs, etiquette, and habits of a given society. As emphasized by Salvatore Nastasi, focusing the attention to intangible cultural heritage could therefore provide the possibility of promoting cultural diversity as well as recognizing social expressions as an inclusive cultural asset, encompassing the expressions of everyday life, transferable as a country's cultural identity [4]. Thus, even content and experiences of fashion need to be recognized as valuable within each specific country's cultural heritage.

The challenge then is to radically improve the conditions of accessibility and experience of those who intend to enjoy the fashion system cultural heritage through the recognition and enhancement of both cultural pluralism and local traditions, as well

as by improving the quality of products and services dedicated to them [5]. Thus, the benefits of this approach have to be framed within two complementary perspectives: on the one hand, we have to consider the systemic level, relying on an idea of archives that is oriented towards the valorization of both tangible and intangible heritage; on the other hand, we have to pay attention to the consumer level by making these resources accessible to anyone who wants to become aware and familiarize with them. In this sense, fashion in its own complexity could play a key role of these identity narratives as it is made up of moments, memories, imagination, practices and materiality. Fashion is definitely a heritage of objects, stories, memories, places and architectures, of material documents and oral traditions, whose persistence must be safeguarded and shared.

To achieve these goals of preservation, sharing and enhancement, we must consider and manage a multitude of data, objects, and places, all of which are interconnected. For this reason we think that a solution based on a unique museum of fashion is insufficient, while a series of trajectories between museums, objects, data, and experiences could work efficiently. The idea, then, is not to focus on a simple place, but to think of many and diversified exhibition spaces dedicated to an itinerant and ongoing presentation and representation of heritage. The focus would not be on one archive per se, but on a network of archives, both physical and digital, that have to be digitally connected in order to allow whoever accesses them to go through them thematically, as well as according to specific experiential paths.

The aim is to build in this way a transmedia universe in which each element of the narrative contributes to give back the complexity of the fashion objects, as well as that of the fashion experiences, enhancing the potentialities of the musealization of material and immaterial heritage beyond those traditional forms of storytelling that are typical of the museum experience and beyond the use of written texts and images. Reinforced by digital and immersive technologies, this approach is expected to open up to the use of audiovisual sounds and music, olfactory and tactile sensations, together with new spaces, movements and lights management.

As a matter of fact the rich transversality of fashion heritage and the general complexity of the fashion system configuration needs a methodology that can adequately collect, share, and make accessible all the objects, contents and experiences. Considering this expanded and multidimensional archive, made of multiple connections between different typologies of archives, seems to be the solution that can best achieve these goals. In fact, the value of archives lies in their potentiality in terms of being transversal while containing information of different levels and in the ease of access that allows the contents to be easily enjoyed and interpreted [6].

## **2 On the Need for a Fashion Expanded Archive**

### **2.1 Beyond the Idea of “Fashion as Art”**

Fashion has struggled a lot to find a space of visibility within the academic context as much as in the museum context where it was initially accepted under the umbrella label of art and/or art history [7, 8] within the frame of these disciplines and through their specific methodologies. Moreover, the industrial dimension, the triviality of use, and the clear emphasis on the monetary value of fashion products have contributed to place the

entire system out of the boundaries of the field of art. Although even contemporary art—from Pop Art onward—has challenged such criticisms based on the economic aspects of objects and their mundanity, as underlined by Bourdieu’s brilliant essay “Haute couture, Haute culture” [9], where the scholar highlighted the overlapping between the field of art and that of fashion to legitimate fashion as an object of study, it is still evident how, unlike decorative arts which are capable of creating independent ensembles, those arts that are considered minor, such as fashion, jewelry and ceramics, are still dependent on the context in which they are found.

Fashion objects have thus become museum objects only by virtue of the legitimacy that art gives to them, to the aesthetic-formal qualities of their production and the actors involved in their creation or validation. Going even further into this issue, as the art-historical frame tends to prevail, it only tells part of fashion’s heritage, which is very often linked to the concept of costume. Thus, the result is the perception of that grim atmosphere that pervades a costume museum, as pointed out by Elizabeth Wilson [10]—one of the most influential scholars within the field of fashion studies—who pointed out how clothes enclosed in glass cases are motionless, deprived of the vitality and dynamism that connect them to individuals’ lives and experiences with their bodies. The static nature of the fashion object thus becomes even more disturbing than that of other art objects.

The idea of fashion objects that have to be lived instead of just shown is perfectly consistent with the most recent reflections on the new aesthetic experience: museums are nowadays starting to overcome the idea of the experience of the object to enhance the idea of the experience with the object [11]. The aim then is to propose a new fashion storytelling that can restore the pervasive power of its aesthetics, the complexity of experiences related to the body and its uses, all of which are characterized by a communicability and shareability that implies cooperation and collectivity.

## **2.2 *Museifying the Italian Fashion System***

The relevance of knowledge and the know-how in the field of fashion is now quite evident in the companies and brands identity strategies as well as in the cultural policies of different countries. As a matter of fact, within fashion companies, creativity is the result of a cultural capital that has been transferred, shared, and sedimented among different generations; but it is also the expression of a material sphere that reflects specific territories and communities. In other words: fashion creativity is not the product of an isolated genius, but is the result of an intense exchange between past and present experiences: the accumulation of knowledge among generations and the productive specificities of industrial system districts [12]. This concept of creativity is precisely positioned at the very center of the reflection about intangible cultural heritage and its preservation, maintenance, and sharing. This approach is able to explain why fashion brands are now investing in business museums and archives with the aim of accompanying the economic-productive and industrial dimensions of fashion through the celebration of tradition and business experience. We may refer, for example, to the textile museum in Prato, or we can consider the Italian experiences of industrial archaeology that are connected to the numerous factories up to the 20th century: i.e. the Textile Industry Documentation Center; the former Pria Wool Mill in Biella which preserves a precious historical archive; the former

Zingone Wool Mill—now the “Wheel Factory”—where restored textile machinery are preserved and presented to visitors.

Within this frame, the museum itself becomes a fashion object, a luxury item with its own memory through which its own knowledge and history are displayed and told. This complexity made of intangible values and practices strongly connected to the territories makes the Italian fashion system an expression of a unique and recognizable artisanal and stylistic heritage, whose origins have been known since 1528 when Baldassarre Castiglione wrote his famous essay “*Il cortegiano*”. Even now, however, how to enhance this multifaceted essence and cultural heterogeneity is still under discussion. In this sense, it is worth noting that there are still no experiences of a fashion museum in Italy based on the assumptions we have highlighted so far. We can certainly not underestimate the proposals provided by the Museum of Fashion and Costume in Florence—better known as the “*Galleria del Costume*,” located in the Palazzina della Meridiana in the southern wing of Palazzo Pitti—as well as consider Palazzo Morando. *Costume Moda Immagine* in Milan. Moreover, the ambition to create a national fashion museum is still alive and its last proposal, dated summer 2022, referring to a project that is going to start in 2023 with the aim of building a fashion museum in Milan, specifically inside Palazzo Dugnani.

Finally, from an archival perspective, we can also refer to “*Archivi della moda del ‘900*”, a comprehensive project aimed at recovering and enhancing the heritage of Italian fashion with the purpose of relaunching the so-called *Made in Italy*. The project, coordinated by the Italian National Archival Association, was carried out in collaboration with the General Directorate for Archives of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. It is essentially a portal divided into eight sections, which is expected to be expanded through the collaboration of a number of different archives, at both the public and private level.

Even if all these examples testify to a strong interest in fashion musealization, all the results seem to be lacking in some way.

### 2.3 An Italian Fashion Archive Between Plurality and Sharing

We are clearly aware that this brief premise is inadequate to reconstruct the tortuous path of the legitimization of fashion and its world; however, it can still be useful in understanding the reasons behind the challenges and limits to the creation of a standalone fashion museum.

When analyzing the limitations of the projects discussed above, for example, they perfectly reflect a structural problem that is inherent at the basis of imagining a fashion museum/archive in Italy: namely the heterogeneity of customs, traditions, and practices linked to different territories, as well as the historical, artistic, cultural and political implications of fashion and of its representations. Then the main problem would be understanding what to archive and what to tell; moreover, how to figure it out and how to do it.

Actually, in the initiatives above we can notice a certain lack of overview, capable of removing fashion from the academic and museum ghettoization to which it has historically been relegated. Moreover, the plurality of content, materials, practices and memories that we have previously mentioned requires an idea of a fashion museum that should be as shared as possible, open to the contribution of different sources and agents,

and able to bring the multiple perspectives of fashion into a positive and productive dialogue which can be constantly enriched also by the people who access the museums and their heritages.

Even if a multidisciplinary approach has been hard to concretely reach due to fashion's difficulties in being validated as a scientific object, if not a field of study, the lack of dialogue between diverse approaches and, at the same time, the prevalence of a specific perspective to justify fashion beyond the trivial economic view can certainly be a starting point in rethinking fashion's musealization.

Finally, while sketching new shapes and functions of fashion museum experiences within the PNRR project "Cultural heritage active innovation for next-gen sustainable society", we cannot but consider that we are facing an era of uncertainty and great change in which traditional social systems are giving way to more fluid and inclusive societies. Within this scenario, also cultural offerings have to adapt to the new challenges that society demands, rethinking the approaches to heritage in order to better meet the current needs of citizens for a broader, innovative, and more conscious democratization of culture.

Maybe the perfect opportunity to experiment a broader approach to Italian culture and its representations could precisely be the experience of fashion lived through museums and archives in all its complexity and richness.

### 3 Digital is for Fashion

The relationship between museums and digital technologies has slowly been strengthening [13, 14] in the last decades, even if for a long time digital technologies have been considered more as a tool to be directed toward conservation, preservation, restoration and cataloguing, rather than developing other potentialities. During the pandemic, also museums experienced a strong acceleration in the use of new technologies as a support and an opportunity to enhance communication and narrative activities.

The new approaches to the museum experience developed in this sense could play a fundamental role in enhancing the new fashion storytelling discussed above in terms of both tangible and intangible heritage. Virtual exhibitions or immersive tours, for example, represent a possible vehicle that can build a fashion narrative which is definitely sensitive to the multilevel readings fashion itself requires, thus generating an expanded and multisensorial experience. In addition, digital tools (from QR codes on) can provide the possibility of expanding the narrative of the pieces of work [15], which in the case of fashion products would be really effective in conveying all the information related to objects. At the same time, the digital design of a more engaging visitor experience through the construction of an ever-evolving narrative journey [16, 17] could be able to overcome the physical and cultural barriers reported as an impediment by the so-called audience development approach discussed by Kawashima in the early 2000s [18].

To summarize the digitalization process applied to the cultural heritage of fashion may work at two different levels: on the one hand, the digitalization works in networking different typologies of archives in which all the historical, artistic, socio-cultural and productive information of the material and immaterial heritage are contained and systematized; on the other hand, the construction of diverse immersive experiences in

multiple spaces of fruition can convey a narrative of the practices where the visitor can be immersed and finally access the intangible culture.

### 3.1 The Digitalization of Fashion Archives

Online access to cultural heritage is certainly a practice that facilitates and accelerates information retrieval especially in the case of fashion-related products which are generally scattered in museums, archives, and foundations dispersed throughout a territory and without any adequate mapping of the potential connections. Moreover, the virtual access to archives can also be an opportunity to innovate and create new forms of fruition and enhancement of fashion-related heritage. Digital tools could lead to a breakthrough that would allow a complete fruition of the numerous and multifaceted productions linked to the fashion system that are usually hidden to the public: we are here referring to the countless material goods that a fashion museums (but also museums where fashion is only a small part of bigger collections) should contain: fabrics, clothes, accessories, jewelry, machinery, and so on. The Fashion Research Italy Foundation's project represents a first step in this direction. The Foundation has built a digital archive that collects a vast amount of textile—or related—material ranging from the 19th to the 21st century. The archive consists of three main sections: the Renzo Brandone Fund, the Emmanuel Schvili Fund, and the Fashion Photography Archive. The Brandone Fund represents the heart of the archive and collects 30.000 textile designs whose vastness perfectly illustrates the multitude of styles that have come and gone over three centuries. The Emmanuel Schvili Fund, the result of an important donation, collects the embroideries the brand itself has produced since the 1970s, highlighting the evolution of embroidery techniques. Finally, the Fashion Photography Archive is a wide-ranging archival project aimed at collecting visual materials, such as campaigns and catalogs, that can tell the story of fashion companies and brands in the region.

It is quite evident to notice how the impetus of digitization could turn such projects into the core of a national network that would collect, preserve, sort, present, and disseminate all the material proofs of Italian fashion, merging the tangible and intangible, and consolidating the identity of individual local communities. Networks like this—if wisely constructed and also physically connected—could provide a complete frame to local and national history, developing a center devoted to the cultural elaboration and analysis of the fashion system where it would be preserved, studied, researched, communicated, and disseminated. In this way, digitization would clearly enable an integrated and intelligent use of numerous data, fostering innovative paths and in-depth study through appropriate search engines. This extraordinary material, wisely collected and managed, could naturally open up spaces of great relevance and interest not only for study and scientific research, but also for information, teaching, training, and the proposal of more attractive content for visiting, even remotely, thus becoming a tool for tourist-cultural attraction.

All this could be made even more efficient by technologies such as augmented reality applications, which can create semantic tagging of the content of collections and archives in order to facilitate the enjoyment of the content. Digital technologies should therefore be exploited not to dismiss the existing but, if anything, to emphasize it, as stated by the Italian Osservatorio Innovazione Digitale nei Beni e Attività Culturali: artificial intelligence, blockchain, chatbots, and other applications can create benefits in terms of

audience development, cataloging, and digitization of the collection without affecting the current system of fruition [19, 20].

### 3.2 Virtual and In-Person: Hybridizing the Museum Experience with Fashion

As already anticipated in the previous paragraphs, the pandemic accelerated the digitization process of the experience in museum spaces; indeed, museums, art and cultural institutions have answered the challenge of the crisis by developing very rich and innovative online programs and initiatives such as dedicated projects, conversations, and virtual tours [21]. Once the pandemic emergency passed, virtual tour and remote access to collections do not have to represent an alternative to in situ experiences; rather, they can help in overcoming a series of limitations that are related to the cultural products of the fashion system identity and visibility. As we mentioned above, as the huge heritage of the Italian fashion system suffers from being isolated or hidden to visitors, scholars and curious people within the traditional museums, making these experiences accessible through their digitalization makes the same museums or institutions, also at a local level, able to spread their heritage widely, promoting activities of dissemination and sharing their patrimony among territories and communities.

In addition, digital technologies would offer the possibility to take advantage of the opportunities provided by digital storytelling so as to transform fashion museums into participatory and immersive environments in which that sense of “lugubriousness” mentioned by Elizabeth Wilson could finally be eliminated. The audience/consumer engagement through storytelling is not a novelty within the frame of the media studies, but it can be an important asset to develop within the museum. The engagement can effectively be reached through the combination of different media to enhance the experience of the visitor, from audiovisual contributions, virtual reality, augmented reality or artificial intelligence, that can integrate the in-person visit through immersive digital experience. Augmented reality applications, for example, enable the enjoyment of stories, narratives, and insights, through virtual models and information superimposed on live video streams. Moreover these technologies and media, integrated within each museum, can be networked creating opportunities to overcome the physical boundaries of the museum, to create trajectories to go through combining in presence and online experience. The virtual tour format represents an important opportunity for the musealized fashion world because it allows people to view collections located in different places, creating a new cultural experience based on the hybrid relationship between virtual and physical available to different audiences [22], breaking down those issues of economic, geographic, and cultural access that still characterize museum institutions.

Rethinking the cultural offerings can also mean using 3D modeling to enhance the personalized fruition of objects. In Italy, 3D modeling has already been experimented and applied to fashion, such as in the case of the 3D-printed reconstructions of the jewelry found in Merit’s tomb, where visitors were given the opportunity to explore the jewelry in three dimensions [23]. The use of technologies, in this case, is an integral part of a wider cultural project that sees digitization as another opportunity to create engaging narratives within museums.

The wide range of digital applications available today thus provides numerous possibilities that museums, foundations, archives, and collections can exploit for the purpose

of making the cultural heritage of fashion visible, in terms of creative expression, production, and experiences related to the historical, social, relational, political, and economic context.

The following are just some examples that could be useful to understand how to rethink museum experiences and fashion-related archives.

- the creation of 360° virtual tours that allow visitors to move among the items and which can be enriched with audio narratives and/or extra content [24];
- the use of haptic technologies to restore the tactile perception of precious objects and textiles;
- the application of T-SNE (t-distributed stochastic neighbor embedding) to aggregate images and objects by similarity, composition, color, theme, setting;
- the use of VR (virtual reality) to operate textile production machinery so as to deliver the experience of fabric production to the visitor;
- the installation of smart mirrors—already developed for the in-store experience—through which visitors can see themselves wearing the clothing displayed in the museum;
- the construction of metaverses dedicated to different periods and historical contexts, in which the visitors' avatars can use the objects displayed in the museum as tools for the construction of their own digital identity and later interact with other visitors in that environment.

It is quite evident that digital technologies stand as a fundamental tool for the construction of a new model of fruition and enhancement: a kind of loom on which to weave the fabric of a new history, stitched together from the many fragments that the territory delivers to us.

## 4 Mapping the Trajectories Through Archives and Museums

All the aspects that we have considered above, whose knowledge represents the necessary premise to the PNRR project we are working within, acquire sense if we think about the experience with the fashion archives and museums from the perspectives of the people who will access them. The starting question of every kind of project has to be: who is the target of the project and what kind of experience will he expect to find? What we are discussing here then depends on the considerations that no experience will be the same because, thanks to digitalization, people are now more demanding in terms of the personalization of their experience which has to be the result of pull and push processes.

The idea, then, is to think about the usability of the different archives and museum spaces simulating the crossing trajectories of the users of the archives and museums themselves, imagining traversal maps that can answer different needs and different goals. The same archive or museum can be accessed by a fashion scholar, a designer, an expert of fibers and fabrics, a craftsman, the curious visitor. This variability explains why we need an interconnected system of archives and museum instead of one museum dedicated to fashion. What the user needs to find are potential paths, made available through the combination of virtual and in-person experience, the accessibility to material and immaterial knowledge, the potentiality of experience instead of data. From the initial need, through several steps until the goal is achieved, only in this way can archives and

museums not only become memory repositories, but an intense experience of building and sharing knowledge.

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# When Shoe Heritage is on Display

## A Digital Fashion Communication Approach

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**Abstract.** This paper contributes to the field of digital culture and fashion communication by presenting a comprehensive overview of publicly available shoe museums and collections worldwide, which have an online presence. To the best knowledge of the authors, this listing is the first of its kind on institutions that exhibit shoes. It shows what types of contents and services shoe museums offer online and to what extent they digitally enable access to their collections. Through a content analysis, museums' websites and their presence on social media are examined. A scattered map shows how much the shoe museums rely on a digitally enhanced access to their collection in comparison to service and institutional information that they provide on their websites.

**Keywords:** Shoe Museum · Digital Fashion · Digital Collection · Virtual Museum · Fashion Communication

## 1 Introduction

More than 20 years ago, when the 'digital information age' just began [1], Finnish media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo [2: 130] asked the following question: "Should a virtual museum be addressed to the home user or the museum goer or both?" After more than twenty years, of which two years of pandemic, this question has lost none of its relevance.

Research on the role of technology and technical innovation in the production of value has often taken place outside the cultural context [3]. An exception is the international series of conferences 'Museums and the Web', which has annually explored "the social, cultural, design, technological, economic, and organizational issues of culture, science and heritage on-line" since 1997 [4]. Conferences like the aforementioned played a crucial role in the times when the first museums established their websites [5]. The potential uses of websites and social media, particularly in the context of museums, still need further research. The goal of this paper is to present a comprehensive overview of publicly available shoe museums and collections worldwide, which have an online presence. To the best knowledge of the authors, this listing is the first of its kind on institutions that exhibit shoes. Through a content analysis, both museums' websites and their presence on social media are examined. A scattered map shows what types of contents and services shoe museums offer online and to what extent they digitally

enable access to their collections. For this paper, not only shoe museums in the strict sense, but also other institutions that either exhibit shoes as part of their collection, physically or digitally, have been considered. Hence, for the sake of simplicity, the term shoe museum will be used in a broader way, intending to include all relevant institutions that are concerned with providing public access to their shoe collections.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Fashion and Shoes in Museums**

Fashion exhibitions are taking an increasingly important role in museums and “have become a great source of attraction” over the last years [6: 34]. This trend of increased acknowledgement was accentuated by UNESCO, which recognised traditional craftsmanship such as the production skills and knowledge of clothing as intangible cultural heritage in 2003 [7]. Nowadays, fashion items are often either part of large collections, be it in public general museums or private ones, or they belong to museums of a fashion sub-sector, such as shoes, a specific designer, or a company [6]. Garments, including shoes, are especially prone to damages caused by improper handling or storage due to their delicate materials. In the past years, new technological possibilities such as 3D digital representations for displaying clothing and accessories found their way into museums. These allow mitigating the risks when archiving and handling the items and can at the same time offer an enhanced view of the exhibited artefact to a much larger audience. Many major fashion museums thus began to digitise their items, enriching them with metadata, and creating online exhibits and multimedia galleries. This creation of an enhanced digital access to museums’ collections has gone in line with their strengthened digital and social media presence in general [8].

### **2.2 Museums on the Internet**

In order to positively influence online visitors’ intentions to revisit the website as well as the physical premises of a museum, design factors of a website such as “content, ease of use, aesthetics, (...) and emotion” are important to consider [9: 383–384]. Additionally, for digital costume museums’ websites, the perceived usefulness and playfulness of the provided information can influence the relation between the visitor and the institution [10]. However, some findings suggest, “social networks and virtual communities (...) can be important in driving visitor traffic to museums, whereas the website does not seem to play the same role” [11: 5]. Nevertheless, websites are part of museums’ communication standard as well as a marketing tool and should be considered as strategically important for museums [12, 13]. The search for information on museums’ websites can be categorised into two types: (i) information search for action planning; and (ii) topic-related information search [14]. The most popular part of a museum’s website is the ‘visiting’ and ‘opening times’ section, with the address and location map being the most clicked features. “Exhibitions, galleries and events” are the second most popular features that visitors of museum websites are aiming at [15]. Moreover, museums continue to add further products and services to their websites, such as web shops, marketing podcasts,

and educational offers, thus making use of the technological possibilities online [3]. This information allows users to engage thematically deeper with the museum's contents. A museum's website should therefore not only deliver practical information, but also tie in with the users' curiosity, interests, and prior knowledge [14]. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, museums mainly relied on social media to disseminate their contents, especially through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram [16]. Today, museums are increasingly user-centred by promoting "a space of innovation and a platform for collaboration, (...) by engaging (...) visitors as active participants in knowledge sharing and creation" [17: 86]. These so-called social museums use the potential of the online environment to encourage users to be "co-producers of knowledge in cultural heritage contents" [17: 86–87]. This participatory approach aims at establishing loyal relationships between the museums and the users, independent from a visit of the museums' physical premises [3].

### 2.3 Virtual Museums

The existing literature uses the term 'virtual museum' for three different concepts: (i) a physical museum's online presence; (ii) entirely digital spaces, which do not exist offline, with objects that were either digitalised or originally created in the 3D space for this very purpose; or (iii) physical exhibitions which are enriched through digital means [8]. In this paper, we focus on the meaning of (i) and (ii), intending collections that are curated for and transmitted on the Internet. One of the central tasks of museums is to make their collections as accessible as possible to the public [18]. Virtual museums and digital exhibitions originated from the museums' attempts to digitise their inventories and databases [3]. However, simply replicating an archival storage approach with descriptive metadata complicates the possibility for private users to acquire effectively cultural knowledge [19]. A non-specialised public "wants to be guided and inspired" [12: 42]. This means that information on single items should be complemented by thematic or contextualised information, visualisations, and storytelling [12]. Furthermore, a digital artefact can be augmented, for example, with animations, videos, and hyperlinks. Another case of virtual museums are entirely digital spaces, which do not exist offline, with objects that were either digitalised or originally created in the 3D space for this very purpose. Due to the widely available technologies, many of which are free of charge, it is increasingly feasible to create fully digital virtual museums [8].

In their categorisation of virtual museums, Geser & Niccolucci [19: 14–19] distinguish between three different variants, which can co-exist within museums:

- *Content-centric*: object-oriented, one-way communication
  - brochure-like, general information about the museum
  - online exhibitions of collection highlights or digital extension for a temporary exhibition
- *Communication-centric*: context-oriented, one-way communication
  - museum as a learning space, didactically enhanced

- storytelling, knowledge and enjoyment through providing context, variety of media for narration
- *Collaboration-centric*: participation-oriented, two-way communication
  - web 2.0 environment, user engagement apart from the museum’s website
  - organising, sharing and exploring of user communities’ own online collections

A digitised inventory enables cultural organisations to collaborate in jointly curated digital exhibitions [12]. Examples of such platforms and mobile applications are the non-commercial initiatives ‘Google Arts & Culture’ and ‘Europeana’. 3D worlds such as the Metaverse at large “aim to replicate the user experience of visiting a physical museum space and observing the exhibits”, while at the same time enriching and extending it [20: 22]. They can also offer a multi-user and thus a more interactive experience [20].

### 3 Research Design

To obtain an overview of shoe museums and significant shoe collections, and to analyse how they present themselves and their collections online, it has been chosen to (i) perform a Google search; (ii) conduct a content analysis on the museums’ websites; and (iii) assess the different digital means they use to present their collections and to build relations with the public. A content analysis is a suitable methodology in analysing web-content as it allows to detect patterns in communication [21].

This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Which shoe museums have an online presence?
2. What types of contents and services do they offer online?
3. How much do shoe museums rely on a digital access to their collection in comparison to the information they provide on their websites?

### 4 Methodology

The research is structured in several stages, following McMillan [22].

First, in order to gain an overview on which shoe museums exist worldwide and have an online presence, the following keywords in 5 different languages were run in a Google search in October 2022: ‘shoe museum’, ‘Schuhmuseum’, ‘musée chaussures’, ‘museo calzatura scarpe’, and ‘museo calzado zapato’. The first 10 pages of search results were analysed and merged with the list of shoe museums available on Wikipedia as well as through a Wikipedia search under the category ‘shoe museums’, where the results in English, German, French and Italian were taken into account [23]. All museums were checked if they were still open through the Google Knowledge Panel or a further Google search. Other shoe museums that appeared in the literature were assessed and classified accordingly [24–26]. A total number of 67 shoe museums has identified.

To conduct reliable research on the shoe museums’ online presence, two criteria were applied: (i) the museums needed to be open at the time of the analysis; and (ii) they needed to have their own web domain. 5 shoe museums were temporarily closed, 5

museums were fully closed. For 3 museums, it was not clear if they were still or already open or closed, and the URL of 1 museum was invalid. These 14 shoe museums were excluded from the analysis, because it could not be assumed that their web presence was still managed and thus up to date. A qualitative content analysis has then been applied on the sample of the remaining 53 shoe museums, which are open and have an online presence. 14 museums did not have their own domain, but a tourism platform, the municipality, or another author provided the online information. As it could not be assumed that the museums themselves had the authority on the published content, they were excluded from the analysis. 39 shoe museums remained, one of them was exclusively an online museum with no physical site.

Second, in order to find out what types of contents and services shoe museums offer online, a content analysis was conducted on the remaining 39 shoe museums in October and November 2022. The codes derived from combining a top-down and a bottom-up approach: certain types of information could be expected to appear on the shoe museum's websites, based on the analysis of other museum websites (cf. Sect. 2.2). Other codes were identified inductively by analysing the different sections of the shoe museums' websites.

In total, 37 codes were taken into account (cf. Table 1 and 2). For each of these codes, the presence or absence of the element was analysed on the 39 shoe museums by using the following values: 1 = present/available; 0 = absent/not existent. The codes were then grouped into four main categories.

Codes based on the types of information derived from the analysis of the shoe museums' website:

- *Service information* (16 codes): the museum acts as a service provider by publishing basic information that is relevant for (potential) visitors, e.g. address and opening hours, details on the collection, or news and events.
- *Institutional information* (7 codes): the museum provides further information on the institution itself, e.g. the history of the museum, members of the management, or the possibility to rent the venue.

Codes based on the shoe museums' social media accounts and the visual presentation of parts of their collection on the website and other platforms:

- *Social media* (9 codes): the museum communicates on other platforms than the website with the aim of building and maintaining relations and nurturing interactions with the public, e.g. social media, newsletters, and blogs.
- *Virtual museum* (5 codes): the museum offers online access to parts of its collection, e.g. through virtual tours and digital exhibitions, such as on google arts & culture.

Third, in order to understand how much the analysed shoe museums rely on a digital access to their collection in comparison to the other information they provide on their websites, a scattered map was elaborated (Fig. 1). The X-axis consists of the sum of the present codes from the categories *Service information* and *Institutional information* (23 codes). This gives an indication on how rich the provided information for potential or past visitors is. The Y-axis consists of the sum of the present codes from the categories *Social media* and *Virtual museum* (14 codes). It shows how much the museums invest

in building and maintaining relations and how enhanced the digitally enabled access to the museums' collections is.

## 5 Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Which Shoe Museums Have an Online Presence?

In total, 53 active shoe museums with an online presence have been found.

**Geography.** The museums are located in 22 different countries on 5 continents, mostly in Europe (72%, 38) and in North America (13%, 7). The countries with the highest presence of shoe museums are Germany (19%, 10), Spain, (13%, 7), Italy (11%, 6), and the United States (9%, 5). This result might be partly ascribed to the languages, which were used for the Google search. Most websites offer their content in English (72%, 38) and German (39%, 21). These numbers might be influenced by websites, which are addressed to an international public and intended to rate touristic activities. Almost half of the museums (47%, 25) offer their website in only one language, 23% (12) in two languages, the remaining 16 provide a website in three or more languages.

**Thematic Focus.** Three quarters of the museums (75%, 40) are dedicated exclusively or mainly to shoes. One quarter (25%, 13) are museums that have a substantial collection of shoes but exhibit further related objects (e.g. machines for shoe manufacturing) or not directly associated items. 58% (31) indicate that their collection shows items related to the shoe industry, technology, and craftsmanship. 47% (25) exhibit historical shoes or show the history of shoes. 43% (23) contain shoes that were manufactured by specific brands, companies, or designers. 28% (15) exhibit shoes that were worn by famous people. 21% (11) focus on shoe fashion and design in general, 15% (8) show sports shoes, and 13% (7) claim to present a different aspect of shoes or a sort of specialised collection.

**Management.** 60% (32) of the museums are managed by a private entity: almost a quarter (25%, 13) are run by a shoe company and 23% (12) by a private association or foundation. 30% (16) are operated by a public entity. For 3 museums (6%) no information was found and 2 (4%) are managed by public-private associations.

### 5.2 What Types of Contents and Services Do They Offer Online?

For this section, only the 39 shoe museums, which have an online presence, are open, and have their website hosted on their own domain, have been analysed by using a content analysis. The first two categories, *Service information* and *Institutional information*, focus on information, which is intended to serve interested website visitors in their decision whether to physically visit the museum or to facilitate the planning of their visit (cf. Table 1). The latter two categories, *Social media* and *Virtual museum*, comprise the availability of a digitally enabled access to the museum's collection (cf. Table 2).

**Service Information and Institutional Information.** On an average, the 39 analysed museums provide their website visitors with 56% of the coded service information and

43% of the coded information on the museum as an institution. Most frequently, they publish information on their collection as well as their contact details (95%), and the address of their physical location (92%). The least information is given on job offers (21%) and an annual report (18%). Only a fifth (21%) of the museums has a web shop and on the websites of 18% of the museums, visitors can profit from an online counter to buy their tickets. These results prompt that the analysed museums mostly do not fully rely on the affordances that the web offers them as service providers. Less than half as many codes cover information on the museum as an institution (7) in comparison to service information (16). This indicates that the museums rather use their website as an online brochure to provide information for potential visitors, which can be considered content-centric.

**Table 1.** Categories on service and institutional information for website visitors (#39).

Category	Code	Description	#	%
Service information	Collection	Presented items/topics in the exhibition/collection	37	95
	Contact	Contact form/phone number/e-mail address	37	95
	Address	Indication of physical location, how to get there	36	92
	Opening hours	Days/times the museum is open/closed	33	85
	News/events	Past/current exhibitions, past/upcoming events	31	80
	Ticket price	Admission fees for different publics/groups, discounts	27	69
	Map	Graphic map of the physical location	20	51
	Support	Audio/video guide, guided tours	20	51
	Education	Activities for schools, courses for further education	19	49
	Accessibility	Information for people with special needs	17	44
	Catalogue	Publication about the museum/exhibitions	15	39
	Donations	Ways to support the museum as a private person, volunteering	15	39
	Search bar	Search bar for keyword search	13	33
Shop/café	Offer of products/food/beverages	12	31	

(continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

Category	Code	Description	#	%
	Web shop	Possibility to purchase products online	8	21
	Ticket counter	Possibility to purchase tickets online	7	18
Institutional information	History	Museum history	32	82
	Building	Information about the building the museum is located in	24	62
	Sponsors	Partners, who support the museum	21	54
	Management	Museum management/board members	13	33
	Venue hire	Possibility to rent rooms	11	28
	Job offers	Employment advertisements	8	21
	Annual report	Disclosure of business information	7	18

**Social Media.** 34 shoe museums (87%) are present in at least one way on social media. On an average, the 39 museums are engaged with interested people through about a third (36%) of the analysed channels. The most popular social media platforms are Facebook and Instagram, where 31 (80%) and 24 (62%) respectively have a profile. The least popular ways to keep the public informed are through a Blog or Flickr (7 each, 18%), as well as Pinterest (6, 15%). However, no distinction was made between updated accounts with regular posts and those that seem to have been abandoned for some time. Through accounts on social media, a blog or via a newsletter, museums can build and foster relations to stakeholders and interested people. Apart from providing contact details on a website, this is the only form that allows for direct feedback by the public. Furthermore, social media allow users to share and comment on the museums' communication efforts as well as the collection and items in a larger sense, which can be considered collaboration-centric.

**Virtual Museum.** 25 of 39 shoe museums (64%) provide users some sort of digitally enhanced access to at least a part of their collection. 8 (21%) are engaged in doing so in 3 or more of the 5 analysed ways, which can be considered communication-centric.

The most popular way to give an interested public insight into a museum's collection is by a virtual tour. 13 out of 39 museums (33%) allow their website visitors to roam through their premises digitally. In most cases, this is enabled by applications from or similar to Google Maps or Matterport, which allow a 360° view. Some provide points to click on, which offer more in-depth written or multimedia information. Even more museums rely completely on the photographs of the museum interior. This complicates the view of items and related information and makes the virtual visit much less profitable compared to a physical visit. Other ways for virtual tours are interactive floor plans with additional information to click on, a simple slideshow with photos, and YouTube videos.

**Table 2.** Categories on a digitally enabled access to a museum's collection via social media (#39).

Category	Code	Description	#	%
Social media	Facebook	Institutional account/profile	31	80
	Instagram	Institutional account/profile	24	62
	YouTube	Institutional account/profile	15	39
	Twitter	Institutional account/profile	13	33
	Newsletter	Newsletter to be received upon subscription	13	33
	LinkedIn	Institutional account/profile	9	23
	Blog	Webpage for institutional articles with a possibility for users to leave comments	7	18
	Flickr	Institutional account/profile	7	18
	Pinterest	Institutional account/profile	6	15

Two museums request a registration to join a virtual guided tour or a small fee to access a video. A virtual tour requires the least effort for curation, as the existing structure of the museum and its exhibitions is reproduced. Some texts and detailed photos of the artefacts, however, might be adapted and/or digitally enhanced for the users, which calls for a further curation.

11 museums (28%) offer their website users a thematically curated online exhibition. Mostly, the exhibition is presented as a slideshow with only few information on the content of the pictures. There are two exemptions: the Bata Shoe Museum's bilingual exhibition 'Boots & Blades: The Story of Canadian Figure Skating' uses music and makes visitors scroll up and down, and sideways, as well as click on file cards, among others, and provides a side navigation. The Museo Salvatore Ferragamo organized its exhibition 'Donne in equilibrio' as a virtual tour with the possibility to navigate on the floor plan or on dollhouse perspective. During the lockdowns for the COVID-19 pandemic, it was assumed that the format of online exhibitions could act as a temporal substitute of physical museum visits, together with virtual tours [27]. However, it does not seem that many analysed shoe museums hopped on this trend. Rather, in the majority of cases, the online exhibition was just a selection of contents around a topic, without providing a clear storyline or a comprehensive and thoroughly curated insight into the topic.

Online collections and online archives/inventories are equally popular, with 10 museums (26%) providing each of them. An online collection, in contrast to an online exhibition, is usually a selection of items of the collection or highlights. It is not thematically coherent, and only provides little information in an accompanying text. Most online collections are presented through slideshows, a few of them through individual photos. An exception is the Bata Shoe Museums, which gives insight in its collection through its YouTube series 'Unboxing the BSM'.

An online archive or inventory is a digital access to the museum's artefacts with characteristic data on the single items, such as object type, measurements, material, and style, just to name some. Out of the 10 archives, 8 have a search option. The search is

mostly guided by default keywords, only a few museums offer a full text search. The majority of the shoe museums does not provide extensive metadata. Whereas almost all online archives show one or more pictures of the item to explore its different angles, only one archive has 3D views of the shoes. All archives were publicly available, besides the ‘Catalogue’ of the Museo Internazionale della Calzatura, which requested an online registration to gain access. The Museo Salvatore Ferragamo grants access to its archive via a virtual tour and a video. Two archives were on other websites apart from the museums own domain. The online archives and inventories made available by the analysed shoe museums seem to occupy an ambiguous position: on the one hand, they are too detailed and specific to appeal to a public without any previous knowledge, leaving it unguided and potentially overwhelmed [19]. On the other hand, they do not seem to be oriented towards an expert public due to the lack of completeness and standardisation.

7 museums (18%) participate in Google Arts & Culture. This relatively low number suggests that they principally rely on their own website to present parts of their collection, instead of engaging in a more collaborative environment. Whereas museums enjoy greater freedom content- and design-wise when presenting parts of their collection on their own website, they would benefit from a possibly greater visibility and joint initiatives with other cultural institutions on Google Arts & Culture (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Categories on a digitally enabled access to a museum’s collection via means of a virtual museum (#39).

Category	Code	Description	#	%
Virtual museum	Virtual tour	Virtual tour through the museum as an institution, e.g. via Google Maps	13	33
	Online exhibition	Thematic selection of items with further information	11	28
	Online collection	Selection of items presented through photos/videos	10	26
	Online archive/inventory	Online inventory with search/classification possibilities	10	26
	Google Arts & Culture	Institutional account/profile on Google Arts & Culture	7	18

### 5.3 How Much Do Shoe Museums Rely on a Digital Access to Their Collection in Comparison to the Information They Provide About Themselves?

In order to understand how much the analysed shoe museums rely on a digital access to their collection in comparison to the information they provide on their websites, a scattered map was elaborated (Fig. 1). The 39 shoe museums, which have an online presence, are open, and have their website hosted on their own domain, have been taken

into account. The X-axis consists of the sum of the present codes (total 23) from the categories *Service information* and *Institutional information*. This gives an indication on how rich the provided information is. The Y-axis consists of the sum of the present codes (total 14) from the categories *Social media* and *Virtual museum*. This shows how enhanced the digitally enabled access to museums' collections is and how much the museums invest on building and maintaining relations.

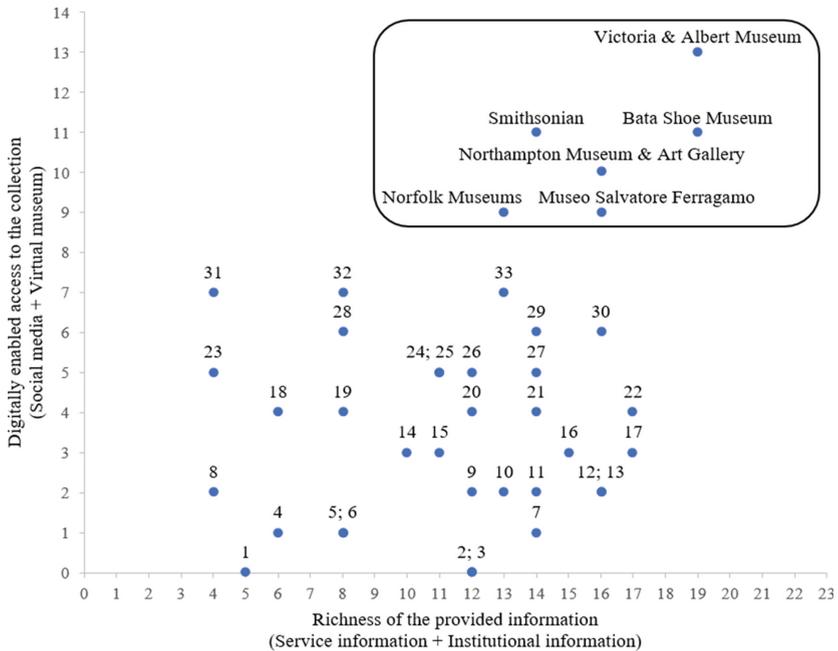
One cluster can be identified, which comprises 6 museums with an advanced digital presence: Victoria & Albert Museum (UK), Bata Shoe Museum (CA), Smithsonian (USA), Northampton Museum & Art Gallery (UK), Museo Salvatore Ferragamo (IT), and Norfolk Museums (UK). On the one hand, they provide comprehensive information on the museum and its services for website visitors. On the other hand, they build and maintain relations through their extensive use of social media and offer a digitally enhanced access to their collections through virtual tours, online collections, exhibitions, archives, or on Google Arts & Culture. The other 33 shoe museums are widely dispersed (the full list is available on the following page: <https://digitalfashion.ch/shoemuseums/>). While there are some museums with an emerging digital presence, 3 (8%) are neither present on social media nor do they use any means that could be considered a virtual museum. 12 (31%) were found to be present on social media, but to have no means for a virtual museum. In the opposite case, only 2 (5%) were found to provide a digitally enhanced access to their items, without any presence on social media. In terms of the scope of the service and institutional information they provide, the 33 not clustered shoe museums are scattered as well, indicating different levels of information completeness.

## 6 Conclusions and Limitations

“Can a virtual museum be merely a replica of the physical one, or should it be something radically different?” Erkki Huhtamo [2: 130] wondered almost 20 years ago. This paper does not give a normative answer, but it shows how shoe museums happen to present themselves in the digital world as of 2022.

The museums are not easily comparable with each other. They vary remarkably in terms of their geography, management, and thematic focus. This diversity is portrayed in the content analysis: The websites fulfil the categories on service and institutional information for website visitors with mostly high percentages. However, they are lower in the category of a digitally enabled access to a museum's collection via social media and in the category, which gives online insight in the collection via means of a virtual museum.

Only one distinctive cluster was detected in the scattered map. These 6 museums invest broadly in their web presence and in building relations. The other 33 shoe museums are classified in different stages. They have in common that they only provide minor insights into their collections by using a rather small range of digital means other than text, photos, and sometimes videos. The museums do not take advantage of the full spectrum of technological possibilities on the Internet. Additionally, the quality of the two third (25, 64%) who provide a digitally enabled access to their collection varies greatly. One possible reason why the shoe museums seem to lag behind in the adoption of digital means on their websites is that many of them are managed, operated and curated



**Fig. 1.** Scattered map of how much the shoe museums rely on a digital access to their collection in comparison to the information they provide on their websites (#39).

by smaller local and private associations. It can be assumed that these institutions do not have the personnel, financial, strategic, and technical means to create a state-of-the-art web presence. The shoe museums in the cluster, on the contrary, are publicly owned general museums or managed by world-famous shoe companies.

The scattered map suggests that the museums largely follow a more content-centric than a communication- or collaboration-centric approach. Some seem to be unsure of their online strategy: on the one hand, they show parts of their collection to online visitors, but not to an extent that would create real value for them. On the other hand, they provide extensive databases with metadata to the users, but not in a user-friendly curated way. Content-centric information for potential visitors of the physical site and a communication-centric access to curated online exhibitions are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, museums could benefit from upgrading their web presence also in terms of building stronger relations with interested publics, in addition to their collaboration-centric social media engagement.

As the search for museums and collections has been limited to five languages, it is expected to have not identified all shoe museums or similar institutions. Thus, the map does not claim completeness. The content analysis provides qualitative and quantitative descriptive results from a content-centric view. However, the websites have not been analysed in a communication-centric approach. Aspects of usability or storytelling in texts, pictures, videos, and games have been as neglected as the two-way stream of

communication from the users to the museum as well as to other users. This can be subject of further research.

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# Corporate Fashion Museums Communication Strategies: The Case of the Louis Vuitton Maison de Famille in Asnières-sur-Seine

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**Abstract.** The case of the Louis Vuitton ‘*maison de famille*’ in Asnières-sur-Seine allows investigation of communications strategies implemented by Corporate Fashion Museums. It is argued these museum types are used by luxury fashion brands as marketing tools to retain their customers. The data relied upon are primarily qualitative: interviews and exploratory observations were specifically conducted between January 2020 and November 2022. It is suggested that the process of commodification of the family *patrimonium* as well as the enhancement of for-sale products within the museum is made possible through the wise use of various techniques mainly related to the artification and the heritagization processes. The combination of those techniques – linking fashion brands with the art and museum world(s) – enables fashion firms to produce a coherent corporate narrative while pursuing seemingly oppositional goals.

**Keywords:** Artification · Corporate Communication · Corporate Fashion Museums · Heritagization

## 1 Introduction

Over the last decades, the luxury fashion industry has undergone significant changes which have engendered a shift in their business production process. To avoid economic losses and to retain customers, many firms have implemented initiatives enabling them to present their brands as exclusive and prestigious despite the mass and industrialized production. Among those initiatives can be included the launch of fashion-branded Corporate Museums. It is suggested that the process of enhancement of for-sale products within the museum premises is made possible through the wise use of various techniques mainly related to the artification and the heritagization processes. The purpose of this contribution is twofold: first to retrace the strategies implemented by Louis Vuitton (hereinafter LV) to enhance its heritage and analyze the market-oriented purpose behind the opening of the LV Museum. We argue that art-exhibitions allow the brand to advertise its know-how and consequently to legitimize the price of its merchandise. The study of the LV ‘*maison de famille*’ in Asnières-sur-Seine allows investigation of how luxury fashion houses manage to produce a coherent discourse while maintaining opposing goals. We argue that the interrelations between the for-profit market-stream

and the artistic-stream (not subject to commodification rationales) are used by the brands for promotional purposes. Two core hypotheses are formulated:

- While communicating on Corporate Fashion Museums, luxury brands undertake an audience targeting process, implying a differentiation of the visitors. More specifically, museum managers define the accessibility of spaces according to the displayed contents;
- Fashion houses implement performative policies: Corporate Fashion Museums are used as marketing tools. The above-mentioned policy is staged and expressed on various physical performative space(s).

This paper is divided in two main parts. Following a historical overview of the genesis of fashion museums, the first section insists on the specificities of the France context. Thus, the case of Asnières is placed in a larger national framework. The distinctiveness of Corporate Museums and the communication strategies adopted by fashion brands are then outlined. The second section introduces the case study and then explores the methods adopted by LV to differentiate the visitors according to the displayed contents and objects. The researcher provides a deeper understanding of the topics and storytelling related to the *savoir-faire* arguing that the design/creative spaces are only available to a limited public. On the other hand, narratives regarding the purchased merchandises (and their related spaces) are widely accessible. Finally, the author explores the ways in which the stories concerning the '*maison de famille*' are integrated into a broader and multi-scaled communication strategy.

## 2 Study Methods

The research is grounded on qualitative sources. The case of the LV '*maison de famille*' in Asnières-sur-Seine was chosen as an example to illustrate the specificities of the Corporate Fashion Museums within the French context. The empirical research was primarily based on participant and exploratory observations. The author studied the geographic, architectural, and logistical aspects during the visit of the exhibition entitled "*200 trunks, 200 visionaries: the exhibition*" conducted in March 2022. A comprehensive exploration of the premises of the maison was made in October 2022 during the LVMH '*Journées Particulières*'. Non-directive in-depth interviews with three LV managers were also conducted over the same period. The interviewed actors were selected according to two main criteria: their specific role within the company, and their level of seniority in the workplace. Considering the organizational flowchart, the author specifically identified senior employees who have been working at LV for at least ten years, acquiring a high level of responsibility. As per the corporate roles, the heads of Marketing Communication and/or Public Relations of the brand were targeted. The results were combined with a retrospective analysis of the information coming from a study conducted in January 2020 as part of a broader research project financed by the School of Public Affairs at Sciences Po. The study involved 15 respondents, associated with LVMH, cf. top-level managers in charge of deployment of the '*département des Métiers d'Excellence*' within the luxury group. Also of relevance were the informal visits of the Asnières urban district surrounding the museum. Secondary sources were also analyzed in this

framework, i.e. press articles, fashion blogs, scientific articles and reports involving full details concerning fashion shows.

### 3 Staging Fashion in Museums (and Beyond)

The chronological study of fashion museums at the international level reveals the key moments in the evolution of these entities, highlighting the paradigm shifts. This paragraph focuses on the French context, emblematic because of its regional specificities. In essence, a typology of French fashion museums is outlined with particular attention given to Corporate Fashion Museums and within this context, different ‘spatial trends’ of these institutions are detailed. Finally, the communication strategies implemented by corporate museums are analyzed. The first part of the paper argues that the exercise of fashion curating, ‘*patrimonium*’, ultimately justifies and legitimizes the existence of certain types of museums, i.e., the ‘family houses’ museums.

#### 3.1 Fashion, Museums, and Museology: Narrating a Cultural Heritage ‘In the Making’

The display of fashion objects in museums is not a newly emerging phenomenon: the genesis of these initiatives has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon pre-war context [1]. The process quickly accelerated and expanded geographically. The progressive presence of costume collections in the western museum landscape had a specific purpose: to highlight the evolution of style, aesthetics, and functionality of clothing according to a chronological criterion. Starting from the 1960s, museum spaces devoted to fashion became increasingly systematized. The 1990s marked a paradigm shift in the world of fashion museums with the passage from a ‘garments museology’ to a ‘fashion museology’ [1]. This period saw a real change in the way fashion was understood and perceived from being a collection of garments to being an ‘institutionalized system’ [2]. Within this context, major fashion names/personalities are perceived by museums as catalysts: often at the heart of exhibitions, they constitute important levers of attractiveness. They are also likely to give rise to exhibition-events qualified as ‘blockbusters’ [3] – thus consolidating the trend towards the ‘starification’ of museum entities [4]. The ‘fashion museology’ trend encourages not only the narration of a cultural heritage ‘in the making’ (fashion itself never ceasing to evolve and innovate) but also the formalization of unprecedented partnership streams. The cooperation between public museums and private fashion brands makes it possible to exhibit unique pieces that would otherwise be inaccessible. These collaborations are also the pretext for the implementation of new economic models within an institutional context characterized by spending review policies. According to the literature, collaboration between fashion companies and public museums would lead to significant financial benefits for the latter (namely, due to the commercial potential of these exhibitions) [1].

**Corporate Fashion Museums: Locations and Specificities Within the French Context.** The landscape of fashion museums within the French context is heterogeneous: in fact, both public and private entities cohabit in this same category. If in the Parisian context, we observe two types of museums for public entities: those entirely

dedicated to fashion and financed by local municipalities and those dedicated to contemporary art museums that regularly host temporary exhibitions. Apart from the financial dimension (see paragraph 1.3), many scholars have underlined the risks associated with the progressive integration of fashion houses in the management of temporary themed-exhibitions designed using public-private ventures. The co-construction of these exhibitions may indeed undermine the scientific integrity of museum institutions, which are likely to be caught up in market dynamics [4]. These museums fall into the second category (cf. private entities). Foundations (e.g. Alaïa), commercial galleries including exhibition spaces showcasing archives or pieces that are not for sale (e.g. Galerie Dior) as well as Corporate Fashion Museums. The latter may refer to a diversity of locations [5]. 'Corporate Fashion Museums' are defined as physical exhibition spaces dedicated to the presentation of a company's history and know-how, which are open to various audiences [6]. These museums do not meet the museum's criteria adopted by the International Council of Museums during the 21st Conference in 2000. As such, companies can communicate freely about their history and heritage and are not subject to the same regulations as public museums. This implies the existence of both curatorial and geographical specificities. Among these, we note that the location is directly linked to the production site. The distribution of company museums within the French territory is thus modelled on the structure of the 'fashion system' and reflects the industrial history of the hexagon [7]. Close study of the French context allows us to identify different types of locations associated with the identification of Corporate Fashion Museums (Table 1):

**The Communication Strategies of Corporate Museums: Curating the Fashion 'Patrimonium'.** The display of cultural heritage is very strategic for fashion houses that place most of their value on symbolic aspects. Firms investing in museums take advantage of their 'heritage brand' through a specific narrative, which allows highlighting the value of the brand while reinforcing their image and reputation [7]. The literature review considered corporate fashion museums as privileged viewpoints to observe the interconnections between public engagement and luxury fashion brands. Many studies have been conducted regarding the rationale behind luxury fashion brands investments in corporate museums. Those cultural spaces are considered as part of brand value creation [8, 9]: within this context, art is perceived as a business investment [10] useful to reconnect the firms with their origins (and heritage) [11] as well as with their customers [12]. The opening of art-oriented places also allows fashion brands to diversify their marketing strategies: in this perspective, museums can be instrumentalized by luxury companies to offer new consumer experiences [13]. As private entities, Corporate Fashion Museums are free to define their brand narrative and to curate autonomously their own 'patrimonium'. We rely here on the Latin term 'patrimonium' at the core of the notion of heritage, referring to the idea of 'family belongings'. In this context, they may adopt communication methods based on entrepreneurial and marketing techniques. If one refers to the museums located in a historic building owned by the company's owners, one routinely observes that the brand discourse is mainly grounded in the presentation of the personal objects of the place owners. Given the nature of the museum, the biographical dimension prevails over the material one. The text panels are rare: the objects are exhibited because of their aesthetic value [14] and provide an opportunity to portray the lifestyle, passions, or extravagances of the founders of the brand. Rationales

**Table 1.** Specifications related to Corporate Fashion Museum in France.

Kind of Corporate Fashion Museum	Specifications related to the location	Museum examples in France
<i>Museum located in a production site which is still active</i>	The museum space is integrated into the production site. The museum's visit usually includes the presentation of the production machines and allows visitors to meet artisans	Maison de Broderies Vermont (Paris)
<i>Museum located in the former production site which has been specifically rehabilitated</i>	Enhancement of the industrial architecture of the site. The building becomes an integral part of the heritage that deserves to be promoted. Firms frequently choose old production buildings (industrial wastelands) that have become obsolete	Museum of Shirt Manufacturing (Argenton-sur-Creuse)
<i>Museum located in a historic building owned by the company's owners</i>	The museum is located in the former living quarters of the brand's owners (e.g. the director's house). The displays focus on the biographical aspects of the owners. Any intimate element of the family contributes directly to the brand's narrative, becoming a marketing tool	Louis Vuitton ' <i>maison de famille</i> ' (Asnières-sur-Seine)
<i>Museum located in a building made ex novo</i>	The company decides on a location that is representative of the image it wants to convey to the public. The location is not necessarily determined by the geographical proximity to the production site. The opening of such a museum can also be the consequence of a relocation	Pierre Cardin museum (Paris)

for this kind of museums are mixed. Some scholars argue that it is a political choice of fashion companies, which decide to give primary importance to visual culture and advertising methods [15]. Other authors justify these choices considering the playful and recreational value attributed to the museum by brands themselves [7]. The absence of a pedagogical discourse implies, as a direct consequence, an aestheticization, and even a form of 'sacralization' of the exhibited objects [14] as well as a sort of 'starification' of the brand owners [4]. Guided tours are often preferred to written media for

strategic and logistical reasons. The latter are provided by company employees who are familiar with the corporate narrative. In fact, companies develop a narrative within their museum spaces designed to present the brand's specificities (e.g., know-how, creativity, innovation, etc.) to a wide range of audiences. The aim, even if it is not market-oriented, is to persuade the visitor of the company's excellence and to arouse his admiration. To do this, several levers are mobilized, notably the symbolic one involving prestige and reputation, and the historical one involving tradition and know-how [15]. Guided tours are generally based on a limited number of curatorial topics. Concretely, to curate the fashion 'patrimonium', corporate museums usually delve into the following themes. 1) history of the company's founders. 2) history of the fashion house. 3) history of the museum site and territory. The guided tours close, oftentimes, with a look into the future: the brand's innovations are highlighted, both within the creative process and the production system. This topic allows fashion houses to present their cultural heritage, which is still 'in the making'. In this respect, the boundaries between the scientific and the promotional discourse seems to be blurred [4].

#### **4 The Case of the Louis Vuitton 'Maison de Famille' in Asnières-sur-Seine**

Founded in 1854 and specialized in the manufacture of trunks, LV has become a major player in the luxury fashion industry. Initially based in Paris, the company moved its production workshops to Asnières-sur-Seine in 1859. The brand gradually opened to the production of garments, launching in 1998 its first ready-to-wear collection. The choice of the Asnières site can be explained by several factors. In addition to the property price, much more advantageous for such an emerging company, there were also positive externalities associated with the city, which is located nearby Paris and in the immediate surroundings of the Seine banks, allowing the ateliers to be rapidly supplied with necessary materials. The buildings that can be visited today are not the original ones, but those (re)built in 1878. The architectural complex consists of a conglomerate of manufacturing studios and of a residential pavilion, built in 1860, and expanded in 1890 (cf. the 'Maison de Famille'). The company museum is hosted within this site: it displays the historical trunks designed by LV. The latter is only accessible on very limited occasions. It will be noted that the fashion house undertakes a target audience process. It defines the accessibility of venues based on the objects and content displayed. This leads to a differentiation of the audience. Indeed, we will see that the access to the ateliers of the 'maison de famille' is limited to a highly selected audience. Topics related to savoir-faire and production techniques are poorly mediatized and barely integrated into the corporate communication. On the contrary, the gallery's exhibition spaces are available to the general public at no cost. However, the exhibits and themes covered in these museums' spaces are properly related to the company's products and are consequently associated with business approaches. The communication performed in this context is market-oriented. The author visited both spaces, on a guided tour, in 2022. The visit has been analyzed as an event belonging to a broader communication strategy promoting the brand, its heritage, but also its products merchandising. Although not very accessible, the museum allows the brand to be part of a process of "artification",

transforming non-art into art [24]. We argue that this process provides greater credibility to the LV brand – while also increasing the value of its products.

#### 4.1 Sharing the Know-How in the Ateliers: Limited Communication and Constrained Accessibility Reserved for a Selected Audience

The case of the LV *'maison de famille'* is an appropriate illustration of the notion of 'family belongings' to which the concept of *'patrimonium'* refers, insofar as the Vuitton family lived there until recently. All the site's infrastructures are designed to convey a multitude of dimensions (i.e. narrative, aesthetic and technical) that contribute to giving meaning (and value) to the exhibited objects and, by extension, to the brand's image. The physical space of the place is divided in three main parts. The first one, defined as *'Les Ateliers'* is composed of the workshops. Part of the architectural complex is, in fact, still used for craft production. Artisans here specifically make collectibles e.g. rigid trunks and exotic leather goods and customized orders. From an aesthetic point of view, the ateliers are characterized by an 'Eiffel style' i.e. neo-industrial architecture predominantly composed by iron and glass. The second, called *'La Galerie'* is composed of an exhibition space, relatively modest in terms of surface, aimed at hosting fashion branded exhibitions. This space allows LV to materialize its own heritage through tangible elements. The last one, *'La Maison'* is constituted by the *art-nouveau* house of the founder. The objective associated to the corporate enhancement of the architectural complex *'maison de famille'* is twofold: to make a showcase of the brand's creations – through a diachronic perspective – and to have a representative location to host V.I.P. customers and celebrities. Indeed, the place remains barely accessible to the (general) public. However, all the site's infrastructures are made available both for the training of the company's employees and for the reception of selected audiences (e.g. press, celebrities, fashion bloggers, important clients of the company, etc.). Regarding the training of artisans, in tandem with the launch of the *'Institut des Métiers d'Excellence'* (an apprenticeship program aimed at training emerging craftspeople), LV has decided to provide part of the training within the Ateliers. Interviewed by the author in January 2021, the former Head of Marketing & Communication at LVMH explained those choices in different ways [Interviewee N.1]: *"Within their apprenticeships students are expected to be mentored by master artisans which can transmit traditional knowledge, skills, and savoir-faire. It is somehow also a way for the group to preserve our intangible heritage ..."*. In addition to the need to preserve and transmit the heritage and knowledge, the management team seems to consider the location of the training as a key factor for the success of the apprentices. According to this view, being trained in an exceptional place such as the *'maison de famille'* would allow the students to be more inspired and, consequently, more efficient. The presence of aspiring artisans within the *maison* would promote – to quote the interviewer – a form of 'pollination' [Interviewee N.1]: *"It is a matter of giving the students the possibility to familiarize themselves not only with the know-how but also with the places, their history, and the founder's past. This is a real opportunity for them ... We wanted to provide them with exceptional locations so that they can learn the best 'métiers d'excellence' via a process of 'pollination' implying the apprentices, the maison and the senior artisans ..."*.

Regarding the reception of selected audiences, LV has decided to capitalize on the ‘*maison de famille*’ using the place as a marketing tool. Apart from private customers and the press, only 300 VIPs/celebrities are received there each year. Nevertheless, no advertisement is made by the brand concerning these exclusive receptions. Very sporadic information about these visits is gathered from second-hand sources (mainly fashion bloggers who are invited on a regular basis), however, these sources have not been treated for the purposes of this study. The general public is granted access to the Ateliers during The *Journées Particulières* of LVMH. This international event allows, only once every two years, a small number of people to visit various locations related to the LVMH group. Apart from the constrained accessibility, which is largely conditioned by the implementation of corporate events, the communication over the Ateliers is very limited. Interviewed by the author in 2020, the Director of the *Métiers d’Excellence* LVMH indicate that the absence of specific communication for this production site is driven by a corporate choice(s) [Interviewee N.2]: “*Above all, we wish to preserve the authenticity and integrity of the Ateliers. As you may know, visits may disrupt the diligent work of our artisans ... and there are securities and intellectual property issues that arise when opening to the public. Visits are always guided, and supervisors verify the compliance with the policy that prohibits taking photos ...*”. Furthermore, with respect to the fairly low number of participants, the LV Responsible for Public Relations and Marketing Communication indicates that this was a strategic decision made by the LVMH group [Interviewee N.3]: “*We are aware of the demand and desire of the general public to learn more about our know-how and production practices, especially in a context such as the current one, which is increasingly sensitive to environmental issues ... Together with the LVMH group, we have decided to limit the number of visits to the Ateliers. In fact, we intend to preserve the exceptionality of the event [referred to the ‘Journées particulières’] ... so that the public can fully enjoy it*”. To sum up, it seems to be a question of maintaining the notion of scarcity through very restrictive policies of access as well as through the absence of specific communication. This strategy ultimately allows the public to develop a specific place-imaginary linked to what Bourdieu defined as ‘the magic of fashion’ [16].

**Exhibiting Branded Products Within the Galerie: Free Availability and Public Corporate Communication Opened to All Sort of Audiences.** Alongside the ateliers, LV has created a gallery for temporary exhibitions. From a geographical point of view, the space reserved for the exhibitions is relatively modest compared to the overall area covered by the building. According to an estimation produced by the author referred to the surface area data of the ‘*maison de famille*’, only 10% space is open and accessible to the general public. The gallery is accessible for free, and it is explicitly advertised on the brand’s institutional website. The latter provides in fact detailed information on the availability and accessibility of the galerie. The author visited the “200 trunks, 200 visionaries: the exhibition” exhibition in March 2022. A complete visit of the premises was also made in October of the same year on the LVMH ‘*Journées Particulières*’ event. The following paragraph is intended to critically assess the visits, focusing specifically on the communication strategies and the target audience of the brand. The visits opened to the general public include LV merchandise within non-market spaces, conferring a

particular status to the exhibited objects. The latter become “artistic” objects: they intervene as *‘êtres de langage’* (cf. ‘beings of language’) as they are recognized as worthy of being preserved and displayed. Therefore, they are also supported by social practices as they are specifically collected, exhibited, etc. [17, p. 104]. As such, the exhibits can broadcast a narrative defined by the company (or, in this specific case, the gallery managers) [18] which is conceived to be easily approachable. The broadcasted narrative seems to follow three main objectives: producing a corporate history, defining links between the brand and the artistic ecosystem, and implementing a process of heritagization. As per the first objective, it refers to the brand policy aimed at inscribing LV in a unique and intimate past (e.g. the Art-Deco styled House is filled with black and white photos of LV family members). Objects and furniture in the home are preserved even though the house has undergone renovation: within this context, the brand adopts a ‘documentalist approach’ [19]. Likewise, the exhibitions consist, most of the time, on thematically curated retrospectives. The exhibition was specifically enriched with archival elements (e.g. letters, motifs, logotypes, etc.) tracing the historical evolution of the house. The second objective is specifically related to the LV willingness to insert the brand into a specific ‘artistic ecosystem’, by showing visitors the links between the Vuitton family, the firm, and contemporary artists. This goal was particularly noticeable within the framework of the exhibition. The latter was in fact aimed to stress the links between LV and prominent figures from the artistic field Japanese streetwear Nigo, Danish toymaker Lego, among others invited to customize the trunks to commemorate the bicentennial of the brand. According to the corporate narrative, those artists are defined as ‘friends’ of the house. In this context, the audiences are considered and treated both as art-visitors and as (potential) customers. The third objective refers to the enhancement of the brand’s products through specific processes of heritagization. The exhibited objects are symbolically located in a remote past, independently of their date of production. The narrative is consistent and still the same both for trunks dating from the beginning of the twentieth century and for trunks produced in 2020: LV qualify as unique and non-reproducible art works worthy of exposition even those merchandise items that are relatively mass-produced and commodified.

**Integrating the ‘Maison de Famille’ into a Broader Communication Strategy: From Asnières to the Worldwide Catwalks.** The narrative, developed in the framework of the guided tours open to the general public, is then inserted into a broader brand communication strategy. Thus, the exhibitions of the LV collections can be studied as a set of event-based practices that are part of a corporate policy aiming at enhancing the brand’s heritage (and its products). In this last paragraph, we have decided to examine the way in which the family home – and, more generally, the displayed objects are reused – or even diverted – for marketing and promotional purposes. We intend to highlight the overlapping of scales that occurs in this context. We also focus on the iterative character of the process of heritagization. As an example, after being displayed in Asnières-sur-Seine, the “200 trunks” exhibition was then shown in Singapore, in Los Angeles and in New York. We argue that LV implements a performative policy, where the *maison de famille* is used as a proper marketing tool. The above-mentioned policy is based on various physical performative space(s). The first space, which is the family home, is partially used by the brand to display ‘heritage’ products to the audiences through

thematic circuit(s). The second space refers to the urban space surrounding the *maison de famille*. Indeed, with the opening of the Gallery in 2015, LV wished to demonstrate its involvement in promotion of the common good and towards the preservation of Asnières-sur-Seine public spaces. To this end, in parallel with the Gallery's inauguration event, the brand entered a dialogue with the local authorities to rename the street adjacent to the museum space. The negotiation was complex but relatively short lasting: as early as 2016, the former 'Rue du Congès' (92600) was renamed, under the impetus of the company 'Rue Louis Vuitton'. The brand has implemented a form of 'social marking' [20] of the mentioned street, which is regularly walked by the gallery's visitors. LV enacts a 'system of signs' [21] that evoke both the attachment of the brand's founder to Asnières and the attention given by the enterprise to the city. The company's objective is clear and consists in showing the public the importance of the family home in the area by going back to the fundamentals and the roots of the brand. In fact, the street sign focuses exclusively on the founder's original '*métier d'excellence*', namely that of 'trunk maker'. The brand seems to want to return to the know-how of the Ateliers and to the aspects of communication that are traditionally reserved for highly selected audiences (see paragraph 2.1). The third performative space is the catwalks. The architecture of the *maison de famille* was taken up by the LV Artistic Director Nicolas Ghesquière during the Spring-Summer 2023 fashion show. The designer presented a vanity-case representing the family home. The *maison* is thus reproduced – in the guise of a fashion accessory – and propelled internationally – via fashion runways. This process is integrated in a corporate narrative since the brand decided to replicate the house in the form of a commercial product. Even if the communication is based on a fiction such as the beauty-case being only a fictional miniature reproduction of the place it offers an adequate opportunity for the brand to speak more widely about its museum and its artification practices. This reproduction allows the firm both to palliate the large-scale production of its merchandise (by conferring a patrimonial value on it) and to adhere to the 'fashion regime' [22]. The latter is specifically customer-oriented: grounded on the enhancement of the 'family belongings' and the *patrimonium*, the corporate narrative(s) ultimately allows LV to promote new products during the fashion week(s).

## 5 Conclusion

This contribution provides a deeper understanding of Corporate Fashion Museums. The latter may constitute an interesting viewpoint for observing the communication strategies and the target audiences implemented by fashion luxury brands. The piece highlights the mechanisms and techniques used by LV to confer distinctive value to the purchased products: a value that is supposed to be related to the 'family belongings' and which is, therefore, inscribed in a specific heritage policy. It was depicted the way in which the firm adapts its discourse according to the audience it is addressing. The processes of heritagization and artification have also been explored. The conclusions are so far ambivalent: the opening of museum spaces allows the brand to inscribe its (mass) production in an artistic logic – thus making it more valuable in the eyes of the public. However, the latter is exposed to an exclusively promotional brand narrative that emphasizes the for-sale fashion products. Only selected audiences truly benefit from information regarding the

brand's know-how and its creative procedures. This differentiation of communication according to the target audience reflects an institutional choice of the LV company, but also of the LVMH group. The study of the availability and accessibility of the LV museum in Asnières provides an operational understanding of those differentiated communication practices: indeed, the spaces that can be visited vary according to the type of visitors. Comparative studies with other Corporate Museums would be necessary to generalize the results of this case study. However, it seems reasonable to indicate that in the case of LV, the '*maison de famille*' represents only a fraction of a complex strategy involving various geographical scales. The paper opens the scope for further studies, that could eventually include interviews with the audiences. The perception of the visitors as well as the tourism impacts of the opening of the *maison* to the general public have not been explored. From a theoretical point of view, the paper enhances the value of adopting a transdisciplinary approach when it comes to studying complex phenomena such as fashion communication. The study constitutes a premise for further analyses of how fashion house narratives are geographically deployed within performative physical spaces.

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