

How bloggers and influencers created the pandemic narrative: a new stage representing the (fake) everyday life

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Abstract

As the *Washington Post* fashion critic Robin Givhan stated, the fashion narrative changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for bloggers, influencers, digital ambassadors and all those professional figures focusing their work on the digital representation of self in their everyday life. Their stage has always been the online platform of publishing (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) on which they built a new form of storytelling. They plan their life to represent the brands they made commercial agreements with. This representation is not staged in real life, it is, the representation of a fake, virtual life. The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly interrupted this storytelling and gave rise to a new way of representing all of us, especially influencers and bloggers, forced at home in our pajamas and comfort clothes. All forms of live storytelling on social networks reached a record peak during the COVID-19 pandemic. A pause and an objective reflection on this phenomenon are necessary since it is characterising a movement going in the opposite direction of the acceleration of fashion that characterized the last decades. The need to find a new rhythm for the fashion universe is now evident and it is to be interpreted as a call to action for all the persons involved.

Keywords: Digital fashion media; Influencers; Narrative; COVID-19; Giorgio Armani.

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Make it better, not only safer. This sentence summarises the new “big issue” of storytelling after the COVID-19 pandemic, an issue that constitutes at the same time the mission, the main address and the final goal of communicators in this historical moment. As reported and documented in the present paper, the fashion sector significantly changed its way of delivering messages and of building stories about clothes and styles on digital media. The 2020 lockdowns imposed around the world obliged fashion editors, journalists, bloggers and influencers to find a new way to build a relevant and effective communication strategy.

As the *Washington Post* fashion critic Robin Givhan stated¹, the fashion narrative during the pandemic changed for all of us and especially for bloggers, influencers, digital ambassadors, and for all the professional figures who focused their work on the representation of self in everyday life, to quote the always relevant study of Erving Goffman². Their stage has always been the online platform of publishing (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, etc.) on which they built a new form of fashion storytelling apparently for all. Fashion seems for all not only as regards the use of clothes, but also as regards their communication.

The appeal of fashion bloggers, influencers and of their storytelling, especially in the early stages of this phenomenon, between 2008 and 2010, that is to say during the so-called *first wave*, has been exactly to be perceived by the mass audience of social networks as coming from common people, in love with fashion. Time goes by and things have obviously changed. Bloggers and influencers transformed their passion into a profession and their storytelling about fashion life became everything but natural, and distant from brands and the fashion industry.

They plan their life to represent the brands they made commercial agreements with and agree with them the way to deliver their products to the type of people who use those products. This storytelling is usually supported by beautiful locations, and consists of insights into luxury such as unique hotels, places, houses, and gardens, creating a dream-like atmosphere and an aspirational desire in the targeted audience, together with a need to share their representation. This representation is not framed in real life and is in itself a fake life: with actors playing roles on a stage, the digital stage. Techniques and styles of acting depend on the medium used and on the technologies and applications that can be activated in a particular historical moment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted this storytelling abruptly silencing it, and has brought on the stage a new type of representation affecting all of us; especially influencers and bloggers, forced to stay at home in their pajamas and comfort clothes. Many have acknowledged the necessity of changing their way of representing themselves, with a new, more direct and simple form of storytelling. Our homes have become our offices and virtual places where to meet with others. Not being able to physically meet other people at fashion events, openings, and catwalks, brands and their ambassadors — bloggers and influencers included — have organised social events, webinars, online meetings and other forms of staying connected and in touch with other people. What about the outfits used for these virtual appointments? The different phases of the lockdown influenced this social aspect as well. During the first one, (the hardest), we have seen most of them wearing comfortable clothes, cooking or practising yoga and encouraging followers to stay connected, to concentrate on their families and loved ones, rather than buying. The second phase, after a month of being confined at home, was clearly marked by the necessity of something different, and many organised online shootings, in which the team — models, photographer and stylist — worked at distance, and constantly repeated the message ‘try to be normal, even if we are not in a normal situation’. Which if translated into fashion jargon could mean ‘dress as if Covid-19 does not exist, maybe while wearing a new accessory such as a nice eye-catching mask covering your face (call the attention on your eyes and on your make up)’.

All forms of live storytelling on social networks have reached a record peak during the COVID-19 pandemic and this is something that will not change once the pandemic will end. According to *The State*

1. Robin Givhan, “Our clothes tell our story. What happens when the narrative is just pajamas and sweats?” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/03/16/our-clothes-tell-our-story-what-happens-when-narrative-is-just-pajamas-sweats/>.
2. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Book, 1959).

of *Fashion* special issue dedicated to Covid-19³, the pandemic has accelerated many trends that were already present in the market and one of them is the use of technology. While providing a way to stay more connected than before, such as the possibility to see and talk with a person on the other side of the world, at the same time technology enables you to isolate yourself from the rest of the world and create a parallel digital life, different from the physical one. In between the blurred lines marking the boundary between one world and the other, we find the perception of us as actors on a stage, and of the others who are the spectators of all the roles that we can interpret for them. If it is true on the one hand that ‘the medium is the message’, as McLuhan stated⁴, on the other, it is important to acknowledge the power of social networks mirroring us albeit not in the most realistic way. Those networks are often viewed and considered ‘trick mirrors’⁵ misrepresenting people, places, and epochs.

This phenomenon requires a moment of objective reflection, as it signals a movement going in a direction that is opposite to the acceleration of fashion that characterised the last decades. This trend is evident in all the phases of the fashion process, from production to distribution, from creation to communication, and it involves big manufacturing companies as well as small-scale craftsmen, luxury brands, and the emerging designers. The need to find a new rhythm for the fashion universe is now manifest and should be interpreted as a call to action for all the persons involved.

Strong values to hold on: the need of a new narrative

Fashion does not just reflect social change, it rather is a social force in its own right. In creating the perfect expression of the contemporary spirit, by drawing on the past, fashion excels in anticipating things that are yet to come⁶. As Benjamin’s image of the *Tigersprung* (tiger’s leap) perfectly represents, the connection between past, present, and future exists and is always to be considered in fashion. Fashion has always created an ever-changing present, but what happens when instability, fear, and lack of perspective prevail, and it is better to focus on different values? In this historical moment with the outbreak of COVID-19, and with the lockdown deeply affecting our lives, a change seems to be mandatory, a change that calls for strong values to hold on to, a solid heritage to value and from which to create the new narrative. More than ever is it now fundamental for fashion, perceived as something that is fleeting and short-lived, not to be equated with what is facile and futile. It is now the moment to preserve “the lightness of thoughtfulness” as opposed to the “lightness of frivolity”, demonstrating that “thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy”⁷.

All the signs go in this direction: with recent and relevant examples being the special fashion event created by Maison Christian Dior in Puglia on July 22nd with the collaboration of the world-famous blogger Chiara Ferragni, and the Uffizi Galleries in Florence.

Maison Christian Dior, in fact, hosted a live, but audience-free fashion show — without the usual array of celebrities in the front row — in the Italian city of Lecce, in a dazzling celebration of local crafts and traditions that included a dance spectacle in the middle of the baroque main square. Models swayed their way through a gallery of lights called *Luminarie* (created by Marinella Senatore) in Lecce’s Piazza del Duomo, with a live orchestra and dancers performing a modern take on a traditional tune. The fashion event was a homage by the creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri to her father’s homeland, Puglia, to celebrate the craftsmanship of this region — embroidery and *tombolo* in particular — in a fresh and fashionable light. The Christian Dior brand and the heritage of this Italian region offered many opportunities for communication, to create stories, and discover curiosities that altogether produced an effective and fascinating storytelling.

3. Imran Amed, Anita Balchandani, Achim Berg, Saskia Hedrich, Jakob Ekeløf Jensen, and Felix Rölkens, *The State of Fashion Coronavirus Update*, Business of Fashion and McKinsey 2020, April 7, 2020.

4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 1964).

5. Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirrors: Reflection on Self Delusion* (London: Fourth Estate, 2019).

6. Ulrich Lehman, *Tigersprung Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2010).

7. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London: Penguin, 2009).

It is not only about more products — outfits on the catwalks to describe and judge, and the work of media — now it is about finding the best story to deliver a specific brand in a specific moment. The expression ‘the work of media’ refers to both the work of communication offices inside fashion companies and the mass media in general, newspapers, magazines, news agencies, but also blogs and digital platforms as well. After the lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic, on the one hand, people need to start dreaming again, to consider the possibility (even if not immediate) of going back to a normal life or a *new normal* life. On the other hand, people needed to hold onto something solid, something that can last for decades and capable of creating a sense of collaboration and synergy. LVMH-owned Dior called on the Costantine Foundation, a centre dedicated to the self-assertion of women, to manufacture e macramé cloth and lace in natural colours, handcrafted with old looms in the Italian countryside. One ivory dress, bejewelled with dozens of butterflies and roses in bobbin lace, was handmade by one of the few women still able to master the old lacemaking techniques. Pietro Beccari, Christian Dior’s CEO, gave three reasons for holding the show: first, the need to create emotions, because luxury is an emotion; second to support fashion on both a local and global scale, from the artisans who make the clothes and accessories to the ‘family’ in and around the show, and finally to celebrate the Italian origins of both Beccari and Chiuri. The Dior fashion show of July 2020 has been a great example of a new narrative involving everybody and everything in a collective narrative that links and brings together past, present, and future.

Maria Grazia Chiuri in a short video broadcasted on the brand’s social networks spoke about the motivations behind her choosing the Italian region of Puglia and it being a source of inspiration for the collection. As well shown by the Christian Dior YouTube Channel ‘Not only is it a place where she has deep family roots, but it is also a place she is deeply connected to, something she sought to develop and highlight in the collection and in the show, which represent highly important and symbolic collaborations’.

Another relevant example of a new narrative of a pandemic-prompted fashion trend anchored to what is able to last such as culture and art, and to universes perceived as less volatile than fashion, could be the promotion of the Uffizi Galleries effected by the most famous Italian fashion blogger, Chiara Ferragni. On the night of July 16th, Chiara Ferragni was in The Uffizi, one of Florence internationally famous and important museums for a photoshoot for Vogue Hong Kong. On that occasion, she visited the museum and posted many photos that received thousands of likes and comments.

The Instagram account of the Uffizi Galleries commented on her attractiveness comparing her to a modern ‘Venus by Botticelli’ which in turn caused a wave of protests, while at the same time being a huge advertising for the Uffizi Galleries in Florence. There were 330,000 likes and 1,000 enthusiastic comments in favour of Ferragni’s post at the Uffizi and 21,000 reactions and 1,500 comments against the Uffizi’s post dedicated to her visit⁸.

This is the text of the post which appeared on the Instagram account of the Uffizi Galleries :

Beauty standards change in the course of time. The female ideal of a blonde-haired woman with diaphanous skin is a very common model of beauty in the Renaissance. Masterfully expressed by the Florentine Sandro Botticelli in *The Birth of Venus* it may be portraying the face of one of his contemporaries, Simonetta Vespucci. A beautiful, noble woman, of Genoese origin, beloved by Giuliano de’ Medici, the younger brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent, she was so worshipped by Sandro Botticelli that she became his muse. Nowadays, Chiara Ferragni, born in Cremona, embodies a role model for millions of followers — a sort of contemporary divinity in the era of social media. The myth and the story of Chiara Ferragni, argued with by harsh critics and supported by faithful fans, is a real sociological phenomenon that involves millions of supporters worldwide and it can undoubtedly be considered a snap-shot of our time.

8. Edoardo Semmola, “Chiara Ferragni agli Uffizi come la Venere di Botticelli. È polemica social,” *Corriere della Sera*, July 18, 2020, https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_luglio_18/chiara-ferragni-come-venere-botticelli-putiferio-il-post-uffizi-155do532-c8bf-11ea-a818-adbf5a0841db.shtml.

The communication strategy followed on this occasion is perfectly coherent with the one followed for the last few years by the director Eike Schmidt (the Uffizi was the first museum to open an account on TikTok) aimed at bringing an ever-younger audience to the museum, using the testimonials most loved by the young, including bloggers and influencers, even if this was contrary to the opinion of purists. Many of the polemical comments, in fact, insisted that the high culture of the Uffizi should not be 'soiled' with the excessively pop image of Chiara Ferragni.

After the visit of Chiara Ferragni, Schmidt stated that the final goal of this marketing strategy was not only economic:

We have a democratic vision of the museum: our collections belong to everybody, not only to a cultural elite. If the young do not create today a connection with our museum and in general with the world of culture, it will be difficult for them to do it in the future, investing in culture. For this reason, it's important to use their language, to intercept their irony and creativity.

If the role of the museum and the strategy seem quite clear, it is equally interesting and relevant to investigate on what happened to the famous fashion blogger and how this kind of cultural operation affected her visibility and engagement. It is not the first time that the fashion or the music industry chose museums as a location, as in the case of Beyoncé and Jay Z at the Louvre, and more recently the Italian singer Mahmood at the Egyptian museum in Turin. The popularisation of culture and its iconic places through mass — now digital — idols, has always been a reason for polemic debate. Linking themselves with these of places, and consequently with the contents and audiences of these places, helps digital influencers to be associated with the word and world of culture, and to elevate (or try to elevate) their image. Their actions are particularly relevant with reference to young people, the so-called Generation Z, that would otherwise hardly pay much attention to and create such an intense engagement with a photo of one of the most important artworks of the Renaissance.

It is also important to consider the particular historical moment in which this happened, and the strategy implemented by the entrepreneur in the period of the lockdown. She was at the Uffizi Galleries for a shooting job and she spontaneously decided to use that opportunity to promote Italian cultural treasures to a national and international audience of more than 20 million followers. This is an operation that Chiara Ferragni has been carrying out for some time during the lockdown, choosing to work only in Italy and in this way showcasing Italian cultural treasures. She did it during a visit to the Vatican Museums and she was criticised because she was making a private visit, without reflecting on the fact that in conjunction with Ferragni's photo the account of the Vatican Museums become trending topics on Twitter. She did it with the Uffizi and she did again with the Archaeological Museum of Taranto being accompanied by Maria Grazia Chiuri, Dior's artistic director.

Influencer marketing, if used well, can be an excellent tool to promote Italian culture and Italian cultural and artistic institutions throughout the world, in particular since the COVID-19 pandemic and the limits to travelling for everybody. Chiara Ferragni has been able before others to understand the power of digital media and to invest in it, launching trends, becoming a fashion blogger, and a fashion icon, and after that, once she became a public person, a pop idol, and a digital influencer for everything she promotes or shows⁹. Her audience looks at her to copy, adore, inspire, discuss, and even criticise her choices. Ferragni's audience constantly contributes to the empowering of her brand that also involves the promotion of a personal collection, synergies with other brands, and the involvement in the activity of influencer marketing of all the members of her family, including the dog Matilda Ferragni, who has more than 380,000 followers.

9. Marco Pedroni, "Fenomenologia di Chiara Ferragni 1-2-3," *Medium*, October 2019, <https://medium.com/homoacademicus/fenomenologia-di-chiara-ferragni-episodio-3-72dabee74248>.

How influencers and media captured the *zeitgeist* of the COVID-19 pandemic

Bloggers and influencers capture the spirit of times, the *zeitgeist*, and transform it into digital content which can be shown and sold. Usually, this content represents beautiful curated lives where the salary consists of sponsored product deals and brand collaborations including free trips, designer clothes, and invitations to events. All of this, in turn, is fodder for tweets, Instagram posts and stories, and YouTube videos. After the COVID-19 lockdown, two opposite trends emerged in the digital representation of everyday life as depicted by influencers. On one side, the influencers with a current and more qualified experience understood that the present time is a serious moment in which breaking rules and displaying themselves as anti-system offsidiers could be deemed as inappropriate and absolutely not cool, and further on could be considered only as a sterile and possibly dangerous provocation. In this group many influencers tried to truly reinvent themselves in quirkier ways, more honest and helpful than ever before, with some freedom from brands.

On the opposite side, are the opponents at all costs, the ones that play with the lives of people just to gain popularity and to become a topic of conversation on social networks and mass-market media. Unfortunately, the Italian 2020 summer season is full of bad examples, with many in the Costa Smeralda area (in Sardinia) that rejoiced and applauded at the reopening of the local discos, completely disregarding anti-COVID-19 security protocols. At the end of August, after many had been infected by the virus, they retracted their statements. Also, international celebrities displayed this negative provocative approach during the summer, such as the world-famous singer Madonna. The singer often referred to as the 'Queen of Pop', faced backlash and criticism for flouting social-distancing norms and attending a party hosted by the celebrity photographer and long-time friend, Steven Klein. For many belonging to this group and for other people behaving similarly it seemed particularly true that the pandemic could have two different types of endings: the medical, which occurs when the incidence and death rates plummet, and the social, that is when the fear of the epidemic and of the disease wanes. One possibility, historians say, is that the COVID-19 pandemic could end socially before it ends medically. People may grow so tired of the restrictions that they themselves declare the pandemic over, even as the virus continues to claim victims in the population and before a vaccine or an effective treatment is found¹⁰. Trying to define the end of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a long and difficult process and communicators and marketing people should see the moment as a challenge to find new ways to appear.

Another form of self-representation experimented with during the lockdown and after is the fact that followers have become influencers themselves. There is something about the social distancing complete lack of context and the evaporation of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out, i.e. not being invited to participate in something, from a public event to a private exclusive party) that makes people lose their inhibitions and step into the limelight. Now, they are the ones in influencer-like positions, being acknowledged for their work or creating hilarious online personae that bend the unspoken rules of Instagram.

Pandemics can be considered as an opportunity; and the lesson learned from the past¹¹ is that we will all heal together, they make us discover the importance of rights, information, and the involvement of people in public choices. A legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic may be greater work-related satisfaction, more ethical leadership, and a deeper sense of trust. The way we work will not be the same for everybody¹². In 1993 the management guru Peter Drucker argued that 'commuting to office work is obsolete'. As of last year, his vision had not quite come true: nearly half the global companies in one

10. Gina Kolata "How pandemics end," *New York Times*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/health/coronavirus-plague-pandemic-history.html>.

11. Elena Dusi, "La lezione della storia sulle epidemie. Carugati: Da Atene in poi, così influenzano la democrazia," *La Repubblica*, May 21, 2020, https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2020/05/21/news/le_conseguenze_della_pandemia_sulla_democrazia-25723522/?refresh_ce.

12. Adam Grant, "Adam Grant on how jobs, bosses and firms may improve after the crisis," *The Economist*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2020/06/01/adam-grant-on-how-jobs-bosses-and-firms-may-improve-after-the-crisis>.

survey still prohibited remote working. Then the pandemic hit and suddenly millions of people started working from home. Work will never be the same. People started to speak in earnest of *new normality* or a *new normal* style.

Normality is both a product and a premise of legal norms as it concerns what normally happens, what is statistically relevant, and at the same time expresses a judgment of conformity to a behavioural model.¹³ Both concepts of normality and normativity are intertwined with the notion of everyday life, which is indeed both normal and normative. The everyday life and the representation of it on social networks — and also on digital fashion media — was disrupted by a threatening and previously unknown event like the COVID-19 emergency and this life disruption was accompanied, as Bégout argues¹⁴, by the experience of living in an empty space. In other words, it is as if the prolonged and forced suspension of the taken-for-granted dimension of daily existence in the face of the unknown has led to a loss of thought and affections structuring the sense of Self. And this is connected to a sense of loss, emptiness, and suspension.

The system of fashion communication changed after the COVID-19 pandemic and created a new narrative that can be defined as ‘new’ only if we look at the mainstream culture surrounding it. The entrepreneur and designer Giorgio Armani, one of the historical pillars of the Italian creativity system and of the Made in Italy industry, made his voice loudly heard in this period. Armani anticipated many players of the fashion field in February 2020 with his decision to make the autumn-winter catwalk only digital, in April 2020 he sent an open letter to the fashion magazine *Women’s Wear Daily* in which he praised a slower fashion movement and planned to realign collections with seasons in stores¹⁵:

The decline of the fashion system as we know it began when the luxury segment adopted the operating methods of fast fashion, mimicking the latter’s endless delivery cycle in the hope of selling more, yet forgetting that luxury takes time, to be achieved and to be appreciated. Luxury cannot and must not be fast. It makes no sense for one of my jackets or suits to live in the shop for three weeks before becoming obsolete, replaced by new goods that are not too different.

The designer confirmed and reinforced his position in September 2020, announcing that the spring–summer 2021 catwalk will be broadcasted by La7, a national private Italian television channel, on September 26th at 9 pm, as scheduled in the Milan Fashion Week official calendar. Armani has been the first and only designer, who showed a catwalk on national television, maybe still the most popular mass-market medium. In an interview for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, he underlined that this is a real sign of the democratisation of fashion. This was not a decision against the digital system of media that covered the event at the same time, but the opening of a new door, that as a matter of fact is an old door: it is another element that composes the new strategy of communication by the designer that focuses once again on substance and not only on image and appearance. This can be strange in the universe of fashion which is defined by appearances, but it depends mainly on the perspective used to analyse it and the perspective prevailing in Armani’s vision to create a communication that can deliver a product, a collection, and not replace it. This is a vision in which the value of a brand, also of a fashion brand, does not consist only of its popularity level in the media and of its presence in the public debate for any reason (except when connected with the product in a limited way).

With respect to how the new narrative is evolving, we may say that it is not pervasive and that still today we can see patterns typical of the pre-COVID-19 world being reiterated, and it is interesting to analyse the case of Gucci’s not professional model from Armenia, Armine Harutyunyan, who at the age of 23

13. Francesca Emiliani, Alberta Contarello, Sonia Brondi, Laura Palareti, Stefano Passini S., and Diego Romaioli, “Social Representations of ‘Normality’: Everyday Life in Old and New Normalities with Covid-19,” to be published in *Papers on Social Representations* Vol.29 No.2 (2020): X1–X36. Available in early access on <http://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/index.2020>.

14. Bruce Bégout, *La découverte du quotidien* (Paris: Allia, 2005).

15. Luisa Zargani, “Giorgio Armani Writes Open Letter to WWD,” *WWD*, April 3, 2020, <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/designer-luxury/giorgio-armani-writes-open-letter-wwd-1203553687/>.

was a victim of body-shaming. She walked for Gucci in Milan for the spring–summer 2020 collection and appeared in the Gucci Beauty campaign. She was attacked on multiple fronts with comments that not only denigrated her physical appearance, but were also tinged with racism and sexism. The Armine story is a demonstration of the creation a mediatic case of communication not affecting the merit of the product, but only an element related to it, and that was chosen to represent it and its mood, namely the model. The topic, when considered from the right distance, seems so sterile and void of meaning, but in the first days of September, it turned into a real trend topic, with many articles especially in the Italian press, that were echoed in the social media and commented on by fashion lovers and many others. This kind of topic is not only related to the fashion industry, nor is it only interesting to the eyes of the experts of the sector. It is a topic of public interest that involves feminism, racism, beauty, body shaming, body positivity, and maybe other mainstream keywords and topical themes. The negativity was so massive at one point that Harutyunyan spoke about it to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*¹⁶. After this, her story made headlines in *Forbes* (and many other magazines that wrote about this case) with the journalist Rebecca Ann Hughes arguing that even those who pride themselves on their ‘open-mindedness’ and who praised the model’s ‘unconventional’ beauty were part of the problem because by considering the model an exception the established, restrictive beauty standards were thus being reinforced).

However, the tenor of the jokes, insults and hate spewed on social media aimed at Harutyunyan makes it clear that the comments did not exclusively derive from a misunderstanding of the fashion industry changing beauty canons. The model became a victim of body shaming because her traits do not match nor correspond with the traits imposed by social media and forced upon society. Social networks like Instagram have cultivated a particular narrow remit of beauty standards that leave little room for diversity (Rebecca Ann Hughes).

Many commentators underlined the fact that the slowness of the lockdown forced people to pause and rethink their personal and professional lives. In contrast, episodes such as the one regarding Armine Harutyunyan seem to fling us back to a faraway past not characterised by human evolution but rather by regression.

As frequently seen in the past — for example with the phenomenon of blogging — fashion has demonstrated its ability to anticipate society trends by projecting itself forward in constant search of something new. Fashion as a form of communication, a language, a way for human beings to express themselves, and as a way of reading society has always created a bridge connecting the past to the future, while experiencing and living the present, but not being completely absorbed in it. As Armani showed with respect to production, the last decades which have affirmed the fast fashion model changed the work of fashion and consequently the world of fashion communication, thus two universes were born at the same time and grew up together¹⁷. The acceleration of time in fashion communication has been connected to the digital revolution and the spread of the Internet as a way to deliver fashion in many different ways.

The Fashion media embrace of the rapid passing of time is not new. The ephemeral has always been at the very core of fashion, and the fashion media has always had to reflect, as well as support, this evanescence through the constant updating of their pages, fashion magazines being themselves fashion commodities¹⁸. What we really need to understand and reflect upon, in fashion as well as in public debate, is how our way to perceive communication has changed, and how it has changed the notion of communication creators, producers, and consumers (readers, spectators, followers). In the past we had the two distinct categories of information producers and consumers; nowadays we speak more about a new hybrid figure, the *prosumer* who receives and at the same time produces information, while actively participating to the process of commenting a post, sharing an article, linking a video and the many similar practices of building shared digital contents.

16. Serena Tibaldi, “La modella Armine: Sono più di una faccia, e alle ragazze dico di non omologarsi,” *La Repubblica*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/09/01/news/modella-265934638/?timestamp=1598956649000>.

17. Julie Bradford, *Fashion Journalism* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

18. Agnes Rocamora, “New Fashion Times: Fashion and Digital Media,” in *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, eds. Black S., De la Haye A., Entwistle J., Root R., Rocamora A., and Thomas H. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 61–77.

Hypertextuality brings to mind the Deleuzian notion of *rhizome*, a helpful concept for reflecting on the structure of the web, on the role of digital fashion media and fashion blogs in the acceleration of fashion time. A rhizome, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is an a-centred system that is always changing and is made up of units — so-called plateaus — that are linked together in a nonlinear way¹⁹. The blogosphere, like the rhizomes Deleuze and Guattari discuss, is a space in a permanent state of becoming, never fixed. Its plateaus are the many pages and blogs the blogosphere is made up of, which, are in a perpetual movement of displacement and replacement, open onto a limitless number of sites and signs that allow the reader to be always on the move within a continuously changing textual space. Change has always been part of fashion, and acceleration has become a defining trait of contemporary society, with the related notions of immediacy and real-time. With its speeding up of the circulation of both material and symbolic fashion, digital media has supported this process. The challenges we are facing as fashion communicators have to be seen not only as technological changes but also as cultural changes, even if new technologies play a key role in enabling the shifts which have occurred²⁰. We have to investigate not only *how* things happened but also *why*. We here want to consider two main different models for the circulation of content, the *stickiness model*, popularised by its use in Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*²¹ and *spreadable media* analysed by Jenkins, Ford, and Green. If the first one refers to the need to create content that attracts audience attention and engagement and to centralising the audience presence in a particular online location to generate advertising revenue or sales, the second describes an increasingly pervasive form of media circulation, full of grassroots audience practices. Spreadability emphasises producing content in an easy-to-share format such as the embed codes that YouTube provides, which make it easier to circulate videos across the Internet, encouraging access points to that content in a variety of places. The first model and the similar one based on viral influence insist more on the creator's control of content, the second avoids the metaphors of infection and contamination which overestimate the power of media companies and underestimate the power of audiences. In the spreadable media model audiences play a more active role in disseminating content rather than being passive carriers of viral media: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what is valued.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have to accept change as a permanent trait of our contemporaneity, in the field of fashion in general and of fashion communication in particular. Change is a characteristic element of fashion and was there from the very beginning, and now it is has been extended to the entire society. The positive consequence of its pervasiveness is a continuous invitation to find new and hopeful creative solutions that can improve the representation of the fashion universe. The negative side is only too often the lack of investment in the creation of professional figures in the communication sector as well as in other fields of the fashion industry. The first enthusiastic moment of the Internet era and the explosion of the blogging phenomenon was focused mainly on numbers and on popularity without real skills apart from digital marketing. Now times have changed and in order to create an effective communication strategy, both online and offline, it is evident that a company needs professional experts, ranging from journalists to stylists, from photographers to buyers, from artists to models. Bloggers and influencers fit in all these groups, depending on their skills and education. It is the moment for companies on the one hand and for followers on the other to understand this concept and not to relate to them as a single solid group to be exalted or to be criticised.

The need to professionalise the online communication sector is clearly felt by all of us as we are the actors operating in the fashion field; it is a call to action in the moment when we are all at the same time creators and spectators, and the roles are not as distinct and separate as in the past. A blurring of the distinctions between these roles has occurred in the present system of fashion communication, it provoked and still

19. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980).

20. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

21. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Atlanta: Lb Books, 2000).

provokes confusion and misunderstanding in the definition of the best practices to implement. A professionalisation that is at the same moment a need, a challenge, and an act of responsibility taking into account the importance of the communication in contemporary society. A professionalisation consisting not only in acquiring the technique for using the new means that technology progressively makes available to us, but above all in founding one's own communication strategy for the fashion product starting from a broad cultural and social analysis. A need that emerged strongly even before the outbreak of the pandemic, but which has accelerated with the pandemic, and has become more urgent. A striking example of this was "The Great Show" of the Italian brand Dolce & Gabbana, supposed to be organised in Shanghai on November 21st 2018 and then cancelled due to an epic fail. This epic fail initially consisted of cultural and semiotic misunderstandings associated with the three videos produced to promote the show and later on in the following gaffe starring one of the two designers, Stefano Gabbana. To advertise the event, the brand launched three teaser videos starring a model trying to eat a huge serving of Italian spaghetti, pizza and a cannoli with chopsticks with a voice-over making inappropriate jokes about eating huge servings of Italian food. Despite the name of the campaign being "D&G Loves China", Chinese people felt insulted and reacted by boycotting the show and the brand in a compact and massive way.

The theatre metaphor, the representation of life with which I started writing this article, the one taught by Goffman in the late Sixties has been — and still is — capable of capturing many aspects of our present society. One thing has changed; in that representation: the distinction of roles which at that time still existed. Now we face a new reality marked by constant instability and by blurred and unclear borderlines between the roles played by individuals in a society where now more than ever it is important to focus on relevant values, to study and analyse the past, and to be able to create a solid and tangible future vision. In the so-called *liquid modernity*²², the one that we can observe every day, this vision is not something abstract, like a dream or a desire, but it must be conceived as something that is very concrete, a strategic plan to put into action in order to survive.

22. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Pr, 2000).

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