

Mediatized Fashion: State of the art and beyond

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Abstract

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

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

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

(Alber Elbaz)

Mediatization and digitization in the field of fashion

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fashion is one of our most powerful global social imaginaries¹² thanks to the circulation of several and increasingly sophisticated media objects.¹³ From fashion films to makeover TV shows and documentaries,¹⁴ and early fashion blogs to Instagram and TikTok profiles of mega-influencers, fashion is more than clothing. It has become a key cultural industry¹⁵ able to function as a source of meaning and identitarian values. Accordingly,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

when they first emerged in the mid-2000s they were met with bafflement and some derision.”¹⁸ The institutionalization of fashion influencers — a now well-established process¹⁹ — took place through (and despite) fierce press attacks and stances against the new digital actors.²⁰ The post of the former director of *Vogue Italia* Franca Sozzani is worth mentioning in this regard. Sozzani,²¹ at the beginning of the 2010s, stated that they “don’t hold a real importance in the business”. Even harsher was the invitation from *Vogue.com*’s editors to “bloggers who change head-to-toe, paid-to-wear outfits every hour. Please stop. Find another business. You are heralding the death of style”²² (Singer et al. 2016). Despite being later in exploiting the advantages of digitization than other cultural industries, fashion was inevitably involved in this “mediatization of everything.”²³ It is subject to mediatization in a variety of ways²⁴ which affect the processes of designing, producing, distributing, promoting and consuming clothes,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fashion brands in the era of digital media

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tremendous growth of user-generated content⁴⁰ has led to a considerable power shift in brand strategies, driven by consumer demand for more authenticity from brands. Consumer-centric tools are increasingly embraced by companies to build meaningful relationships with audiences and to help them feel involved in a brand's authentic communication strategy. Research indicates that consumers trust peer consumers more than they trust companies, and are likely to use information provided by fellow consumers to evaluate products and services before making a purchase decision.⁴¹ In particular, consumers appear to trust the apparently genuine personal recommendations from credible and influential digital gatekeepers who help identify and set trends in the fashion markets.⁴²

Authenticity, indeed, appears to be the new keyword in the relationship between fashion brands and social media. Authenticity — what is “real”, or “genuine” or “true” or “original” — is in high demand in the markets.⁴³ Similarly, the public debates “about who and what should be called ‘real’ versus ‘fake’”⁴⁴ have increased. Authenticity is also used as a rhetorical strategy⁴⁵ by both fashion companies and digital influencers to justify their practices of product placement, product seeding and, more generally, brand promotion. Through digital influencers, brands seek to deliver messages that are perceived as genuine and authentic.⁴⁶ In the fashion market, it seems that the “realness” of “next-door” influencers is designed to maintain the audience's perception of non-biased information, or to reinforce the trust in the brand. *The Guardian* has effectively explained that in fashion today “realness is prized” and that the digital “influencer industry is going authentic.”⁴⁷ Finally, an increasing number of academic works focus on the concept of authenticity, which has informed numerous topics in management and sociological research, initiating with the seminal work by Peterson⁴⁸ on fabricating authenticity in the music indus-

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37. Long-Chuan Lu, Wen-Pin Chang, and Hsiu-Hua Chang, H. H., “Consumer attitudes toward blogger's sponsored recommendations and purchase intention: The effect of sponsorship type, product type, and brand awareness,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 34 (2014): 258–266.
38. Shu-Chuan Chu and Yoo-Kyoung Seock, “The Power of Social Media in Fashion Advertising,” *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2020): 93–94.
39. Shu-Chuan Chu and Yoo-Kyoung Seock, “The Power of Social Media in Fashion Advertising”.
40. Teresa K. Naab and Annika Sehl, “Studies of user-generated content: A systematic review,” *Journalism*, Vol. 18, No. 10 (2017): 1256–1273.
41. See for example Kyung-Tag Lee and Dong-Mo Koo, “Effects of attribute and valence of e-WOM on message adoption: Moderating roles of subjective knowledge and regulatory focus,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (2012): 1974–1984.
42. Gil Appel, Lauren Grewal, Rhonda Hadi, and Andrew T. Stephen, “The future of social media in marketing”.
43. David W. Lehmann, Kieran O'Connor, Balázs Kovács, and George E. Newman, “Authenticity,” *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2019): 1–42.
44. David W. Lehmann, Kieran O'Connor, Balázs Kovács, and George E. Newman, “Authenticity,” p. 1.
45. Crystal Abidin, “‘Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?': Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity,” *Social media+ society*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2016): 1–17; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* Vol. 10, (Paris: Gallimard, 1999); Joanne Jacobs, “Faking it How to kill a business through astroturfing on social media,” *Keeping Good Companies*, Vol. 64, No. 9 (2012): 567–570; Agnès Rocamora, “The labour of fashion blogging”.
46. Mariachiara Colucci, and Marco Pedroni, “Got to Be Real: An Investigation into the Co-Fabrication of Authenticity by Fashion Companies and Digital Influencers,” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, in press (2021).
47. Sophie Elmhirst, “‘It's genuine, you know?': why the online influencer industry is going ‘authentic’,” *The Guardian*, 5 April 2019. Retrieved at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/apr/05/its-genuine-you-know-why-the-online-influencer-industry-is-going-authentic>.
48. Richard A. Peterson, *Creating country music: Fabricating authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

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

In this Issue

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

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

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

Thirdly, how do fashion brands cooperate with, defend themselves against or exploit new digital intermediaries such as bloggers, influencers and content creators? As we have shown elsewhere⁵¹ and previously discussed in this essay, the relationship between brands and influencers is built on an attempt of the former to control the latter and an attempt of the latter to keep their editorial autonomy despite the requests of the companies. Consumers use authenticity as an ideal to convey quality judgments, placing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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