

Fashion Storytelling and Heritage on Social Media: A Visual Content Analysis of Fan-led Instagram Fashion Brand Archives

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Published: January 15, 2025

Fashion images are essential in studying fashion. From fashion editorials to runway shows, street photography, advertisement campaigns, catalogues, museum exhibitions, illustrations, fashion film, and product photographs, fashion images encompass the diverse and dynamic visual landscape and multi-faceted nature of the fashion industry. Despite its material importance, a large part of our interaction with fashion, especially in academia, is visual. To be able to research fashion requires access to images, especially in the case of fashion objects that are hard to obtain or view in real life. In the past, you had to either consult a magazine or catalogue or turn to the collections of museums, libraries and archives.¹ Nowadays, almost any kind of fashion imagery can be found online, and in some cases exclusively online. Fashion has become a coexistence of material objects and digital images.²

Particularly interesting cases of online fashion content are fan-led Instagram accounts concerned with the history, identity, and products of luxury fashion brands. These accounts, often led by an individual who has no clear ties to the fashion brand other than being an enthusiast or consumer, represent a unique intersection of online fandom and fashion brands. Ironically, some of the fan-led accounts have more followers than the official fashion brand accounts. While these fan-led accounts are featured in fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Dazed Magazine*, research on the topic showed that academic attention to this phenomenon is moderate. As such, throughout all of November 2023, I explored and kept track of ten fan-led Instagram fashion brand archives through which branded fashion imagery is shared. With this discussion, I emphasise the emergence of fan-led Instagram accounts as noteworthy communication channels in our visual exploration of the fashion archive domain and fashion brand storytelling and heritage.

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1. Hazel Clark and Annamari Vänskä, "Introduction: Fashion Curating in the Museum and Beyond," in *Fashion Curating: Critical Practices in the Museum and Beyond*, ed. Annamari Vänskä and Hazel Clark (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1–16.
2. Nick Rees-Roberts, *Fashion Film: Art and Advertising in the Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 2.

Approach

To study the fan-led Instagram fashion brand accounts, I employed visual content analysis, drawing inspiration from Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*.³ Visual content analysis, or visual media analysis, provides the possibility to analyse a large number of visual images.⁴ However, this research is not so much interested in the frequency of content, but rather the content itself. In other words, the focus of the visual content analysis is on qualitative data and the interpretation thereof within the context of visual fashion images. To do so, this study follows the four steps of doing content analysis as formulated by Rose: finding the images, devising categories for coding, coding the images, and analysing the results. Table 1 provides a summary of the coding used in the analysis.

Table 1. Categories and sub-categories of codes

| Category | Sub-category |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Brand content | Photoshoot |
| | Fashion film |
| | Catalogue |
| | Fashion show |
| | Behind-the-scenes |
| | Sketches |
| | Other paratext |
| Third-party content | Magazine |
| | Museum exhibition |
| | Street photography |
| Personal content | Personal life |
| | Personal collection |
| | Personal event |
| | Personal brand |
| | Press |
| | Review |
| | Commentary |
| Miscellaneous | Celebrity image |
| | Archival image |
| | Repost |
| | Anniversary |
| | Political |

For this research, the fashion images analysed were chosen based on specific criteria for the Instagram accounts. To avoid ambiguity, the accounts had to meet the following: at least 100 feed posts for sufficient content; a significant number of followers and public accessibility to ensure engagement; activity in 2023 to ensure recent engagement; and a clear focus on at least one luxury fashion brand. Taking these criteria in mind and limiting the scope of the research to ten Instagram accounts, the following accounts were found: *@balenciaga_files*, *@cdgarchive*, *@chanel_archives*, *@datewithversace*, *@dior-inthe2000s*, *@mcqueen_vault*, *@oldceline*, *@oldprada*, *@prada.archive*, and *@tomfordforgucci*. These accounts were found because of earlier knowledge of their existence and through Instagram's 'further suggestions' feature. Furthermore, all archives had a different focus, ensuring variety in content. Table 2 provides a summary of the archive corpus.

3. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 4th ed (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016).

4. When referring to fashion images, it implies both image as well as video material.

Table 2. Corpus summary of the ten Instagram fashion brand archives analysed end-November 2023

| Instagram username | Followers | Posts | Story highlights? | Fashion brand | Focus? | Curator in bio? | Personal brand? |
|--------------------|-----------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|--|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| @balenciaga_files | 239k | 610 | No | Balenciaga | “Dedicated to Cristóbal Balenciaga and when Nicloas Ghesquièrewas the creative director” | Yes | No |
| @cdgarchive | 69,7k | 1081 | No | Comme des Garçons | No explicit focus besides brand | No | No |
| @chanel_archives | 150k | 1135 | Yes | Chanel | No explicit focus besides brand | No | No |
| @datewithversace | 140k | 3654 | Yes | Versace | “Versace Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow” | Yes | No |
| @diorinthe2000s | 98,4k | 5000 | Yes | Dior | “The house of dior through the eyes of john galliano” | Yes | No |
| @mcqueen_vault | 176k | 99 | Yes | McQueen | “Ongoing social collage of Lee Alexander McQueen” | No | No |
| @oldceline | 360k | 174 | Yes | Celine | Older collections of Celine (2008-2018) | No | Yes, personal apparel brand |
| @oldprada | 52,3k | 475 | Yes | Prada | Older collections of Prada | Yes | No |
| @prada.archive | 109k | 716 | Yes | Prada / Miu Miu | No explicit focus besides brands | Yes | Yes, vintage selling and rental |
| @tomfordforgucci | 87,9k | 3603 | Yes | Gucci | Gucci during the creative direction of Tom Ford | Yes | No |

In terms of the content, the images analysed were taken mostly from each account's feed. Taking into consideration that multiple images can be featured in one post, the number of images analysed from feed posts alone was roughly 2750 images. Besides feed posts, I have also included reels and story highlights in the analysis, but they formed a smaller size.⁵ The reason for focusing on these three types of Instagram content is because of their semi-permanent nature. Different from stories that disappear 24 hours after being posted, feed posts, reels and story highlights remain accessible on the account until the owner decides to remove them. Analysing temporary content will make the analysis unable to replicate. The idea of allowing temporary access to images defeats the purpose of a digital fashion archive.

Analysis of Fan-Led Instagram Fashion Brand Archives

Each account showcased a unique collection of feed posts, reels, and story highlights, defined by the archive's focus. Some accounts were highly specific, like *@tomfordforgucci*, which exclusively featured Gucci during Tom Ford's tenure, while others broadly focused on a single brand. The level of detail varied too: some captions meticulously described the image, including the designer, garment name, collection, presentation, wearer, and image source, though this level of detail differed across posts. The following paragraphs explore each category in detail.

Brand Content

This category includes content created and distributed by the main brand, such as ad campaigns, photo-shoots, commercials, fashion films, catalogues, and lookbooks. Its scope depends on the archive's focus. For instance, *@diorinthe2000s* limits itself to Dior's John Galliano era (1997–2011), while broader accounts like *@chanelarchives* and *@cdgarchive* include recent and older campaigns, some of which were not originally available online. Accounts without strict time demarcations often showcase a wider range of campaigns across different periods.

Fashion shows, from photography to video, dominate Instagram's fashion archives. As Agnès Rocamora notes, social media now play a central role in showcasing new collections, with fashion shows increasingly designed with online platforms in mind.⁶ This includes creating visually screen-friendly designs, filming shows for later distribution, and livestreaming events, especially since COVID-19. Despite the modern mediatization, the archives also feature older fashion shows, even those that pre-date the rise of digital photography.

Beyond advertising campaigns, this category also includes paratextual content: materials linked to but separate from the main collection. These include behind-the-scenes photos (e.g., dress fittings, rehearsals, garment construction), sketches, illustrations, show invitations, and textual snippets or quotes.

Third-Party Content

This category includes content similar to brand content but created by a third party. For example, magazine content, which can vary from online to print media, of which the latter takes shape as magazine scans. Fashion magazines such as *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* function as mediators between brands and consumers, and as such are essential components of a fashion archive. In the Instagram fashion archives analysed, magazine content varied from covers to editorials, interviews, fashion spreads and more. For example, *@cdgarchive* utilises magazine scans not only for aesthetic purposes but also as a source for providing industry insights. Despite some of the magazines being written in Japanese, the archivist, who is based in Tokyo, provides English summaries which makes it accessible to a larger audience.

5. Reels are TikTok-like vertical videos presented in the standard account feed but have their own separate feed as well. Story highlights are stories — images or videos that are accessible only for 24 hours — saved to the Instagram account for users to look at even after the initial 24 hours have passed. Story highlights can be given a title and categorized in groups.

6. Rocamora, "Mediatization and Digital Media in the Field of Fashion".

Another form of third-party content is museum exhibitions. Such content, often photographs taken of the exhibition spaces or promotional content such as flyers or exhibition guides, provides information about the exhibition, which garments are presented and what narrative is being told. These posts feature both ongoing as well as finished exhibitions, thus serving two distinct functions for an archive: to promote what can still be experienced, and to remember that which cannot.

Finally, third-party content also includes street photography, photography of everyday life in public spaces. These photographs can be made by professional photographers, or paparazzi, but also by ‘amateur’ photographers simply using their smartphone camera. The function of these posts is to highlight the ‘everyday’ wear of garments by the fashion brand. It is, however, not always clear whether these pictures are authentic in the sense that they might be spontaneous, but they might also be staged by the brand themselves.

Personal Content

As the Instagram archive accounts are ‘curated’ by individuals, there are certain degrees of visible personalisation. While some accounts provide no reference to the account owner at all, there are some accounts that do post personal content or mention the owner’s personal Instagram account in the biography. This category thus comprises all content linked to the person behind the account.

Personal content can include aspects of the owner’s life unrelated to the archive’s focus or posts showcasing their fashion collection. For instance, *@mcqueen_vault*, described as a “private legacy vault,” shares not only brand or third-party content but also the owner’s personal McQueen collection. Personal events might feature moments unrelated to the archive’s theme or the owner’s perspective at brand events. For example, *@datewithversace* attended the Versace S/S 2024 runway, sharing personal recordings of the show. This content differs from brand-produced material, as it reflects the archivist’s unique viewpoint, without any screening or editing by the brand.

Interestingly, some account owners leverage their account’s impact to market their own fashion brands or services. For instance, *@oldceline* promoted the release of its own fashion brand, Phoebe Philo’s. This resulted in the *@phoebephilo* account gaining nearly 400,000 followers without posting any content; everything related to Phoebe Philo was posted on the *@oldceline* account. Similarly, *@prada.archive* uses its platform to promote a fashion rental service featuring Prada and Miu Miu garments, the two fashion brands that align with its archive’s focus. These examples highlight how Instagram fashion archives’ impact can serve as effective marketing and promotional tools.

Besides personal content related to the individual, there is also personal content related to the archive. Press contents are mostly shared through story highlights, showcasing the account’s coverage and expertise in other fashion channels such as *Vogue* or *Dazed Magazine*. Furthermore, posts also include reviews, mostly on books. While generally linked to fashion topics, reviews mostly deviate from the archive topic. Finally, some posts provide commentary, for example by ranking the fashion garments worn at a specific event or show from best to worst. Commentaries differ from reviews as they are intended more for amusement and comparing opinions with others. All in all, personal content provides an individual’s unique perspective to the fashion archive.

Miscellaneous

The final category brings together any miscellaneous content that does not warrant its own category but offers valuable insights into the archive’s theme. This includes images of celebrities wearing brand garments, often paired with runway photos of the same designs. Celebrity-related content also covers press tours, fashion events like the Met Gala, and red-carpet appearances. Archival images such as analogue photographs of designers’ personal lives or store locations, are another component. Additionally, reposts from brand accounts, other archives, magazines, or individuals are common, with sources credited in captions or on the images themselves. Some accounts also mark anniversaries, including birthdays, designer reflections (using the hashtags *#throwbacktuesday* or *#tbt*), or deaths. A few accounts even

share political posts, such as the black square with #blackouttuesday supporting the Black Lives Matter movement against racism and police brutality.

A New Communication Channel for Fashion Brand Storytelling and Heritage

In the fashion imagery landscape, fan-led Instagram fashion brand archives offer new perspectives on fashion legacies and societal narratives. They combine elements of branded fashion accounts and fandom pages to provide a digital archive of branded fashion content. Semiotically, the images shared in these archives differ from those posted by fashion brands and publishers, as they are removed from their original context and gain meaning through connections with other content. The digital landscape enables new forms of fashion heritage by providing broad access. Participation on Instagram through liking, commenting, and sharing, contributes to shaping a brand's heritage. Thus, these fan-led archives act as new communication channels for fashion storytelling and brand heritage, raising several important points for discussion.

The blending of professional and personal content creates a hybrid fashion archive, allowing the audience to see through the curator's eyes. This fashion archive is not 'objective' in the sense that it provides *the* legacy of a fashion brand, but rather the archive curator's subjective perspective on it. This approach aligns with contemporary postmodern views of fashion archives, which emphasise the record user's role in interpreting history and recognising that archives merge public and private spaces.⁷ Instagram fashion archives thus form subjective representations of fashion heritage, offering diverse views on a brand's legacy.

This subjectivity raises the question of how fashion brands view unofficial brand channels and whether they should be seen as contributors to fashion heritage. Some accounts, like *@prada.archive*, explicitly state that they are not affiliated with the official brand their archive presents. However, this does not mean that brands and archives do not engage with one another. For example, Donatella Versace and the official Versace account follow *@datewithversace*, and Donatella has engaged with the account by reposting its posts and commenting "Thank you so much for all your love and support." While not representative of all, this example suggests that fashion brands and designers can participate in the archive culture, allowing for direct engagement with individuals without undermining de-institutionalisation. It also highlights fan-led fashion archives as new influencers in shaping brand imagery, as they are acknowledged by fashion brands and designers.

The final discussion point concerns the interchanging level and sometimes lack of information provided by the Instagram fashion brand archives, influenced both by the archivist and the platform's interface. Since feed posts are the first content users see, they serve as key visual signifiers for the account's identity. Simply put, first impressions matter on Instagram, and one way to ensure a good first impression is to have an interesting but also overall coherent grid of feed posts. Providing information on Instagram can sometimes be overshadowed by providing stylised and aesthetic experiences that help increase engagement.⁸ This lack of information may not obstruct the casual viewer, but it highly limits the researcher/expert's ability to work with the archive.

7. Peirson-Smith and Peirson-Smith, "Fashion Archive Fervour," 279.

8. Franceschini, "Navigating Fashion".

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