The Foreseeable Future of Digital Fashion Communication After Coronavirus: Designing for Emotions

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Abstract. The coronavirus pandemic brought the world to a halt and its impact on the fashion industry was significant. Moreover, consumer behavior and media consumption habits changed due to social distancing measures and as a consequence, the importance of digital channels was highlighted. Brands were forced to rethink their strategies and address consumers’ needs.

This paper presents an overview of the subject by examining how fashion brands adapted the communication strategies in the digital space to reach their audiences in a meaningful way. Furthermore, it delves into the consumer shifts and into the role of digital channels, to understand how they might shape the future.

The findings of the study suggest that during the crisis, fashion brands focused on people’s well-being and published content aimed to inspire, motivate, and entertain. Furthermore, it reports technology as a path for innovation for its contribution to improving online shopping experiences. A reflection on the theme also revealed that emotions are central to fashion strategies, and they can be used further to elevate communication.

Keywords: Digital fashion communication · Emotion · COVID-19

1 Introduction

The fashion industry is not immune to the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic: sales plummeted, revenues declined, and job losses are widespread. Nevertheless, the industry came together to provide support to the global health crisis. “An entire industry whose future is in question has put the needs of others first — it’s truly remarkable,” said Dazed Media CEO and co-founder Jefferson Hack [1].

Indeed, the commitment of fashion to society has been noticeable. Brands like Gucci, Valentino, Armani, Ralph Lauren, among others, are making donations to COVID-19 causes as well as fashion designers, namely, Valentino Garavani, Donatella Versace, and other well-known figures from the industry. Additionally, fashion
companies are repurposing to manufacture needed items such as protective equipment, gowns, and masks.

In the words of Anna Wintour [2], the influential editor of American Vogue, “This is an extraordinarily challenging time for so many.” The pandemic crisis is also obliging companies to shift from physical to digital and rethink how they communicate with their customers. As Alexandra Mondalek [3] explained in an article to the Business of Fashion, marketing has become a minefield and some of the techniques are becoming obsolete.

During this time of crisis, brands and retailers turned to digital channels to attract, inspire, and engage with consumers. Through websites and social media, they are trying to make a difference by promoting content that revolves around the well-being of people. Furthermore, they are recreating event atmospheres online; using live streams to showcase products; influencers; branded content; etc.

It is believed that even when the crisis is over, the systematic shifts will remain. As reported by WGSN, “The pandemic, which has reached nearly every shore, will result in tidal waves of change for years to come” [4]. It would thus be of interest to get a better understanding on the role that digital will play and how it can be used to create meaningful connections with the consumer.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper provides an overview of the digital fashion communication strategies promoted during the pandemic. Moreover, it delves into consumer behavior shifts, highlighting the challenges and opportunities for fashion brands. It is also a reflection and its ultimate purpose is to attempt to portray the foreseeable future of the digital fashion communication realm.

2 Communicating During the Pandemic

The pandemic brought the world to a halt and as a result of social distancing, digital channels were increasingly embraced by consumers. Consequently, the consumption of digital content has grown as well as the use of social media. Deprived of their store-fronts, brands and retailers enhanced their digital channels to reach consumers in a relevant way.

Thus, the fashion community witnessed messages of encouragement that were shared on Instagram by designers and founders of independent labels [5]. In addition, entertainment and educational content were provided by the luxury brands e.g. Alexander McQueen created a program named “McQueen Creators” that probed the Instagram audience to make paper dolls with materials found at home. The virtual “laboratory of creativity” by Bottega Veneta is another example—the brand featured writers, musicians, film directors, performers, and designers in all its online platforms. In highly distressing times, brands aimed at inspiring and motivating consumers through their communication strategies.

In the same way, brands promoted videos, interviews, performances, and active audience participation to enthrall consumers. For instance, the original American house of leather Coach directed the attention to its customers by asking them questions like “What are you reading” or “What are you listening to?” in their Instagram feed. In regards to sportswear brands such as Nike, they encourage people to stay home—“Play
inside, play for the world.” There were also initiatives to promote physical well-being like the digital workout classes delivered by Lululemon.

Transparency was a trait that stood out in some of the messages. As a case in point, Nordstrom published a note on Instagram with information about the precautions in place to protect employees and customers and in the end invited the audience to visit their website and apps. Markedly, Gucci took a bold approach by posting a set of visuals completely outside of their usual imagery. They strive to create a global community to stand together and fight the Coronavirus—“We are all in this together,” said Alessandro Michele and Marco Bizzari [6]. To that end, the brand published official messages from the World Health Organization and this way allowed consumers to keep up with their initiatives such as financial donations to crowdfunding campaigns.

Ultimately, it can be observed that the communication of brands during the pandemic aimed to shorten physical distance through social proximity.

3 Consumer Shifts: A Path for Innovation

The physical-distancing measures transformed not only media consumption, but also consumer behavior. Admittedly, the consumer sentiment analysis conducted by McKinsey in April revealed that there was a decline in purchase intent of 70 to 80% in offline and 30 to 40% in online [7]. Furthermore, in the fashion industry, stock prices declined more than 40% since the beginning of the year [8].

Nevertheless, since brands and consumers have a strict contact within a physical space, it is expected that online shopping will continue to increase. However, consumer needs are changing as well as their priorities. A closer look to the motivational theory of Maslow might cast light on the latter. His theory entitled “Hierarchy of needs” encompasses the needs that people must fulfill, from the lowest to the highest: physiological; safety; belongingness; esteem and self-actualization. With coronavirus, the lower order needs become the focus of individuals lives i.e. physiological (biological needs like breath, eat, sleep); safety (the need for security) and belongingness (the need to form and maintain significant relationships).

In the view of the trend experts from WGSN, this need for stability lead to a “desynchronized society” where people still do many of the same activities, but not at the same time as others [9]. Also, they forecast that the future consumer 2022 will prioritize stability; will be more balanced; highly social, and hyper-connected. In this respect, McKinsey and Business of Fashion add that “The pandemic will bring values around sustainability into sharp focus, intensifying discussions and further polarising views around materialism, over-consumption and irresponsible business practices” [8].

The world is shifting, and brands need to adapt accordingly. The elevation of digital channels poses challenges, but it also represents opportunities. From a creative standpoint, the crisis has forced brands to rethink their strategies and consequently lead them to try new approaches. For instance, in the domain of fashion magazines, editors had to improvise to get images and literally start issues from the beginning [2].

On the other hand, investing in strategic innovation through technology can improve consumers’ shopping experience. For instance, artificial intelligence,
augmented reality, virtual reality, and live streaming e-commerce platforms are technologies that have been explored to shape online shopping.

Regardless of the digital channel or technology used, brands should drive authenticity, transparency and communicate with meaning to resonate with increasingly overwhelmed consumers. As Kapferer [10] remarks, meaning can only be provided by “brands that add value to the product and tell a story about its buyers, or situate their consumption on a ladder of intangible values.”

4 The Foreseeable Future: What Is Next for Digital Fashion Communication?

Due to the outbreak, people spent more time in front of the screen and as a consequence, the time on media consumption has increased. In the long turn, as aforementioned, people conducting more of their lives through screens can become an opportunity for brands to engage directly with their audience creatively, but it can also turn out to be a challenge as well.

While the average number of human attention span gets shorter, the number of stimuli presented online increases, and reaching consumers is becoming highly competitive. To stand out and bewitch, brands need to inspire and establish emotional connections with consumers. As seen in the second section, the communication strategies during the pandemic aimed to address people’s needs at several levels, and emotional well-being was central.

In the society of seduction portrayed by Lipovetsky [11], emotion plays an important role because it is part of the brand strategy to attract consumers’ attention—after all, fashion is a vehicle of dreams and fantasy. Aware of the importance of emotions, Wrigley and Straker [12] developed a framework to aid companies engaging digitally with consumers in a meaningful way. Based on Damasio’s theory and the intersection of the fields of business strategy and digital technology, the “Digital Affect Framework” encompasses three components to guide organizations: understanding your industry; understanding your customer and understanding your digital engagements.

From a design perspective, emotion has been studied by both researchers and practitioners, who have been exploiting ways to elicit emotions to create a positive experience in the users in the last two decades. There are two main approaches applied to emotional design: one is based on the aesthetic of the product, whereas the other focuses on promoting fluent and engaging interactions [13].

Also, emotions have been explored through technology, namely, Eye tracking, Galvanic Skin Response, and Facial expression analysis. These technologies measure physiological reactions such as heart rate or pupil dilation, which are associated with emotions and thus can provide a better understanding of how people feel [14].

All things considered, by following the latter approaches and exploring emotions in-depth, fashion brands can elevate their communication strategies, engage with consumers, provide meaning and ultimately be able to build long-lasting connections through digital channels.
The fashion industry was negatively impacted by the coronavirus pandemic as sales plummeted, productions ceased, and the product demand decreased. Social distancing measures shifted consumer behavior and media consumption habits. In uncertain times, one thing became clear: the paramount importance of digital channels.

A closer look at the digital communication strategies promoted by fashion brands during the crisis revealed a concern with people’s well-being, and several efforts to bring communities together. Inspirational and educational content were promoted as well.

Furthermore, this study highlighted opportunities and challenges for fashion brands that need to adapt to thrive in a time where consumers are overloaded with content. To innovate, companies can enhance consumers’ online shopping experience through technology features such as augmented reality or artificial intelligence.

In the foreseeable future, digital fashion communication must address the needs of future consumers who will be more conscious, highly social, and hyper-connected. To that end, designing for emotions may provide a path for establishing meaningful connections and add value to fashion brands.

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