

Luxury Studies

The In Pursuit of Luxury Journal

Volume 1 Number 1

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Aims and Scope

Luxury is a constantly changing idea that provokes much debate. Whether rooted in the manufacturing techniques developed during the eighteenth century or the emergence of the kinds of digital processes that impact on design, craftsmanship and production today, certain constants remain in how we perceive and define luxury. Technology continues to influence our lives and decision-making processes. Circular economic models address the need to be aware of the impact of our actions on the production of goods and services. Data driven information informs and enhances our understanding of the customer and can provide goods and services to address their individual needs. This is in stark contrast to mass produced products and 'services' which – through global portals – contradict the very nature of luxury, with its emphasis on the unique, the bespoke and the singular, over mass consumption.

It could be said that the roles of manufacturing and craftsmanship are, and remain, critical components of how luxury is defined. But is the impact of digital technologies changing our very understanding of what luxury means today? Should the notion of luxury be adapted/re-examined? If so, what form should luxury take in terms of reflecting and reacting to continued advancements in technological processes, opportunities and services? Current concerns that need addressing include consumption, waste and the impact of our actions on the planet, health and well-being, equality and change. An emphasis on corporate social responsibility has enabled the tracking and tracing of finished goods and the materials used in their construction, including their environmental impact and the well-being of those involved in production. As the industry becomes more transparent, can luxury continue to remain beyond scrutiny?

Call for Papers

Luxury Studies: The In Pursuit of Luxury Journal welcomes contributions from scholars from all disciplines and from practitioners from all segments of luxury including but not limited to fashion, jewellery, hospitality, architecture, automotive, technology and aviation.

We welcome full papers (5000–7000 words) for the journal, and also book, exhibition and conference reviews. All submissions should be sent via the journal webpage (<https://www.intellectbooks.com/luxury-studies>). Please contact the editors for any additional questions or information.

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Exploring disrupting scenarios in the fashion retail and communication paradigms

ABSTRACT

The growing complexity in the economic sphere, the accelerating rate of change, the new information technology and the globalization of cultural processes create a new landscape. The new tech habits are reshaping customer behaviours and businesses. Contaminations, hybridizations and negotiations increasingly characterize today's retail landscape. The future of retail is connected to how well brands adapt and take advantage of digital change. Within this framework, the fashion system can catch the opportunity to reflect and redesign the entire production and cultural system. Today, the shopping experience is realized thanks to multiform sensory and informational solicitations and the different distribution and communication channels, both physical and digital, defining new needs, strategies, technologies and even new aesthetic forms. In this renewed context, retail becomes increasingly relevant both in its physical and digital form and above all in the 'phygital' one, between virtual and real. A form that creates new sales space through the creation

KEYWORDS

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in-store technologies
customer experience
phygital store
retail innovation
fashion communication
disruptive retailing

of experiences and interactions between the physical space and the intangibility of the digital world: from the multichannel, we move towards increasingly integrated strategies that use omnichannel sales and communication methods. In this context, new paradigms and new retail concepts emerge, bridging communication and distribution. Communication actions that are increasingly transversal, enriched with new languages and tools capable of reverberating the aura of fashion through the creation of real cultural palimpsests such as the Dior Talks and Possible Conversations by Prada, the Alexander McQueen Floral Challenge or the Trivia by Salvatore Ferragamo. Projects between communication, art and marketing that redefine the fashion point of view on the relationship between real and digital; as well as the Sunnei Canvas project that uses 3D design tools both for the development of the collection and for the creation of animated avatars that will guide the final translation of the brand's lexicon.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is entering the new global competition market by augmenting those phases in which design, creativity, sustainability and technological transformation are the principal axes while simultaneously reinventing its business models. The emergence of pervasive connectivity, more intuitive interfaces and new interaction channels drive fashion retail innovation (Alexander and Blazquez Cano 2020; Alexander and Kent 2020; Grewal et al. 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016) and simultaneously affected customer behaviour and expectations (Hagberg et al. 2016; Mende and Noble 2019). New channels and integrations between those channels evolve (Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson 2014) into complex omnichannel networks (Savastano et al. 2019), which are facilitated by the impact of mobile and the role of social media return a seamless customer experience. Consumers move freely between all the different touchpoints (online, mobile and physical) within a single transactional process (Rosenblum and Kilcourse 2013) and a consistent narrative experience.

The omnichannel architecture breaks the integrity of traditional channels by returning a new retail paradigm (Cakir et al. 2021; Grewal et al. 2017; Verhoef et al. 2015) and encourages strategic-design experimentation with new formats and retail concepts (Alexander and Kent 2020; Alexander and Blazquez Cano 2020). A new multidimensional ecosystem in which the relationships and interactions between different knowledge domains represent the ingredients for producing new and unprecedented customer experiences. New processes that consider business development and environmental, social and political sustainability (Bertola et al. 2020). But, again, processes that, thanks to technology and the transformation of consumption practices, recognize transparency, authenticity and the company's social role as a competitive value.

The retail industry transforms the distribution system into a more complex system of interdependencies between spaces, processes and problems associated with contemporary retail and consumer service industries (Paul and Rosenbaum 2020). Digitization has strategic solid and meaningful spillovers on the physical shop (Alexander and Blazquez Cano 2020). The new physical store augmented by technology becomes 'phygital' (Mikheev et al. 2021): a store capable of integrating technology with the in-store experience and generating and managing information, relationships, desires, aspirations

and transform them in real-time into Big Data (Silva et al. 2020; Pantano et al. 2019). Analysing consumer shopping behavioural data can help improve shop management and design to improve consumer engagement and experience. In this context, the fashion sector has tended to be more engaged with consumer-facing technologies (Bonetti et al. 2018; Souiden and Ladhari 2019), favouring the proliferation of channels and touchpoints in which users can actively participate in processes of 'co-creation of value' (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2004a, 2004b) and promoting 'cooperative investment' (Che and Hausch 1999) with consumers (Lusch and Vargo 2006; Vargo and Lusch 2004) to a scenario informed by 'consumer agencies' (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

The omnichannel is a complex system of relationships and interdependencies in which 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts' (Morin 1983) where communication, consumption, cultural processes and service coexist within the new physical and virtual 'containers'.

But not only that, it is a process implemented and transformed by increasingly leveraging data and analytics to predict footfall, manage assortments and built personalized offerings (BOF and McKinsey 2021). The brand designs specific customer journeys within which the selection and organization of the different touchpoints ensure specific brand experiences in line with its business model and brand identity. The integration of the retail channels with the digital dimension increases furthermore the opportunities of creating relationships with customers and transforming them into Big Data (Fan et al. 2015; Gensler et al. 2015; Pantano et al. 2019). Technology also has a dark side: poses data management issues; facilitates the emergence of challenging retail competitors; for instance, retailers confront competition from the resale, vintage fashion or the second-hand market, consumer-to-consumer online sites and social media (mainly Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok) (Padmavathy et al. 2019). Moreover, there is an increase in those retailer closures that fail to evolve and become obsolete (Mende and Noble 2019). The complexity reached in the retail industry requires the implementation of continuous innovation processes (Brown 1987) and a higher strategic and design level, precisely because it is less focused on the product but more oriented to design-driven innovation processes (Verganti 2009) and design thinking management (Dell'Era et al. 2020; Johansson-Sköldberg et al. 2013; Liedtka et al. 2013).

The digital transformation, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is closely related to many other transformations that have affected the broader social, cultural and technological context in the last twenty years.

Nowadays, 'people work at home, live in offices, trade-in homes, study in factories, make museums in gasometers' (Branzi 2004: 7, translation added). Digital technologies, social media and the expansion of the Internet of Things (IoT) dominate daily routines and generate new forms of sociality

[A] complex stratification of places, non-places, networks and flows in which the material city and that of communication and entertainment intertwine and hybridize, and the territories themselves become fluid, the architecture of the ephemeral and temporary intertwine with the places of memory, and the present of events and performances with the anticipations of the future.

(Fiorani 2005: 19, translation added)

This is a panorama in which technology allows new contaminations, hybridizations and negotiations. Fashion retail and the digital ecosystem find common

ground to create disruptive scenarios between physical and virtual realities. New media, increasingly integrated with sales activities, have transformed the way brands interact with consumers and vice versa. New cultural practices spread and create further negotiations between real and artificial experiences, relationships and value systems in a context where 'Instagram is a window into people's thoughts and imagination' (Manovich 2015: n.pag.). The new communities, both virtual and physical, retrieve autonomy and critical thinking and assume the creative act as a tool that enables them to co-participate in the actions of the enterprise. The action of co-creation and collaboration (Nadeem et al. 2021) that, as in an open work (Eco 1962), lead to 'the continuous breaking of models and schemes – electing as a model and scheme the perishability of models and schemes, and the need for their rotation, not only from work to work but within the same work' (Eco 1962: 151).

The new smart consumers demand quality; this means transparency, traceability and accountability throughout the value chain (Dawid et al. 2016). They pay attention to information about products: who made them, where they come from, what they are made of, their environmental and social impact. In this sense, blockchain technology promises a new and improved shopping experience (Subramanian 2018) transforming the '[i]nternet of information' to the '[i]nternet of value' (Tapscott and Euchner 2019: 15).

In the omnichannel architecture, the narrative aspect behind the brand takes on even more incredible value precisely because it is capable of triggering those relational and meaningful practices that are able to act as an 'adhesive' between the different touchpoints in which the company today makes itself accessible. From the flagship store to the pop-up store and through e-commerce and the new social media, the element of cohesion is increasingly entrusted to the construction of a narrative capable of conveying, within the social context, an extensive network of meanings and stories that feed the everyday life of new atmospheres and rituals. Through articulated metaphors and as many narrative speculations, companies implement in the different retail channels those material and immaterial aspects at the basis of the construction of meaning (Csikszentmihalyi 1999; Krippendorff 1989, 2007) and increase the scope of the customer experience, once diffused only in the physical channel. Starting from the recognition of store environmental variables as conditions capable of influencing individuals during shopping activities (Kotler 1974), the influence of extra-economic factors capable of influencing consumption choices (Tauber 1972), the relationship between store environment and consumer behaviour (Mehrabian and Russell 1974), hedonistic consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) to the recognition of the experiential and emotional variable (Schmitt 1999; Pine and Gilmore 1999) retailers have used emotional cues to influence consumer behaviour and the creation of the experience, as a lever to influence, has given the physical store a central role in activating meaningful experiences.

Nowadays, the rapid spread of new technologies (Bonetti et al. 2018) and the growing importance of in-store technological solutions (Pantano et al. 2019; Lee and Leonas 2018; Pantano and Vanniucci 2019) today create new opportunities and challenges for retailers (Stephens 2013; Pantano 2015). New technologies, such as the IoT, Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Mixed Reality (MR), virtual assistants, chatbots, powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI), are dramatically transforming the customer experience (Hoyer et al. 2020). Thanks to transactional technologies; information technologies, able to provide knowledge about brands, products

and services; support technologies, oriented to build the ecosystem of customer service through the customer experience; entertainment technologies, able to amplify sensory, emotional and relational experiences in the mixed dimension of physical + digital integration, the customer journey is extended in the sensorial, emotional, relational and service direction. Digital technologies help understand consumer needs, provide a greater assortment, help shoppers make decisions, reduce costs, increase loyalty and improve customer service. Shopping activities are no longer as we have known them. The physical retail space is being reconsidered (Helm et al. 2020) so far as to imagine it as a place devoid of goods, enriched by the new technologies of AR, VR, and MR to become a space where interactions between brands and consumers are also activated through gaming and co-creation activities.

A cultural, entertainment and sensory stimulation space firmly anchored to the urban space of the new smart cities, or even a space capable of promoting individual and social wellbeing (Rosenbaum et al. 2016). This holistic transformation of the physical store is also recognized by digital-native brands, which are beginning to take over physical urban spaces with their flagship stores (Google, Amazon, Glossier, Bonobos, Everlane). The new experience is pervasive and capable of generating and introducing into the market an extensive network of meanings, not only in the form of objects and shapes but also in the form of speeches, expressions, stories, spoken and written words, visual images, signs, metaphors, idioms, gestures and places. The brand directs its experiments to seek new forms of interaction and collaboration with the end customer and those in the supply chain, such as buyers and retailers. New models of consumption observe the transition from 'transmedia storytelling' to 'transmedia experience' (Hills 2017). Fashion has always been intrinsically connected to the intensification of transits of both objects and heterogeneous elements in the context of a narrative that has always been a type of 'experience', often spatially localized in those physical spaces represented by show-rooms, concepts and flagship stores. In these spaces, flows of images, colours, sounds, smells and shapes have always been part of a particular story that combines advertising campaigns, collections, fashion shows, events, art exhibitions, brand heritage.

The current technological revolution introduces a discontinuity that goes well beyond the formal process of reconstitution, but which, starting from the existing context, is able to initiate new strategic-formal trajectories in which permanence and continuity seem to prevail because the new feeds many references to the existing to which is anchored to go beyond it.

In this regard, many questions arise on the role and transformation of the distribution policies of fashion companies in the face of the new omnichannel ecosystem, the new systems that digital technology is implementing and a changed consumption scenario.

This study aims to understand how the fashion brands strategically benefit from digital transformation to innovate the customer experience through closer integration between communication and retail strategies. Specifically, this study investigates the retail system in a context in which all retail customers are now omnichannel and physical retail has increased by technology and tries to highlight some trajectories of innovation and new 'alliances' that technology is bringing to the fashion industry. A qualitative approach was used to achieve this through case studies capable of providing experiential knowledge avoiding the generalization based on an individual case.

The study proceeds along two lines: on the one hand, it frames the contemporary context of fashion as a cultural, productive and creative system, deepening the close link between communication, media and retail. On the other hand, traces some trajectories of innovation of the role of the store in the broader omnichannel architecture by selecting some cases that stand out for a destructive innovation.

From a methodological point of view, to collect data in developing case studies, the research integrated multiple methods, including desk research and field research, semi-structured interviews and observations.

2. CONTEMPORARY FASHION AND TECHNOLOGICAL ECOSYSTEM

2.1. *The meaning of fashion*

As a cultural, productive and creative system, fashion is by its very nature a system of change, indeed, according to Kawamura: ‘No matter what historical period one is talking about, the defined essence of fashion is change’ (Kawamura 2005: 5). Since the dawn of the industrial and commercial system as we know it today, fashion has been synonymous with formal, material, technological and media innovation. All kinds of changes, including the revolutionary ones of the last century – be they political, social or technological – have considered fashion a field of experimentation.

In the twentieth century, the fashion world was one of the expressive forms in which the future’s most diverse visions have taken shape. Utopias, like anticipations, which over the years, and in different geographical areas, have taken on different meanings and forms, from the social and political to the creative and design-oriented, unrealizable utopias, or even become a reality. Utopias, even if brief, have contributed to shaping – through more or less extreme visions, often in the form of artistic, urban planning, architectural and political manifestos or as instruments of provocation and rupture – the future, laying the foundations of our present and the future of the next generations. Fashion has been an object of study and a subject of experimentation. Fashion has always been an object of study, a medium for experimentation. And yet, at the same time, it has been able to become an active subject, capable of representing, if not anticipating, the most varied utopian impulses, often encouraging the most futuristic visions. From *Vestito antineutrale: Manifesto futurista (Antineutral Dress Manifesto of Futurism)* by Giacomo Balla in 1914, through functional experiments that led to Thyath’s Tuta and Aleksandr Rodčenko and Varvara Stepanova’s Varst, through the Space Age visions of Paco Rabanne and Pierre Cardin and the political actions of Archizoom with their *Vestirsi è facile*, fashion has become one of the most experimental areas, not only in terms of form but also in terms of technology.

These are often excessive experiments – between performance art and engineering – such as those of Hussein Chalayan, Alexander McQueen and Gareth Pugh or Prada, and Raf Simmons. They manage to translate their visions of the near future into the everyday.

Technological innovations have accompanied the history of fashion and vice versa. The development of the steam engine, which is a hard technology, represented the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and allowed fashion to establish itself as one of the leading manufacturing sectors (Bertola and Teunissen 2018).

Fashion became a real innovative force with telecommunications (radio, telegraph, telephone), thus anticipating almost half a century earlier what Toffler (1980) would call 'The third wave' of technology: the age of information, space and space electronics and the global village.

In the February issue of *Vogue* in 1939, several designers (Donald Deskey, Russel Wright, Raymond Loewy, Egmont Arens, Walter Dorwin Teague, George Sakier, Henry Dreyfuss, Joseph B. Platt and Gilbert Rohde) were already investigating visions of the future of fashion. They envisioned clothes – portrayed in a fashion shoot by Anton Bruehl – that were 'reduced to the minimum', conceived as a 'system of units'.

The visions of these designers of the future of fashion do not stop at the aesthetic and material form. They included reflections on the impact of emerging communication technologies on society and social interaction. Consistent with the technological level of the time, the group of designers defined new forms of sociality and ways of shopping that the new fashion would achieve thanks to technology.

As time passed and imagined future became more imminent, these visions showed their weakness (or overconfidence in technology applied to fashion). They gave way to a new idea of the future, closer, more accurate and more realistic: a future well represented by the dystopian visions of many contemporary science fiction films, in which technology does not affect the aesthetics of fashion but defines new ways of interaction between people, between people and objects and, last but not least, between brands and consumers. A current technology that goes beyond the concepts of complexity and tangible, favouring an increasingly simple, invisible and intangible form of communication.

2.2. The mediatization of fashion

The fashion system thus becomes the protagonist of the information age, stimulating the emergence of new technological applications and defining new possibilities of communication (Krotz 2007: 257), consumption and distribution.

A 'mediatization of fashion' (Rocamora 2016: 503) is increasingly taking shape, a new idea of 'doing fashion through media' (Rocamora 2016: 505) and of using fashion to generate or implement new media and digital tools.

Let us consider the genesis of Google's most popular tools: Google Images, a tool created by the unaware of fashion, or instead by a single dress, Versace's *Jungle Dress*. The story behind the creation of the iconographic search tool arises from the fact that millions of people, after J Lo's 2000 Grammy Award appearance in the *Jungle Dress*, went online to search for images of the singer and her plunging neckline dress, becoming the most popular search Google had ever seen at that time. It was precisely the difficulty for internet users to find that image that inspired the Cupertino company's developers to implement a new search tool, image search. Twenty years later, Google Images became the co-host of the Versace SS 2020 fashion show. After showing a series of dresses with different variations on the Jungle print theme, Donatella Versace appeared on the big screens around the circular catwalk, asking Google Assistant: 'Google, show me the real *Jungle Dress*'. The real *Jungle Dress* appeared on stage, both in its digital version, through images retrieved by the Google tool and projected on the venue's walls, and in its live version, with J Lo on the catwalk. A real phygital event, further amplified in the digital, thanks to the filming and photography, in a perfect Instagram version of the

event (Long 2019). The mediatization of fashion has driven brands to define and manage communication and produce images from the unit of 1080 pixels that of an Instagram post. Images, but above all events, in this sense, are now designed to be enjoyed within the Instagram interface, which allows not only to attend but above all to interact and finalize a purchase.

So digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat (Burberry previewed its spring–summer 2016 collection there) and the more recent Periscope (a live video streaming extension of Twitter) have become legitimate spaces for disseminating collections.

In this context, shows are increasingly conceived with social media in mind; they have become mediatized events, produced and staged to be consumed online, on a digital screen.

In July 2013, for example, fashion show producer Alexandre de Bétak explained that the internet

[H]as completely changed the way we frame what we show, not only visually but also in time [...] even the way I direct the models is influenced by where some of the webcast cameras are positioned [...] The shows are full of ‘moments made for Instagram’.

(Rocamora 2016: 507)

Fashion shows are increasingly designed and managed to be enjoyed online to provide a better and more effective experience, to generate greater engagement and astonishment through the screen of users’ devices.

This reduces communication time and makes it instantaneous. The concept of physical and material space disappears. You can be present even if you are physically far away and, last but not least, the filter between designer/brand and final consumer is reduced. This opens the way to new digital natives figures, poised between an influencer and a fashion brand, for whom communication, product, narrative, hybridize real and virtual.

On Instagram, the public sphere overlaps with the private one. The designer and the brand communicate in a parallel and contemporary way, reinforcing an idea of proximity and normality. There are no longer just brands, but Ista-brands (Fury 2019).

Technology thus becomes a field where it is possible to move quickly to communicate and design, but above all to share, involve and, of course, sell.

Everything becomes available to the public, the boundaries between B2B and B2C are becoming increasingly blurred.

Digital, driven by the acceleration imposed by COVID-19, has opened up new opportunities for communication and consumer engagement. Thus, in the last months of the 2020s, VR or AR experiences were implemented, such as the Prada VR projects, the Gucci Garden Virtual Tour or the Dolce & Gabbana Virtual Boutiques, but above all real digital formats that recover the concept of *hic et nunc* with events that, thanks to the various social platforms, recover the value of participation, of the live event or the physicality of objects. Social media thus become more and more channels through which to engage the public with talks, interviews and performances, such as the Dior Talks or the Possible Conversations carried out during the lockdown on Instagram and the various interactions Prada has built up in recent years. Starting from the creative co-direction between Miuccia Prada and Raf Simmons, the Milanese brand has created a system of interaction with the public that is increasingly direct, using the sticker questions from Instagram stories to engage everyone

in post-show interviews with the two creative directors or to provide input for the SS 2021 ADV campaign.

3. FASHION RETAIL ECOSYSTEM

Fashion is, therefore, an 'overflowing text of objectified discourses, of grammars internalized in bodies, clothes, accessories and images' (Fiorani 2006: 7, translation added). Fashion produces meanings and concepts embodied in objects, spaces and narratives capable of synthesizing complex interconnections which, from the productive sphere, through objects, are welded to the modes of thought and cultural, value and aesthetic models of society. Moreover, fashion is a 'cultural system' that produces and disseminates innovation embodied in new knowledge, know-how, products, values and behaviours. Fashion feeds on the ideas, cultures, philosophies, visions, images and imagery of an era. It absorbs and simultaneously modifies rites and traditions; it renews the meaning of things and produces new meanings and new mentalities. New visions of the world.

Fashion assigns the task of creating frames of meaning to collections, images, fashion shows, events, shop windows, urban space, communication and shops, and social commitment, real narrative devices called upon to unify the micro-narratives of objects into a single great story.

Fashion elaborates and re-elaborates signals of change and becomes the interpreter of the weak signals that it detects, remixes and relaunches and places in the spotlight of commercial space (Morace and Santoro 2014).

The retail industry welcomes and integrates images and signs as an essential system for triggering new economic and discursive practices. They are places with a low level of functional identity (Branzi 2004) spread in the new urban platforms of postmodernity and oriented to privilege the dynamics of relationships and the logic of flow (Fiorani 2009).

Retailing policies guide fashion through new relational and meaning processes and, at the same time, introduce new design languages capable of innovating not only the form-function but above all, the form-meaning (Iannilli et al. 2019). In this direction, Prada inaugurates, over twenty years ago a completely new trend commissioned by Studio OMA, under the direction of architect Rem Koolhaas, a study of the evolution of shopping worldwide for the elaboration of a new concept in retail outlets. The work is materialized in the so-called 'Epicentres' strategy and the opening of the first one in SoHo New York in 2001, in the former home of the Guggenheim Museum. The SoHo store is conceived as a shifting theatre that captures the experimental spirit of the place and places fashion in the spotlight as one of the most authentic forms of expression of our time (Iannilli 2014). 'The Epicentre functions as a conceptual window: a means for diffusing future directions, which positively charges the greatest number of typical stores' (Rock 2009: 421).

Prada's Epicentres upset the integrity of the custom of that precise historical period, just as today just as many brands are once again upsetting the concept of retailing and, more generally, the concept of communicating brand value.

These are the flagship store of the Chinese streetwear brand Hipanda in Tokyo, designed by Curiosity studio in 2019, which integrates sales, communication and service channels in an omnichannel context and activates different interactive experiences in-store, mainly thanks to AR technology, the Villa de Múrir flagship store in Seoul, designed by the South Korean studio Collective

B and based on a business model driven by peer-to-peer; in which brand contents are created directly in the shop, thus also sharing the message that the experience in that specific shop is worth sharing (Iannilli and Spagnoli 2021). Also, Chanel's new flagship store opening in 2020, which features high-tech fitting rooms with a connected mirror to show customer choices, is a technology already widely adopted by Farfetch in its Store of the Future. A retail context now defined by systems of interdependence and concatenations of interconnected systems in which technology and its users are not distinct actors that pre-exist their interaction, but entities that must be considered, at the same time, the constituent elements and the product of relationships (Murdock and Varnes 2018).

Nowadays, it is unthinkable to think of a single, independent information system and an information infrastructure that creates continuous relationships and interactions. Today, communication and retailing strategies show their progressive fusion within physical and virtual spaces and in new seamless customer experiences.

Brand value is increasingly a process 'co-created through network relationships and social interactions among the ecosystem of all stakeholders' (Merz et al. 2009: 338). An ecosystem fuelled by new technologies, new digital-native start-ups, social media and user communities can create new forms of relationships between companies, products, services and people. New extended networks. A tangle of relationships now enabled by technological innovation is returning new and different forms of hybridization between the real and virtual worlds. The level of contiguity between the natural and the artificial, between tradition and future projections, uncovers new perspectives that urge a rethinking of retailing policies, a new context in which companies inaugurate the possibility in which design innovation is based not exclusively on consolidated conceptual parameters but also on decisive uprooting.

To the process of theoretical and practical welding between inanimate and living systems corresponds a phenomenological reality that is no less significant, recognizable in the progressive blurring of distances, now traceable to approaches, contiguities, integrations of technical intervention in economic and social processes, confirming the lability of the boundary between the natural state and artificial action.

The holistic methodology that characterizes the study of large socio-technical (and economic) systems has gradually given shape to a simultaneous vision of the parts and the whole, to a system where the dichotomy between nature and artifice can be resized or overcome. Fashion belongs to our material culture with its utilities and intrusions, constituting the physical and value reality in which we carry out our life experiences. In this context, the emergence of the future is felt in terms of the infrastructure of consumption: as new strategies, new cultures, new aesthetics, new technological applications that simultaneously create an extension, organization, complexity of procedures for the multiple interactions and interdependencies between socio-social, technological, political and economic dynamics. The fading of conventional dichotomies (nature/artifice, biological/technological) can be read at multiple levels and finds a new expressive context in the new retail experiments.

The market begins to show the first business models driven by disruptive innovation (Christensen 1997, 2006; Christensen et al. 2015), which challenge the status quo and radically reshape supply and demand (Jin and Shin 2020).

3.1. Fashion retail scenarios

In the new retail scenario, made possible by digital and technological transformation, digital plays the role of an invisible enabler, capable of allowing the creation of products, services and experiences that have implemented, and sometimes replaced, pre-existing ones. The theoretical implications discussed so far on the fashion retail system provide the basis for identifying possible innovation trajectories in digital retail transformation into fashion. Starting from empirical research, based on the identification and analysis of the case, an interpretative model is proposed that can outline, starting from the most recent and advanced retail concepts, as many innovation scenarios. These four scenarios provide insights into the current state of the art in fashion retail and identify disruptive innovations capable of influencing the entire customer experience. In particular, the first case, digital platforms for international retailer-led customization, shows how digital technology allows creating connections from buyers to end clients favouring convergence processes between B2B and B2C in the Italian streetwear brand Sunnei. The second case, In-gaming experience, shows, through different fashion brands, a recent evolution of gaming, which exceeds those already experienced by various fashion brands (Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Moschino, etc.). For instance, in *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*, the project developed by Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga, the physical store becomes the first step to start the gaming activity. The third case, AR driven experiences across communication and retail, is a project to more experimental AR applications. The physical space takes an editorial form, creating cross-fertilization processes between the language of communication and those of interior design. The last case, renewed brand community, presents the case of the Nike brand, to underline the role of technology in allowing to define customized experience in which access to the product becomes selective and exclusive and at the same time co-participated thanks development of digital platforms.

3.1.1. Digital platforms for international retailer-led customization

Brands such as the Italian Sunnei – founded in 2014 by Simone Rizzo and Loris Messina – since 2020 have started several actions, forced by the pandemic, to bridge the physical distance required by the situation and at the same time to implement new forms of interaction with the different levels of customers of the brand, from buyers to end clients (Salibian 2021). The Italian streetwear brand thus experimented with new digital ways of combining collection design, distribution strategies, sustainable production and communication methods in a single digital action and interface. The project called Canvas, developed during the lockdown was presented in July 2020. Sunnei Canvas is an online platform that uses 3D modelling tools and customization technologies, creating a virtual space not only for designing but above all for presenting, promoting, customizing and communicating the collection. A platform within which Sunnei presented the pieces of the collection on digital avatars. The products, which were initially blank, were presented in a sort of virtual showroom where buyers could view the samples and digitally modify the colours, patterns, shapes, fit and materials of some of the pieces in the collection.

A platform designed for B2B has also become a promotional channel. During the Milan Men's Fashion Week in July 2020, the same avatars used in the Canvas project were transformed into a communication tool. They were

used as models for a virtual fashion show, during which they staged a choreography to the rhythm of the 'Macarena'. They created short videos to present the new collection to buyers, the press and the end customer through a digital fashion show/performance. The project evolved from season to season. During the Milan Fashion Week shows in September 2021, Sunnei's customer community was invited to participate in a collective, non-competitive, non-commercial videogame created with the sole purpose of entertaining. In this new gaming project, avatars from the Canvas project and users could interact within the same virtual environment while simultaneously discovering the new collection. Suppose the presentation of the SS 2021 had mainly involved buyers through the video game format of the FW 2021. In that case, the end customers could also be protagonists by interacting with ten avatars and choosing their characters' appearance to discover the new collection. The evolution of the project then occupied the physical spaces of the Sunnei shop, which during the SS 22 Men's Fashion Week became the actual space where customers were able to customize some of the brand's iconic products through a physical version of Canvas. An event during which a physical version of the digital project was implemented, subverting the traditional forms of de-materialization of the shopping experience but implementing a circular system in which real and virtual follow each other and integrate as shopping experiences within a strategy capable of seamlessly integrating design, communication and retail.

3.1.2. *In-gaming experience*

Even though born before the epidemic outbreak, the relationship between fashion and gaming has seen in recent months an acceleration and an increasing interest by fashion houses, especially those in the luxury segment. Gaming has increasingly become an interesting area for growth for companies in the sector, making it possible to broaden the audience of consumers, who are increasingly younger and more from Asia, where the trend of hybridization between online gaming platforms, sales experiences and communication is constantly growing (Ferraro 2020). Suppose even before the pandemic, and several brands had explored the world of gaming platforms as a communication channel (recall, e.g. the projects of Louis Vuitton and League of Legends, Moschino and The Sims, Gucci's Tennis Clash, Virgil Abloh's Endless Runner for Louis Vuitton and Burberry's B Bounce, to name a few). In that case, it is with the forced social distancing that we have witnessed an increase in collaborations and synergies between fashion houses and video game companies. And so, unable to capture attention through traditional means, many fashion brands have quickly moved into spaces where consumers are more likely to find them, the web and online gaming platforms. Gaming has thus represented a frontier to be explored to expand the fashion business. Several brands have understood this and used it mainly to present their new collections. For example, in traditional fashion shows, brands such as Gcds have created a videogame form of the show. Christian Louboutin, on the other hand, created a virtual presentation on the Zepeto app. At the same time, Burberry was the first brand to broadcast a show on Twitch, a platform owned by Amazon and created as an online gaming project.

In this context, the sales space and the presentation space blend together, defining an increasingly hybrid form of shopping experience implemented thanks to digital. And so the retail space (recreated in the world of games)

becomes one of the levels of *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*, the project developed by Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga for the autumn/winter 2021 collection. The fashion show has been replaced here with an immersive gaming experience created in collaboration with Unreal Engine, one of the leading graphics engines for video game development by Epic Games. A project started in April 2020 and launched online (on the dedicated website <https://videogame.balenciaga.com>) on 6 December of the same year. A game structured like a classic FPS (First Person Shooter) with five levels to explore. In its digital form, the retail space becomes here the first level of the game, defined as the starting point of an adventure that leads the consumer to explore first the boutique and then the rest of the post-apocalyptic world in which different avatar-models move. The immaterial space of the shop thus becomes not only a place for selling and staging the product but also an integral part of a communication strategy centred on the direct involvement of the new generations of consumers, who are increasingly attracted by hybrid and transmedia experiences, consolidating the connection between digital technology, gaming and fashion, especially considering the figure of the current consumer who, as Demna Gvasalia himself said to *Vogue Runway*, '[t]oday's customer does gaming. It's an important luxury customer base. They project so much onto their character. It's a parallel world' (Mower 2020: n.pag.).

3.1.3. *AR driven experiences across communication and retail*

Even before the pandemic, AR had defined new forms of shopping experiences. AR 'try-before-you-buy applications' (such as those of IKEA and Home Depot, or Louis Vuitton and Gucci) have already defined a new relationship between retail space, consumers and new technologies for some years. The retail space, in a sense, disappears, becoming a dematerialized shopping experience, which can be enjoyed anywhere, in the shop, and one's own home, expanding in space and time the phases preceding the purchase, such as the try-on phase. In this context, retail (both physical and virtual) has evolved, and AR has shown that it can add enormous value to the consumer shopping experience (Papagiannis 2017).

COVID-19 has become supercharged with virtual, accelerating the shift to digital shopping by about five years (IBM's 2020 U.S. Retail Index Report). In this context of growth, AR is one of the fastest-growing technologies, if we consider, for example, that already in 2019, 51 per cent of consumers, according to Nielsen's Report, were willing to use AR as a technology to evaluate and try products before purchase.

This is thus increasingly becoming a field of experimentation, capable of offering an effective service and defining new experiences in which traditional forms of communication (such as advertising campaigns) acquire new meaning and are integrated, thanks to technology, within the sales space.

Therefore, AR in retail is no longer just a tool to allow consumers to preview products on a digital scale in their homes, on their bodies, before purchasing, and as a narrative tool. With this in mind, the Gucci Hallucination project was born in 2018. A communicative system from the printed page takes different forms in the domestic and private space, as well as in the public space of the shop. Born as an advertising campaign in a traditional, if not old-fashioned form, Gucci Hallucination was created by the Spanish artist Ignasi Monreal who, inspired by great masterpieces of art history, created real paintings, quotes to references from art history, populated however by the garments

of Gucci's spring/summer 2018 collection. The result was a campaign full of quotations, such as John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, Van Eyck's *Arnolfini* and Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Hyperrealistic paintings that, thanks to AR, came to life in the home. Thanks to Gucci's App, the pages of the advertising campaigns were animated, creating amazement and amusement with carp and other animals (in digital form) that began to interact with the real world thanks to personal devices. The same sensations were recreated in the sales space and the shop windows, conceived as part of an imaginary museum. The windows of Gucci's boutiques were decorated with the same images of the advertising campaign. They were conceived as commercial touchpoints and as interactive art spaces in which the products on display took on new meanings, thanks to the AR experience. In this way, a profound sensory experience is realized that hybridizes art, fashion, retail space and, of course, technology.

3.1.4. *Renewed brand community*

In the new sales and communication scenarios, the ability of new technologies to implement and stimulate processes of construction and loyalty of brand communities, i.e. those communities of users whose primary basis of identification with a brand is linked to the action of possession and purchase, occupies an important place. These communities are growing more and more, becoming an important resource for brands to expand their audience of consumers and better define products and projects in line with the expectations and desires of the market. Users with similar interests and experiences who come together in a group thus define one of the niches to which the brand can turn to increase its recognizability and strength on the market. An increasingly global market thanks to new technologies that define more and more communities that are not geographically bound but based on virtual relationships between users. Social media and digital connectivity have helped consumers and brands communicate more effectively by facilitating information sharing (Humphrey et al. 2016). Online communities provide the perfect platform to build relationships through interaction and thus increasingly build relationships based on emotional involvement. The actions implemented by Nike in recent years fit into this context. Increasingly consolidated as a company that sells sneakers and an aspiration, Nike has increasingly managed to change the perception of its products from consumer goods to products with a meaning that goes beyond form and function, becoming more like an artistic product.

In recent years, Nike has implemented new direct-to-consumer strategies focused on mobile technologies, combining physical and digital retail to serve Nike communities better. SNKRS Stash – which unlocks access to exclusive Nike and Jordan products using cellular geolocation – and Shock Drop – which provides surprise alerts of the availability of coveted new trainers – are technologies that allow consumers to purchase instantly through the app or in the Nike shop. The surprise, the limited availability of the products, the limited presence on the market and, last but not least, the action of selecting the lucky buyers through a raffle have defined SNKR's success, conceived according to a curatorial approach to fashion products, no longer linked to seasons or large numbers, but designed to be a collection of special editions limited in time and quantity, each time curated (not designed) by designers, brands or artists. The exclusivity of the product thus widens the community's audience, defining a form of purchase not necessarily linked to the use of the product but

its collectability and, increasingly, its resale on the market. In this way, those niches of enthusiastic consumers about the brand (and not just its products) are increasingly strengthened. Within the community networks, they define virtual spaces in which the strength and relevance of the brand grow.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of four distinctive cases of fashion retailers highlighted the opportunities interactive digital technologies offer to enhance the customer experience. The findings from these case studies demonstrated how retail innovation can be achieved via various approaches, depending on the retail context, as well as the potential of digital technology is fully expressed when it does not replace the physical but manages to expand the abacus of communicative, productive, creative and sales possibilities. As Miuccia Prada, who has always been an acute interpreter of the contemporary world, says – as early as 2002 she investigated the use of technology within the physical experience of her boutiques

[T]he internet may be superficial, but it is up to us to fill it with interesting content, to make it a mirror of the complexity of the present [...] To discourage it is a losing battle; it is better to learn to use it well. [...] We have to learn to say intelligent things quickly, but to do that you have to have a vision of what we imagine our future will be. A lot of work needs to be done on how to make your ideas clear and understandable.

(Cazzullo 2020: n. pag.)

In this sense, we can frame the innovations of the case studies presented. Virtual and real are increasingly creating unexpected synergies, which can be successful when they implement creativity that is not constrained by the tool, also defining hybrid projects, extremely physical but amplified by digital, such as JW Anderson's Show in a box, which despite its physicality, has become one of the most shared 'fashion shows' on social networks, and Moschino's Teatrino staged by Jeremy Scott for the SS 2021 collection fashion show.

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BOOK REVIEW

SUSTAINABLE LUXURY AND JEWELRY, IVAN COSTE-MANIÈRE AND MIGUEL ÁNGEL GARDETTI (EDS) (2021)

Singapore: Springer, 229 pp.,
ISBN 978-9-81162-454-4, e-book, £87.50

Reviewed by Ken Kweku Nimo, University of Johannesburg

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, luxury is underpinned by the indispensable tenets of craftsmanship, durability and a considered approach to production that guarantees the longevity of products. For decades, these tenets have been perceived as amenable to sustainability, thereby shielding the conspicuous lifestyle of the elite from scrutiny. The deepening debate on the adverse ecological impact of the global fashion and luxury goods industry orchestrated by disquieting supply chain practices has cast the luxury goods industry in disrepute. With an estimated market value of over USD 39.9 billion in 2021 alone, jewellery constitutes one of the foremost segments under luxury, and despite epitomizing the idea of luxury for its own sake, the emotive, enchanting and almost sublime objects of desire are plagued by a history of labour exploitation and environmental degradation. The infamous debacle of conflict diamonds, dramatized in the 2016 blockbuster movie ‘Blood diamond’ continues to haunt the contemporary gemstone and jewellery industry. Consequently, the sustainability revolution is reverberating across all segments of the luxury goods industry, as consumers demand greater transparency.

SUMMARY OF PRIMARY ARGUMENTS

Sustainable Luxury and Jewelry, edited by Ivan Coste-Manière and Miguel Ángel Gardetti is a collection of thoroughly researched and well written articles that explore sustainability in the global supply chain of luxury

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jewellery. This timely book pieces together cohesively, different dimensions of the topic as explored through the lens of scholars around the world, furthering the frontiers of the sustainability discourse. The book opens with a hypothesis by Armano and Joy on the parallelism between the conceptualization of ethical jewellery and 'Made in Italy' products. Through ethnographic interviews with the owner of Gioielleria, one of Italy's leading ethical luxury jewellery brands and a representative sample of his clientele, they argue the increasing relevance of sustainable sourcing practices to consumers, highlighting the favourable perception towards certified fair mined gold and Canadian ethical diamonds, which align to consumer perceptions of the 'Made in Italy' brand. In Chapter 10, this idea of 'Made in' is explored in Africa where forced and marginalized labour characterizes the resource extractive industry. Ismail Taifa's discussion of the global luxury industry and its underbelly of modern-day slavery highlight the pervasive power imbalance that characterizes the production and consumption of luxury goods. However, while Ismail contextualizes slavery issues (MSI) in Africa, the discussion steers clear of specificities and provides a bird's eye view of MSI in Africa.

The slogan 'A diamond is forever' has been hailed as one of the world's greatest marketing campaigns, but the horrors of the brilliant stone as a catalyst to conflict in many parts of the world especially Africa remains imprinted on the minds of consumers. A major theme of exploration in the book is traceability and the provenance of gemstones, which constitutes the cornerstone to sustainable supply chain practices in the global luxury jewellery industry. However important, traceability and provenance are but the starting argument for sustainability and antecedent to a deeper discourse on the ethics of deceptive marketing, geopolitical turmoil, circularity, environmental degradation, overconsumption and the future of the gemstone industry amid technological advancements. In Chapter 9, Matteo de Angelis, Cesare Amatulli and Silvia Petralito scrutinize leading global efforts towards sustainability such as the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme, they observe that the KPCS is not only self-regulatory and beset with challenges, but also limited in scope regarding the definition of the term conflict diamonds. A critical concern with the KPCS is 'the laxity of its enforcement mechanism', with conflict-free declarations almost impossible to verify. Other sustainability jargons such as fair trade/fair mined gold standards, despite being perceived as superior to the KPCS, are equally inundated with challenges as they downplay the toxic and hazardous impact of chemicals utilized in the extraction process.

The book explores the global diamond trade in remarkable depth, and examines sustainability in the diamond value chain from the mine to the retail store. The emergent phenomenon of lab created diamonds – which are identical to mined diamonds in both physical and chemical attributes – is discussed, delineating its pros and cons. The exposition on lab created or cultured diamonds is sufficiently detailed in the chapters by authors Bagathi et al., and de Angelis et al. However, the novel lab created diamonds, which have been perfected over the past 70 years of research and constitute the most sustainable leap towards a sustainable diamond industry, is yet to attain universal acceptance. According to de Angelo et al., the authenticity of lab created diamonds are undermined by perceived scarcity amongst consumers, a paradoxical observation given the relative overabundance of

mined diamonds. Nonetheless, this insight empowers marketers of cultured diamonds significantly. An extension of this experiment to a different demography such as millennials and consumers in liberal North American markets is recommended by the authors. The book also explores the indigenous luxury industry in India, with Sudeep Chhabra and Ivan Coste-Manière adopting Sabayasachi, India's largest jewellery brand as a case study. This chapter is a thought provoking read with intriguing details of the development of India's jewellery tradition punctuated with refreshing imagery of exquisitely rendered jewellery.

Beyond diamonds, the book is an excellent primer to the enchanting world of pearls. The chapter titled 'The Pearls and Their Soul' by Ducrocq et al., explores the history of pearls from fishing to culture, and the myths that abound in disparate cultures concerning its origins. The chapter offers remarkable insight into the formation and typology of pearls and examines sustainability in pearling from bio-ecological, economic and sociocultural perspectives. Annette Condello deepens the exposition on pearls and highlights the connection between the underwater luxury gem and fashion and tourism industries in Western Australia. The chapter centres on Broome, the heartland of the bustling pearl fishing and trade in the Kimberley region in Western Australia, which became the multicultural pearling capital of the world in the 1900s. Of the many gemstones that constitute the global trade in luxury jewellery, the pearl is the most sustainable with its 'extraction' impacting the least on the ecology. The reader is also sure to glean much on Tanzanites – a rare gemstone peculiar to the East African nation of Tanzania – from the chapter by Florent Vincent, Ivan Coste-Manière and Marc Basseporte.

It is imperative that a book on sustainability and luxury addresses craftsmanship. Borstrock explores divergent pathways to craftsmanship between the luxury brand and the designer craftsman. He juxtaposes the operations of major jewellery luxury brands to that of three London based designer craftsmen and woman; Theo Fennel, Ute Decker and Mark Bloomfield, illustrating through their considered practice the existential fault line that pervades the claims to craftsmanship by global luxury jewellery brands. Manlow explores the degree of creative freedom among jewellery designers in different organizational settings. She observes that the creative autonomy of craft persons was influenced by a number of factors, such as whether he or she worked for a house within a conglomerate or for independent small or medium scale brands. A jewel designer's experience was also hinged on whether they worked in the realm of fine or costume jewellery, or some combination of the two and whether the firms they worked for focused primarily on jewellery or fashion. Veronica's observations drawn from the distinct experiences of four jewellers and craft persons are fascinating as it affirms and deepens Borstrock's argument on craftsmanship. Besides situating craftsmanship as imperative to luxury, it uncovers the power of luxury branding in promoting products that may have been the output of a fully automated value chain or embodying practices antithetical to luxury.

REVIEW SUMMARY

Overall, the book is insightful and instructive. The book confronts the ills of the global jewellery industry and proffers pragmatic solutions to bridging the disconnect between destructive practices in luxury jewellery and sustainability. It explores the possibility of a truly ethical and sustainable value



Figure 1: Meticulously hand-crafted rings by Theo Fennel.



Figure 2: *Orbital One* – an adaptable 3D-printed necklace by Mark Bloomfield.

chain in luxury jewellery as advancements in technology mediate a transparent supply chain, attenuating the devastation of mining, while fostering circulation of reconfigured/reconstituted jewellery. It is broad in scope and sufficiently addresses the central thesis of sustainability in the production and consumption of luxury jewellery, which makes it a valuable resource for scholarship at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. As a researcher with a keen interest in luxury, I believe this volume contributes immeasurably to understanding the luxury jewellery industry and its inclinations to sustainability. Each chapter engages the reader independently just as much as it does as a cohesive volume, however, the non-specialist reader may have a little difficulty navigating the structure and arrangement of chapters. Perhaps a thematic organization of the chapters would have helped with the flow. It is an informative read, presented in simple language and sufficiently illustrated with the appropriate captions. For the purposes of scholarship, it is adequately referenced in text and in the bibliography. This is a recommended read for researchers, educators and enthusiasts of luxury jewellery. I rate it 4.5 stars out of 5.

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