

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

## The post-pandemic fashion calendar: Resume or revamp?

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The Chanel Cruise 2021 show was staged in a studio and recorded in a seven-minute video. Image credit: Chanel

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With the release of its Cruise 2021 collection, Chanel became the first major brand to get back into the rhythm of things following the outbreak of COVID-19 globally.

Previously scheduled for Capri on the Italian Riviera, the *Balade en Méditerranée* show was reimaged digitally by creative director Virginie Viard in the form of a seven-minute video.

With the cancellation of this year's menswear and haute couture shows, the once jam-packed fashion calendar has suddenly become silent.

Chanel's move was not just a digitally progressive way of showcasing 51 new looks, but also almost a stimulus shot of sorts for the industry; a sign that business is as usual. However, it appears that not every luxury brand agrees.

Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele opined on May 24 via the brand's official Instagram that the terms "Cruise, Pre-Spring, Pre-Autumn, Spring/ Summer, Autumn/Winter" were "labels of an impersonal discourse that lost its meaning."

The brand announced plans to break the fashion industry's longstanding seasonal calendar and instead hold two shows per year.

Saint Laurent, another label under the Kering Group, [also stated that it would skip the Paris Fashion Week in September](#), readjusting its plan for the current year, and launch upcoming collections with a new strategy.

Disruptions to the fashion calendar because of the pandemic has not only brought runway shows and parties to a halt, but has also raised questions about the existing system.

Brands are now stepping forward and attempting to shake up industry practices a move that might just help propel fashion in a new, more sustainable direction.

Adapting to millennial shopping patterns

The fashion industry was once proud of its seasonality, releasing autumn/winter collections in February and

spring/summer collections in September.

Traditionally, there is a six-month lead-time between runway shows and collections being sold in stores. But today's younger generation of shoppers, having been raised in the era of instant gratification, quickly tired of this model, prompting brands such as [Burberry, Tom Ford and Tommy Hilfiger to adopt the "See Now Buy Now" approach as early as 2016](#).

From "Prt-Porter" to "Prt-Acheter": Consumers are increasingly demanding a higher level of production efficiency from brands, and moving towards a season-less calendar might just be the answer to matching their perennial appetites.

Without having to chase seasons, brands will have more flexibility in terms of production schedule, potentially shortening the lead-time between product launches and actual delivery.

Protecting brand equity

Inevitably, the seasonal model has also given rise shorter product life cycles.

With the excessive number of collections and product series created comes overstocked inventories that brands typically try to shed at the end of every season.

This has created a culture of end-season discounting a quick and easy way for brands to cash out and fashion-savvy bargain hunters to snap up a piece of their favorite labels on the cheap.

While this solves the problem in the short run, the practice raises questions about the impact on a brand's long-term equity.

Over time, will the average luxury consumer still be willing to buy full-priced seasonal items knowing they will be discounted a few months later?

This issue is not only related to a company's revenue.

For luxury brands that have spent decades building up their image and public perception, the long-term damage discounting could have on that far outweighs the short-term benefits of clearance sales.

In that vein, [Milanese label Prada stopped its end-of-season markdown practice in 2019](#), with CEO Patrizio Bertelli saying, "We believe that this decision is actually going to strengthen the brand's image and in particular, it's going to guarantee higher margins for us."

Then there are brands who consider the issue of image dilution as a result of discounting and instead opt to quietly get rid of unsold stock.

[In 2018, Burberry made headlines for destroying more than 28.6 million pounds sterling-worth of inventory](#). Public backlash for this long-standing practice in the luxury industry was severe, prompting the brand adopt a more sustainable approach [this year, it donated unsold wares to Smart Works](#), an organization that provides high-quality interview clothes and interview training to unemployed women in need.

However, the British label is not the only luxury brand guilty of such a practice, posing questions about the sustainability of the punishing fashion calendar as well.

Moving towards sustainability

For cash-rich luxury brands, sustainability issues go beyond that of incinerating unsold product. It is well known that brands pull out all the stops when staging runway shows to launch their new collections. Being an excellent marketing opportunity, jetting VIP clients, press and industry insiders to exotic locales fitted with immaculately designed sets are simply par for the course.



*Nicolas Ghesquire's Samurai-influenced Louis Vuitton Cruise 2018 collection at the Miho Museum on the outskirts of Kyoto, Japan. Image credit: Louis Vuitton*

Who could forget how Louis Vuitton chose to show Nicolas Ghesquire's Samurai-influenced Cruise 2018 collection at the Miho Museum on the outskirts of Kyoto, or Maria Grazia Chiuri's grand presentation in Marrakech's historic El Badi Palace for the Christian Dior Resort 2020 collection, or [how Chanel reportedly spent \\$1.7 million to build an artificial island in Dubai for its Cruise 2015 show?](#)

This marketing method, while helpful in highlighting the level of exclusivity of luxury brands, is now being called into question as sustainability concerns sweep through the fashion industry.

Fashion technology company Ordre.com and environmental change consultancy Carbon Trust released its [Zero to Market](#) report in February this year, which calculated the carbon cost of travel associated with the ready-to-wear wholesale buying process.

Retailers and designers travelling to Paris, London, Milan, New York and other regions during fashion week were said to have generated the equivalent of 241,000 tons of carbon dioxide approximately equal to the carbon emissions produced by lighting up New York's Times Square for 58 years.

Given the fast pace of the fashion seasonal calendar, this only accounts for a small portion of a brand's marketing activities around the world.

In which case, reducing the number of collections that a brand releases a year seems like the natural answer to overcoming this.

While Chanel's move to present its Cruise 2021 collection might have been borne out of necessity due to the pandemic, it perhaps the answer the luxury fashion industry is searching for in terms of sustainability and a step towards being more digitally progressive.

This, of course, cannot fully replace the intimacy and interactivity that live shows offer, but certainly offers an alternative channel for brands to seriously consider developing as well.

Breeding creativity

On the brand side is another compelling reason for moving towards season-less collections: improving creativity.

Creative directors and designers at major fashion houses have been vocal about the impact of the excessive fashion calendar on creativity for years.

Burnouts are common from [Raf Simon's widely publicised departure from Dior](#) to [Alber Elbaz parting ways with Lanvin after 14 years at its creative helm](#).

In the recent Vogue Global Conversations held on Zoom, designer Marc Jacobs was quoted as saying, "We've done everything to such excess that there is no consumer for all of it, and everyone is exhausted by it [...] It's all become a chore and it's a chore that's just a waste of time and energy, and money and materials."

Instead, he expressed that the [industry should be thinking about scaling down](#) the number of shows and collections per year.

By taking the pressure off designers to deliver new collections every season, brands and consumers may end up coming out on top.

Given ample lead time between collections, designers would have the luxury to develop novel, fresh and well-thought out pieces instead of cookie-cutter ideas churned out to meet fashion week deadlines.

COVID-19 has forced the fashion industry to hit the pause button, and has inadvertently thrown the spotlight on its unsustainable pace.

Cancelling interim collections and scaling back shows might be a helpful stopgap measure, but does not quite address the fundamental issues present.

While the fast-moving fashion calendar appears to be meeting the demands of the modern consumer, it comes at a cost. And as the system stands at the precipice of change, will brands step up?

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