

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

## Navigating the dystopian future of luxury fashion

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*The pandemic will only make brands such as Gucci stronger. Image credit: Gucci*

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The luxury business is under incredible duress.

The pandemic devastated luxury everywhere, from showrooms in Milan to factory workers in Bangladesh. The notions of revenge buying or a leap back to pre-COVID-19 consumption are unlikely to be realized.

Questions around sustainability and consumption have put a spotlight on the environmental impact of fast fashion. Many designers are out of work and smaller brands or younger designers have likely put their hopes of starting or sustaining their businesses on hold.

It seems like things cannot get worse but they can.

Tee for two

Advances in AI and technology and the health requirements of social distancing could threaten to generate an even more grim and dystopian future for luxury brands.

All that said, the end of the industry is not a foregone conclusion.

Focusing on fashion in particular, I would argue that there are two important categories when it comes to the consumer experience in luxury: curation and commerce.

Curation represents the editorial voices putting their stamp of approval and publicizing what brands bring to market.

Commerce is the experience leading up to and including the purchase and subsequent purchases of products from a brand.

Within these areas of curation and commerce, there is a tension between two opposing forces: in-person engagement and technology-based interactions.

The picture that emerges is one of a hybrid an outcome that sits somewhere in the middle between two extremes. Here is what I mean:

Curation in-person: The elite few

In the dystopian future, the power center of the elite who evaluate and curate what reaches consumers becomes hyper-centralized because only editors, buyers, customers and celebrities with access to private air travel will attend shows.

Participants will be limited to a small group to ensure social distancing. This shrinking of curators exposed to shows creates an aggregation of power around the most established media outlets (e.g., *Vogue*) and brands (Gucci, Louis Vuitton, etc.).

Curation led by technology: A virtual technology-based future

In a technology-driven future, fashion shows no longer require physical presence or human models.

Certified influencers from around the world will use VR headsets to experience fashion shows.

A wider array of international curators will vote on favorite looks and only the winning items will go into production, creating more sustainable supply chains.

Curation: The likely hybrid outcome

The cycle of shows is likely to slow, with live shows becoming intimate as we typically see for haute couture.

Houses will avoid large-scale, elaborate productions in favor of beautiful spaces where little decor is required.

A select group of editors, customers and celebrities will be invited to attend, and shows will be livestreamed to the other attendees before being released to the general public.

A handful of designers will address crises and social injustices head on, while most will create fantastical worlds of escapism.

Commerce in-person: By appointment only in smaller storefronts

Physical storefronts will become too expensive to maintain due to decreased foot traffic and holding companies will consolidate multiple brands into existing real estate.

Due to social distancing, brands will adopt an appointment-only mentality with hyper-personalized experiences for the few allowed within these smaller stores.

Customers will need "credentials" to receive this exclusive service. Inventory will be mailed to customers after purchase.

Commerce led by technology: Amazon gains foothold on fashion

Department stores have met their final reckoning and so too will many multi-brand ecommerce sites.

Amazon will finally prevail in its foray into luxury, providing unique storefronts for high-end brands and the back-end supply chain infrastructure for efficient fulfillment and returns.

However, the functional efficiency of Amazon will deteriorate the level of personal service, perception of scarcity and beauty that physical and Web storefronts provide, eroding the brands and their *raison d'être* for charging such high prices.

Commerce: The likely hybrid outcome

Luxury brands will rethink their digital storefronts. They not only will maintain the high level of interface design and functionality consumers expect, but also will augment the experiences with behaviors that emulate the in-store experience. They will take a cue from telehealth and provide one-on-one video interaction with salespeople, digital online closets, virtual trunk shows, and exclusive access to content and virtual events.

High value customers will receive "Prime"-like features such as free shipping and unlimited returns.

WHILE THE LUXURY fashion business has long been perceived as slow and traditional, recent developments have called for large-scale change.

However, it is not a destruction, but an evolution a happy medium between the incredible physical experiences of the past and the highly personalized digital ones of the future.



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