

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Emerging designers focus on unlikely benefits of pandemic

November 24, 2020



Designs by Kenneth Ize were recently featured in Vogue. Image credit: Nadine Ijewere for Vogue

By ELLEN KELLEHER

Young, celebrated designers voiced their enthusiasm for the digitalization disrupting the economics of the fashion industry as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subscribe to **Luxury Daily**
Plus: Just released
State of Luxury 2019 **Save \$246 ▶**

During a panel at the FT Business of Luxury Summit on Nov. 23 moderated by *Financial Times* deputy fashion editor Carola Long, speakers shared the challenges and difficulties which the pandemic has brought about. The panelists also spoke about how the pandemic has contributed to positive changes in the sector, such as the growing importance of sustainability, storytelling and direct-to-consumer sales.

"I'm really excited about the new marketplace because I think the new marketplace is the next retail store," said Julie Gilhart, chief development officer of **Tomorrow London Ltd**, a fashion consultancy. "It allows for support for a brand-owned direct to consumer model.

"You can control your inventory and you can control discounting," Ms. Gilhart said. "You can control a lot more."

Silver linings of COVID-19

The focus of the discussion was on how the struggles of COVID-19 have yielded unexpected benefits for business models and also made people in the industry take certain ethical and political issues more seriously.

Speaking on the panel were Nigerian designer Kenneth Ize, who was shortlisted for the LVMH prize in 2019; French designer Marine Serre, a specialist in upcycling and environmental causes who won the LVMH prize in 2017; as well as Ms. Gilhart.



The theme of this year's FT Business of Luxury Summit Nov. 23-24 is "Luxury After Lockdown." Image courtesy of The Financial Times

The pandemic has leveled the playing field for young upstart designers such as Mr. Ize and Ms. Serre, as a critical factor in success is how digitally oriented a brand is.

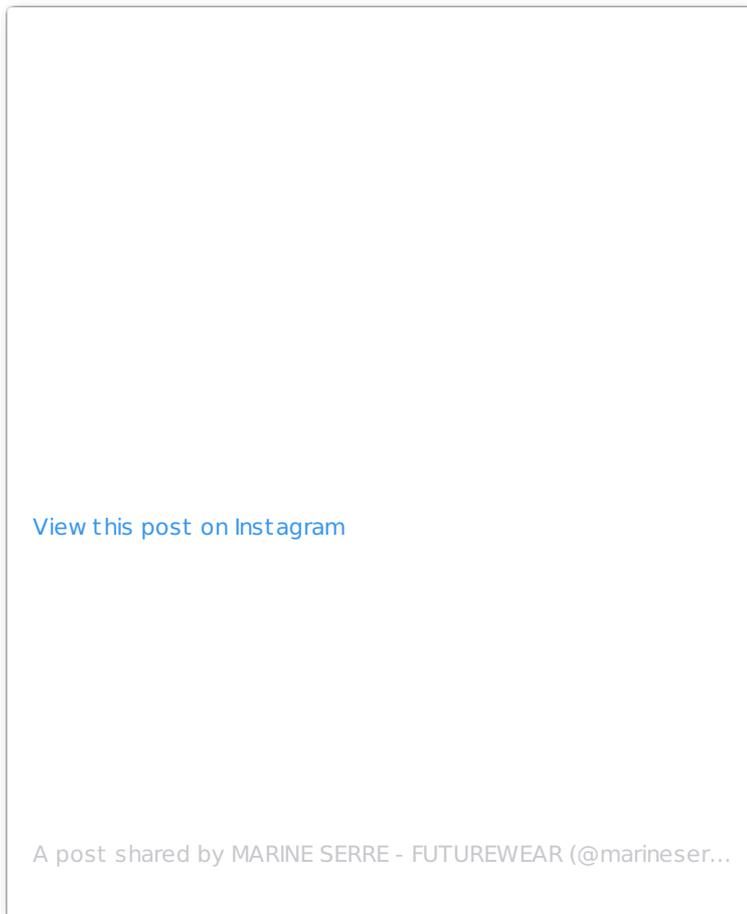
"The brands that have really put the emphasis on wholesale and resale are having a harder time," Ms. Gilhart said.

Ms. Serre made the point that shopping for fashion is something that needs to stay fun and light, adding that the retail experience will need to be reinvented.

Both Ms. Serre and Mr. Ize said it was quite important for their brands to reflect their values.

"I'm coming from Africa where there is much less infrastructure and less access to things," Mr. Ize said. "We need to understand the value of one another and appreciate the work that we do."

Ms. Serre, meanwhile, also noted that her customers are currently more interested in her focus on upcycling finding a new use for things that would otherwise be discarded and sustainability than in the past, particularly after she released a video showcasing how her garments were made.



Instagram post from Marine Serre

Echoing her point, Ms. Gilhart said that upcycling and the repurposing of alternative materials has suddenly become part of the fashion conversation and the creativity of the industry. This creates an advantage for younger, newer

brands who have always been focused on such issues.

"It puts a lot of pressure on the designer, but you know it's part of the brand conversation and it spawns a lot of good storytelling," Ms. Gilhart said. "Being a storyteller is another thing that a creator has to do now."

While younger brands have the ability to grow faster due to technology, social media and internet sales, brands also can fall faster as well.

"So, it's really important for creatives to partner with business partners that can kind of scale in that proper timing," said Ms. Gilhart. "You don't want to be something that crashes and burns."

The process of building a brand has also become more complex as young designers can widen their reach beyond clothes to include home collections, for example, or even food collections.

"They can have all kinds of things," said Ms. Gilhart. "They can have a really strong brand identity in just a short amount of time."

Also on the mind of Mr. Ize is empowering the success of the artisans he worked with in Nigeria.

"I'm trying to empower the weaving community that doesn't really exist in a very cohesive way in Nigeria, so that's what I'm trying to do," he said. "I want to grow the community from Lagos."

Transparency is equally important to Mr. Ize and Ms. Serra for the purpose of lending authenticity to their products as well as honesty to their brands.

"You can definitely show how the goods are being made and how they are being processed," Mr. Ize said.

It is also valuable for fashion brands to embrace slower processes, according to Ms. Serra. A number of traditional luxury brands disclose little to no details about their supply chains and environmental and social policies, leaving room for more transparency in the industry.

Dior, Max Mara and Longchamp are among the brands that received low scores in the past on Fashion Revolution's Fashion Transparency Index, which analyzes publicly accessible information.

As consumers desire more details about the origins of the products they buy, transparency is a key component to winning and keeping their business ([see story](#))

The pandemic has brought home the rawness and fallibility of business models and designers are being hit by delayed payments, canceled orders and discounting.

In response, Ms. Gilhart said designers should seek out a balance between building their own websites and distribution channels as well as having some avenues for wholesale and traditional retail outlets.

"You have to manage your business in a proper way," she said. "What I would say to any emerging brand coming up is to think about the whole process and how you're involved in communicating with the customer."

Wholesale cannot be ruled out, particularly when expanding into new markets as human contact is pivotal to brand establishment.

"We can always be in front of a screen," Ms. Gilhart said. "But what's more pleasurable than going into a store and browsing around and seeing things that you like?"

The rise and rise of DTC

Instead of focusing on customers as a whole for the shopping experience, direct-to-consumer brands center on the individual shopper connection. They use individual user data to make a personalized experience for each customer.

This is partially due to DTC brands and retailers being web native, as well as "socially closer to the consumer," according to the 2019 IAB 250 Direct Brands to Watch report ([see story](#)).

While established luxury brands have been slowly incorporating more sustainable practices into their business models, affluents now have a growing roster of emerging eco-conscious brands offering high-quality products ranging from textiles to skincare and jewelry.

To be successful, brands such as Mr. Ize's and Ms. Serra's still have to reach consumers who are concerned about sustainability while maintaining a luxurious image.

Today's consumers expect companies across sectors to be committed to social responsibility, particularly firms in the fashion and personal care industries ([see story](#)).

"That's the way a lot of emerging talent will get started," said Ms. Gilhart.

© 2020 Napean LLC. All rights reserved.

Luxury Daily is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your [feedback](#) is welcome.