

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

## The year fashion met reality: Seducing a changed consumer

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*Chanel's fall-winter 2020-21 show was a study in fantasy, as almost all of the fashion brand's presentations are. Image credit: Chanel*

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Chanel's [fall-winter 2020/21 show](#) on March 3 was the ultimate fashion fantasy. Chanel shows always are. They recreate a mountain vista, [an oceanfront](#), a rainforest, the Parisian rooftops and are usually thought of as a pinnacle of an industry made of, and for, dreams.

Forward a couple of weeks ahead, and the reality became so dire that our dreams revolve around living "normally."

Escapism is out, reality is in

The unreality of 2020 changed the fashion flex. A head-to-toe designer-dressed influencer posing in an exotic location feels sorely out of place and out of different time.

With socializing still mostly under the radar, consumers directed their taste flex elsewhere: to their exercise routines, cooking mastery, gardening skills, podcasts, newsletters, Instagram gift guides, Spotify's 2020 Wrapped playlists.

In terms of [#2020wrapped](#), Taylor Swift's "[Cardigan](#)" is doing exceedingly well. A self-directed single marks the peak of the cottagecore aesthetic TikTok frenzy in the lockdown.

For the uninitiated, cottagecore revolves around a Henry David Thoreau lifestyle of isolation in a cabin in the woods focused on romancing nature, homemade bread and cardigans. Make that three cardigans, worn simultaneously: there is not an Instagram influencer worthy of their name that is not hiding under layers of comfortable, plush and tartan clothing. It is style meant to soothe and insulate against hard times.

From escapism to activism

Insulation against hard times does not mean giving up on actively trying to make them better.

Fashion brands from Zara to Ralph Lauren to Zadig & Voltaire kept and kept reminding Americans to vote in the presidential election. Biden and Harris merch is now a collectible.

Around the world, brands have been taking a stand: first in the fight against the pandemic with repurposing their factories to make face masks and hand sanitizers, like Dior did, and then in the fight against climate crisis.

There are a very few fashion brands who this year did not commit to their efforts on creating a more environmentally responsible fashion system.

For the most part, fashion sustainability is still in the domain of carbon-neutrality pledges and abandoning fur, with notable exceptions of Levi's re-commerce and buyback program and a city-wide recycling department store in Berlin.

Similarly global has been advancing racial diversity in fashion: Black Lives Matter protests, from New York to London to Milan, were a long-overdue industry wakeup call.

If the leading fashion magazines and more than one corporate shakeup are any indication, the fashion industry is working hard to broaden its focus.

Fashion media and brands are celebrating the real people: the frontline workers, doctors, social and political activists, environmentalists, pioneers of LGBTQ+ community. Always a purveyor of aspiration, fashion started taking its social and cultural role seriously and is putting forward images that many can identify with.

From influencers to everybody

Thanks to acceleration of social commerce, defined as consumers buying from consumers on social media, independent fashion brands can connect directly with their consumers.

Everyone can become a fashion seller, and a lot of people do.

At Depop, a social resale marketplace, Gen Z is redefining the rules of commerce by using other people's "likes" as their main tool for trend discovery.

When a Gen Zer sees what her cool friends liked, she beats them to it by buying an item before they do. It is like high school all over again.

There is something very appealing about shopping from your high school nemesis closet or buying from a girl with pink hair and vintage overalls. It lets us find others with similar tastes and styles and interests. It also lets us find brands and makers that we want to support.

"Meet the makers" is the main feature at Handshake marketplace by Shopify. Along with guided discovery and personalization, knowing who made your clothes and what they are about is something that Amazon is most notably missing.

A TikTok celebrity, like WeChat influencers before them, can now easily capitalize on their fame.

Shopping influencer livestreams and Instagram gift guides allow consumers to buy curated selections from their favorite influencers or friends. We are effectively replacing the role of editors, buyers and department stores.

From aspiration to cancelation

If cottagecore was the aesthetic of 2020, then canceling someone or something is its organizing principle.

We proved that we can quickly turn on ideas, persons and even places with which we aspired to be or be associated.

Calling out bad social practices and behaviors of individuals is much needed and long overdue. Still, it occasionally looks uncomfortably close to herd thinking.

We've seen it in pop culture, when Beyhive or Nicki Minaj's Barbies zoomed in on someone a music journalist, a Cardi B fan who crossed them.

In culture and in society, once we start canceling too much without nuance and without thinking, it becomes like the boy who cried wolf it will matter less when it counts.

From high street to my street

Where there was once mass retail, we now have a collection of individual tastes and styles and looks to satisfy them.

Just like my Netflix is not like your Netflix, my fashion feed is not your fashion feed. We gravitate towards communities and influencers that cater to our niche styles.

Case in point: this year's Halloween costumes were not Lady Gaga or Tiger King but Peloton instructors.

Fitness instructors are a new breed of celebrity, borne out of this year's wave of indoor and outdoor exercising.

From biking to aerobics to yoga, there are Instagram and TikTok fashion communities created around fitness apparel and those who influence it.

There are princess Peloton riders, vintage garb runners and Jane Fonda exercisers.

When it comes to status signaling, fitness is the new fashion.

In this micro context, the challenge of mass fashion brands is not that they put forward an obsolete set of values and irrelevant styles. It is that there is no longer one predominant style and set of values.

Modern fashion consumers are not a monolithic group, but a network of subgroups and niches. To win them over, mass fashion brands need to start thinking of themselves in plural and create many doors in.

From V to K

Having many doors in a brand attracts a lot of different consumers, which matters at the time of increasingly K-shaped fashion aspiration.

K-shaped aspiration happens when, following the pandemic, different parts of the consumer market resume fashion shopping in different manners.

On one end, there are discerning fashion consumers who can afford to buy sustainably. On the other end, we have the fashion consumer who cannot.

If shopping bags seen on the streets of downtown New York are any indication, fashion at the moment is happening in Zara and H&M.

Even fashion influencers are these days practicing the art of the treasure hunt in places such as Arket, ASOS or & Other Stories.

Viewed from the perspective of environmental capital, this shopping behavior is not aspirational. From the perspective of affordability, it is.

Filling the gap between different consumer groups are brands that positioned this year themselves as tastemakers and cultural voices. "Not for you, for everyone" is fashion brand Telfar's motto. It emphasizes the power of a strong and clear values-led narrative: it allows a brand to attract a community, set trends and enjoy a strong cultural association.

THE BIG HEADLINE for fashion this year was "reality."

Fashion looked itself in the mirror and started reckoning with the fact that it is now seducing a changed consumer. This consumer is, at least at the moment, paying attention to diversity, sustainability, affordability and a social stance from the companies from which they are buying.

This consumer is looking at fashion differently. Fashion's task is to start weaving together a culturally sensitive and culturally relevant narrative that celebrates "realness."

In the fashion of the future, community comes before the individual, change-makers before change-talkers and real-world heroes before the invented worlds.

Fashion is a dream, but better than fairy tales are dreams that come true.



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