RETHINKING THE RUNWAY:

CONSIDERING THE ROLE OF FASHION SHOWS IN 2020

by

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This thesis seeks to respond to contemporary criticisms of the runway industry by defining the role fashion shows play in the 2020 communications landscape. This study will frame its argument with communications theory, the social psychology of dress, and multiple runway shows by top brands. It will then establish frameworks for understanding the different communicative properties of these shows, alternative marketing strategies and shortcomings of the frameworks presented before answering the research question.

Acknowledgements

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List of Accompanying Materials

1. The video coverage of Thread Show, analyzed in the final section, can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tny5pf5Dk8&t=1070s
   [CITATION Lon19 \l 1033]

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Introduction

I have been sewing since I was in middle school. While my ability has improved, the motivation has remained steady: engaging with clothing as a means of communication. By 2019, I was working in the Honors College at the University of Oregon and the School of Journalism and Communications. The combined passions for the art of sewing and the utility of Public Relations (PR) events inspired me to host a fashion show on campus in the Fall. During the show, my perspectives of communications and liberal arts allowed me to consider the cultural and communicative significance of fashion. I have read communications research on clothing and branding; however, I knew I had to conduct this thesis to investigate the communicative properties of runway shows and what role they currently play.

Many editorial sources question the runway's legitimacy. Couture fashion houses funnel a large amount of resources into these events, leaving critics skeptical of the cost. According to a Forbes article, "a 10 to 15 minute fashion show can cost anywhere from $200,000 to over $1 million**"**[CITATION Lon19 \l 1033]**.** Financial resources aside, there are also vast amounts of materials, time, labor, and travel that go into large fashion weeks. Many journalists question whether the returns make up for the steep cost. One article for Quartz explained, while there are ways to tell if one clothing line is more or less successful than another, it is difficult to connect success or failure to a specific show [CITATION Bai19 \l 1033]. Another article states that consumers, "are not spending as much money on clothing as they are on technology and vacations" and that "the buyers attending these shows do not buy their collections during the show, but rather sales take place during private showroom appointments" [CITATION

Sar19 \l 1033]. All these reports miss the value of the fashion show because they lack the framework to measure its success. They are thinking of the fashion show in terms of its direct translation to sales rather than considering it in terms of successfully establishing the brand identity which is necessary for all sales.

Through this thesis, I will respond to these criticisms by analyzing the role that fashion shows play in 2020 and comparing this to other contemporary marketing options for fashion brands. I hope to provide an updated framework, based in communications theory, and to position the runway as the best option for couture fashion houses, even as online and influencer marketing become more widely used. The argument I construct through this document is that fashion shows and couture brands are inextricable because they are less about the clothing itself and more about the identity the clothing connects the consumer to.

Before discussing these topics, it is important to define many of the main terms that will be used. A runway, for this thesis, will include any in-person event, held by a clothing brand, displaying clothing with the intention of making money. The terms “runway,” “runway show,” and “fashion show” are used interchangeably. The term “clothing” will be meant to represent any material meant to cover the body: dress shirt, slacks, gown, shoes, etc.. The term “dress” is defined perfectly by Merriam-Webster, “a particular form of presentation.” Another clarification I would like to make is that of the couture fashion house. The dictionary states that for something to be “couture” it must be fashionable and custom made. When discussing couture houses in this document, I am considering any brand which meets this description and who regularly uses runway shows as a method of displaying their work. The terms “fashion house” and “couture

brand” are used synonymously, usually to denote the brands I have chosen to analyze. Finally, a clothing line will be considered as a specific group of clothing items styled and presented by one fashion house in one season.

I would like to acknowledge, as previously mentioned, that my study is limited to the areas I am well-versed in: Communications and Humanities. The concept of identity in relation to fashion shows should be further explored for financial, gender, sexuality, and racial implications, because clothing is often used as identifier for different socioeconomic, sexual, gender, and cultural identities.

Chapter 1: History of the Runway

Before Charles Fredrick Worth pioneered the use of live models in the late 19th century, “haute couturiers had traditionally visited clients at home for fittings**”** [CITATION Zak20 \l 1033]**.** Worth was the first to show his designs on live models for clientele to choose from[CITATION Sar19 \l 1033]**.** This transition from a one-on-one interaction to a display shaped fashion into a form of communication, with the model as a vessel. This built the foundation of the fashion show as we know it today.

While the method of showing clothing on live models became standard, it was not yet what is commonly thought of today as a runway show. There were no fashion weeks with dramatic spectacles and well-considered locations. Early shows, or what Blanchard (2018) calls “fashion parades,” and Zak (2020) called “salon shows,” were more akin to trunk shows, where an intimate audience gathers in a home and an entrepreneur displays goods to be sold. In 1937 Coco Chanel would watch her audience from, “the reflection of the curved mirror staircase that led to her apartment” [CITATION Zak20 \l 1033]. Around the same time, British designer Lady Duff-Gordon, “regularly showed collections at her Hanover Street salon” [CITATION Bla18 \l 1033]**.** This beginning era was denoted by pragmatism. The shows were highly focused on the clothing and less on the critical reception or marketing. The location was usually wherever the designer had access, such as Chanel’s apartment or Duff-Gordon’s salon. In these private homes, photographers were not allowed. The emphasis was still on the client rather than publicity [CITATION Bla18 \l 1033].

The fashion industry grew and middlemen like department stores and clothing magazines separated the consumer further from the designer. The nature of the show

began to change. In 1943, New York held a “press week” which would later become New York Fashion Week [CITATION Bla18 \l 1033]. At its start, press week was a chance for buyers and editorial staff to view couture lines six months in advance to help them plan what they would have available in store and what trends they would promote in their magazines [CITATION Sar19 \l 1033]. The purpose of the show grew from displaying an item to a potential buyer to establishing the tone for the fashion industry as a whole; setting trends and coordinating magazines with department stores. It was less about winning over an individual buyer and more about herding a mass of buyers towards certain trends.

Entering the 1950s, the fashion show began to find its power as a publicity machine. In 1947, Christian Dior was the first designer to allow photographers to photograph his collection [CITATION Bla18 \l 1033]. Then, in 1952, Givenchy founded his fashion house through which he would collaborate repeatedly with Audrey Hepburn. Fashion reporter Zak writes, “Givenchy understood the importance of celebrity as a tool to extend his brand beyond the doors of his Paris salon” [CITATION Zak20 \n \l 1033]. This was one of the first examples of a designer intentionally collaborating with a celebrity to increase their communication potential.

Paris fashion week came together in 1973 when a governing body took responsibility for the fashion shows which were already happening, and London fashion week came together in 1984, in a similar manner. Paris was another hub at the time which marked the “big four;” New York, London, Milan, and Paris fashion weeks, which still dominate the industry today. The rise of fashion weeks increased the spectacle and complexity of the runway industry.

Out of this glamorous world, the 1990s brought with it the prominence of supermodels such as Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford and a rise of designers who bucked the system. According to Blanchard, “the mark of a really edgy designer was the ability to attract the fashion crowd to see a collection in the most obscure, out-of-the-way venue” [CITATION Bla18 \n \l 1033]. Locations have only continued to become more experimental with the recent Jaquemus Spring 2021 show being held in a wheat field in Vexin Regional National Park, an hour outside of Paris [CITATION Jac20 \l 1033]. The show had previously moved from providing styles that impressed specific clients to defining styles that would streamline the industry as a whole, and now moved to showing the in-style clothing on bodies that audiences would wish to emulate.

The 2000s brought internet devices and social media platforms which revolutionized every aspect of society, the fashion show being no exception. Sardone describes Instagram as “one of the biggest game changers in the industry,” by creating, “a constant connection between brands and customers” [CITATION Sar19 \n \l 1033]. Alexander McQueen was the first designer to livestream a show in 2010 [CITATION Bla18 \l 1033]. Around 2018, brands began taking audiences on all-expense paid trips for their shows where, “the clothes are almost an irrelevance” [CITATION Bla18 \l 1033]. In this internet age, the fashion show became an experience for the audience, bigger than the clothes themselves. The importance was providing a photo-worthy experience that would translate to social media attention.

The history of the fashion show is one which moves from salesroom to spectacle, from pragmatic to extravagant. The runways shifted focus from the clothing to the designer to the location to the model and finally to the audience itself. The

modern runway industry is constantly weighing all of these variables in order to produce an experience that will communicate the brand's identity while also bringing in money to support the brand's continued existence.

Chapter 2: Communicative Properties of Dress

In order to analyze the communicative properties of the fashion show, I had to first research that of clothing itself. There is a wealth of research surrounding the social psychology of dress, defined as "how an individual's dress affects the behavior of self as well as the behavior of others toward the self" [CITATION Kim14 \l 1033]. Here I summarize some of the findings which inform my argument, combining them into three frameworks: clothing as a second skin, as a language, and as a costume.

Clothing as a Second Skin

The "second skin" metaphor is in response to the findings of the collective body of social psychology of dress research. Like a "second skin," clothing acts as another physical characteristic of the wearer and communicates social information at first glance. Researchers have found that, "consistent first impressions can be formed very quickly, based on whatever information is available within the first 39 ms [milliseconds]" [CITATION Net06 \l 1033]. Just as there is meaning associated with any skin color, hair color, or eye color; there is cultural meaning imbued in each piece of clothing. Considering encoding decoding theory, we know that messages are encoded by a sender and decoded by receivers. The meaning is not always decoded properly, leading to miscommunication. In the case of clothing, the wearer may or may not deliberately select clothing for its communicative value. Regardless, viewers will decode information from their dress.

This second skin is given meaning by the people who witness it. One psychology study asked participants to rate a girl on certain characteristics when she

was under one of three clothing conditions. They found, “In the definitely sexualized condition, undergraduate students rated the girl as less moral, self-respecting, capable, determined, competent and intelligent than when she was depicted in either childlike or ambiguously sexualized conditions” [CITATION Kim14 \l 1033]. Clothing functions similarly to physical characteristics: both subconsciously trigger assumptions surrounding the wearer’s identity.

It has also been found that this causes distress for wearers when they feel their identity is misinterpreted. A study showed a high level of dissatisfaction among pregnant women with the limited options of maternity dress because it, “symbolized someone that they did not want to associate with” [CITATION Kim14 \l 1033]. The same study showed that women, “used dress to confirm their selves as pregnant and as NOT overweight” [CITATION Kim14 \l 1033]. The framework of considering clothing as a second skin helps us to conceptualize the amount of meaning that is communicated through dress upon first sight.

Clothing as a Language

When clothing is considered as a language, it is easier to understand how and why we consciously or subconsciously pull meaning from it. This aspect of dress is heavily rooted in symbolism theory. This is the idea that one visual cue can trigger an understanding that is separate from the direct reality. For example, when we see a red octagon it communicates “stop.” There is nothing inherent in that color and shape which hold that meaning. Instead, the meaning comes from our cultural conditioning: stop signs.

Similarly, because humans in modern societies are expected to be clothed while in public, every person we see or interact with is associated with some form of dress. After a lifetime of these interactions, clothing items begin to take on subconscious meaning.

Many scholars, such as Jared Johnson from Western Kentucky University, have made the comparison of dress to language [CITATION Joh16 \l 1033]. The clothing item, a shoe, shirt, piece of jewelry, and so on, can be thought of as a word. The outfit, or the way in which each clothing item is pieced together and paired, can be thought of as a sentence. Clothing items are constantly evolving and taking on new meaning as our culture evolves, and so is language. Whereas "fire" has historically been used to denote images of flames, the current generation has adopted the term to mean, "cool, impressive, or great." The string of letters, "f-i-r-e" do not inherently relate to flames or to impressiveness. We only understand these meanings as a product of repetition within different contexts and seeing the meaning drawn by other people. Similarly, there is nothing about fishnet stockings that inherently means sensuality. It is only their history and association with provocative culture and experiencing people in previous generations respond to the visual of fishnets in a certain way that imbues them with their meaning.

Johnson *et al.* explains this idea well: "color also conveys meaning that varies as a function of the context in which the color is perceived. Accordingly, the meanings of colors are learned over time through repeated pairings with a particular experience or message" [CITATION Kim14 \p 5 \l 1033]. When we consider clothing a language, the

color, fabrics, and structures, act as the letters. These come together to create a word, or a clothing item. These clothing items then come together in an outfit, or sentence.

Clothing as a Costume

This aspect of clothing's function is very similar to its first function as a second skin. However, while a second skin simply establishes clothing as an outward expression, the idea of costume implies that clothing causes the wearer to take on an identity other than that of the self. Research has shown that clothing not only communicates identity but can influence it. That is, dress has been proven to impact the behavior of the wearer under certain contexts.

Johnson *et al.* made the argument that, "clothing color affects both the wearer and the perceiver" [CITATION Kim14 \p 7 \l 1033]. Other studies have shown this is true for most aspects of clothing and dress. Researchers Frank and Gilovich, in response to findings that black was perceived as an aggressive color, wanted to see if it in turn created aggression in the wearers. Among football and ice hockey players, those with black uniforms were awarded more penalties for aggressive behavior than those wearing other colors [CITATION Fra88 \l 1033]. While this begins to imply that dress could actually impact the behavior of the wearer, it does not prove it definitively. If this color is perceived as more aggressive, it is possible that the players were not behaving with more aggression but rather that the referees were biased by the subconscious messaging of the uniforms.

Another study looked at counterfeit sunglasses. Johnson summarizes the Gino e*t al.* study from 2010 saying, "Participants who thought they were wearing fake sunglasses cheated significantly more on two experimental tasks than those who

thought they were wearing authentic sunglasses**”** [CITATION Kim14 \p 9 \l 1033] [CITATION Gin10 \l 1033]. In a third study, Kellerman and Laird (1982) “conducted an experiment with undergraduate students having them rate themselves on an array of traits when wearing and when not wearing glasses and to complete a hidden figures test. Although there were no significant differences in their performance on the test, the participants’ ratings of their competence and intelligence was higher when wearing glasses than when not” [CITATION Kim14 \p 16 \l 1033][CITATION Kel82 \l 1033]. Similar to an actor wearing a costume to portray a character, these findings imply that our clothing choices can cause us to perceive ourselves differently. They can also, in certain cases, impact our behavior. The messages that the language of dress communicate to others are also communicated to the self.

Conclusion

Clothing should first be considered as a second skin in that it adds something to the body with communicative abilities. Dress is used by others to better understand the wearer. Clothing can then be understood as a language where items carry meaning that is culturally endowed and constantly changing. Finally, clothing can be thought of in terms of costume. This is to say that the communicated messages are sent not only to the audience but also to the self. The fashion show allows designers and couture brands to exert some influence over the meaning associate with specific clothing items and the identities they denote. In the next chapter I will extrapolate on these abilities of the runway.

Chapter 3: The Roles of the Fashion Show

In my introduction, I included the idea that fashion shows cannot be considered under the same framework as a traditional PR event. In the previous chapter, we established the close link between identity and clothing. Here, I use this link to expand upon the frameworks we *can* use to understand the roles runway shows play.

Fashion shows as selling identities

There are two main theories of identity. The first, Social Identity Theory (SIT), claims that people use self-categorization and social comparison to understand themselves as a function of their innate positioning. People who are perceived as similar to oneself, "are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group"[CITATION Ste00 \p 225 \l 1033]. The other is called Identity Theory (IT) which is similar but grants more mobility. "In identity theory, the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance" [CITATION Ste00 \p 225 \l 1033]. Essentially, SIT is a function of who one is while IT is a function of what one does.

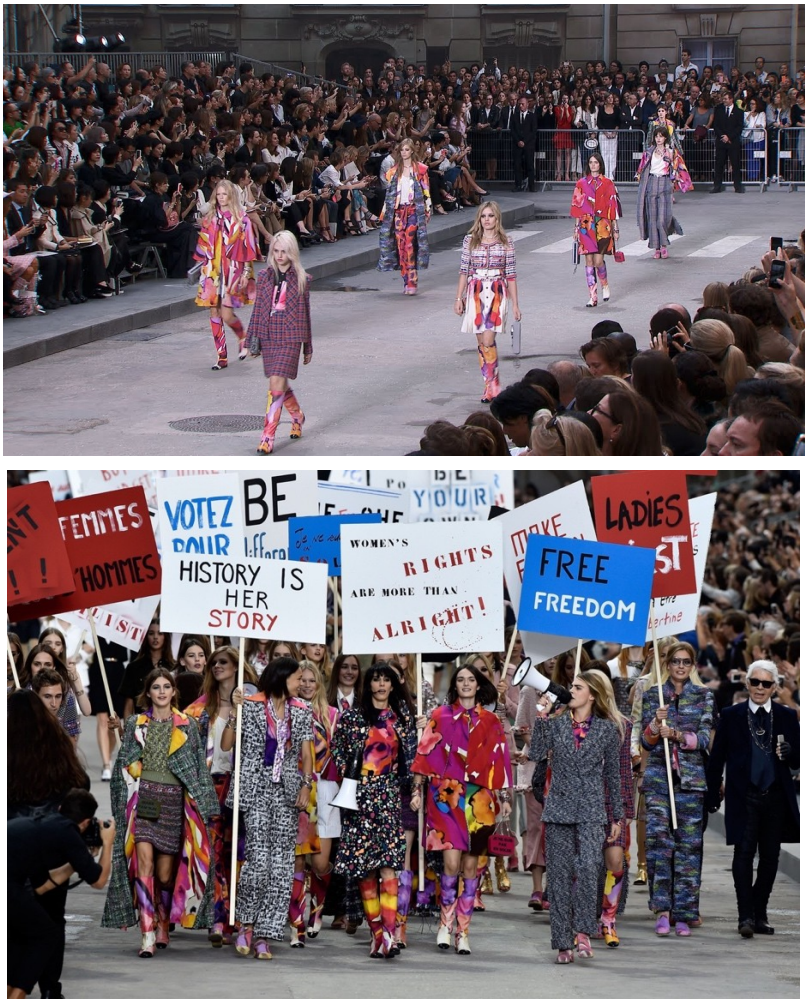
If we are to prescribe to the first, then the fashion show would serve to mimic those fashions seen in elite social circles. Couture sells at high prices, so they are aiming to reach clients who are elite and very wealthy. These clients will recognize their identity in the clothing, will consider the brand as "in-group," and will be more likely to buy their products. This follows the concept of clothing as a second skin because it would be helping consumers to show the identity they truly feel.

If prescribing to Identity Theory, the role of the fashion show would be to create an elite brand identity so those who wish to be seen and see themselves as elite can do so by aligning themselves with the brands. This aligns with the framework of clothing as costume because the identity of the item worn is meant to communicate a status and to help the wearer adopt the identity or status within themselves.

In either case, the fact that clothing communicates identity to others and the self, combined with the ways in which we have theoretically framed self-identity, leads to the conclusion that one responsibility of the fashion show is to form a brand identity that is coveted. They must communicate an identity that consumers will pay well to align themselves with.

The Chanel 2015 Spring-Summer Ready-To-Wear runway practiced this kind of identity sale [CITATION Kar14 \l 1033]. The show took place on a runway made to look like a metropolitan street, as seen in the figure below.

Figure 1: Spring-Summer 2015 Ready-To-Wear Chanel Show



The image on top shows the faux-street setting for this runway which took place September 30th, 2014. The photo below captures the staged feminist protest which Lagerfeld used to close the show.

In 2014, feminism was having a popular year. Frozen had been released which featured two independent and modern sisters as its protagonists and Beyonce had featured a quote from feminist author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie during her VMAs performance[CITATION Alt14 \l 1033]. The protest is purely symbolic, and the signs are vague enough to denote feminism without mentioning any specific issues. The goal

here is not to get political, but rather to communicate the brand's identity as being in alignment with the popular identities at the time.

While the vague signs and lack of body diversity among this faux feminist showing felt disingenuous, there are examples of designers who have aligned their brands with popular identities in a more sincere way. Alexander Wang's Spring Summer 2020 collection is an example[CITATION Ale19 \l 1033]. As a first-generation American, the show represented his love for the country as he perceives it [CITATION Phe19 \l 1033]. Featuring a cast of models uncharacteristically diverse for the industry strutting over an illuminated American flag, Wang aligned his brand with a multicultural identity. With the Black Lives Matter movement reaching prominence this summer in 2020, this identity is one that many Americans want to align themselves with. In the Lagerfeld case, it felt as though he wanted to project an identity, he perceived to be popular. In Wang's case, it seemed a genuine artistic expression which was perceived well and properly timed.

Whether intentional or not, the fashion show communicates an identity which becomes attached to the brand. Consumers will want to purchase clothing that communicates either an identity that they relate to (the second skin) or which they aspire to (the costume).

Fashion Shows as Controlling Context

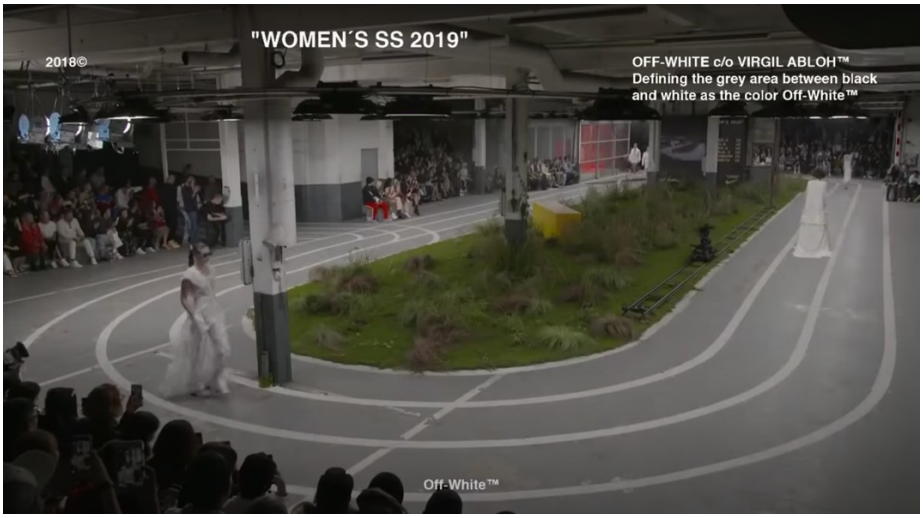
Many of the studies relating to the social psychology of dress bring up the importance of context. In many ways the communicative properties of color act as a microcosm for those of clothing in general. Johnson et al. wrote, "Color also conveys meaning that varies as a function of the context in which the color is perceived"

[CITATION Kim14 \p 5 \n \t \l 1033]. The environment of the object is as important as the object itself. Returning to the study about the impact of counterfeit sunglasses on the wearer, “the effect of dress on one’s behavior was due to the meaning of the dress cue in a context relevant to the meaning of that dress cue” [CITATION Kim14 \p 9 \l 1033][CITATION Gin10 \l 1033]. It would not have made sense to consider the effects of wearing fake couture glasses on athletic performance because the cultural meaning associated with knock off glasses has nothing to do with athleticism. However, studying their effect on integrity is valid. A physical show allows designers to explore not only new clothing styles and structures, but to explore their meanings within different contexts.

The previously mentioned Chanel show is also a great example of context [CITATION Kar14 \l 1033]. The women were wearing classic suit silhouettes, often in tweed fabrics. These suits, with their purple, pink and grey hues, conjure thoughts of the 1950s housewife or the Hilary Clinton pant suit. They conjure thoughts of old-school womanhood. However, the context of the metropolitan street and the finale as a staged feminist protest, represented in Figure 1, transform this meaning. Lagerfeld does not want to make a political statement; he wants to use the protest as a context to modernize the understanding of these silhouettes. In this way, if selling identity is the goal, controlling context is one of the tools to achieve it. The protest was a context which modernized the identity of their silhouettes in order to align themselves with the popularity of feminism and the identity of the modern woman.

The 2019 Off-White Spring-Summer collection (figure 2) had models walking on a track and field course as shown below [CITATION Vir18 \l 1033].

Figure 2: Off-White Spring-Summer 2019 Show



Track setup for the Off-White Women's Show

In coverage of the event, the setting was described as follows, "Everyone's name was flashed on an electronic leaderboard, with their nationalities beside them, as at a games competition, and the runway was painted like a combination of running track and concrete street" [CITATION Mow18 \l 1033]. Their outfits were often flowy and feminine in silhouette but made out of athletic materials and shown within the context of an athletic field. In this example, as well as the last one, the outfits, if viewed in a vacuum, would communicate one message. When viewed in the carefully crafted location of the show, they communicate something entirely different.

What is the popular identity that Virgil is trying to align his brand with? In 2019, female athletes were having an unprecedented year. Pro basketball players like Coby Bryant and Steph Curry were working to support women's programs to level the playing field for their daughters. At my own school, there was a clothing brand called "Women Ball Too," which was receiving a lot of attention and the most successful basketball player was Sabrina Ionescu. Similar to how Lagerfeld wanted to align his

brand with a more modern female identity, Abloh wanted to align his brand with the more modern female athlete.

Valentino's 2019 Haute Couture Show (figure 4) featured a colorful lineup of hyper-feminine gowns [CITATION Pic \l 1033]. Returning to the framework of clothing as a language, the letters (the silhouettes, fabrics and colors), are strung together into a word (clothing item) and then into a sentence by the show to create knew definitions. In an article covering the event, the designer Piccioli speaks to this relationship by saying, "You don't invent color, but you can invent new harmonies for color" [CITATION Bow19 \l 1033].

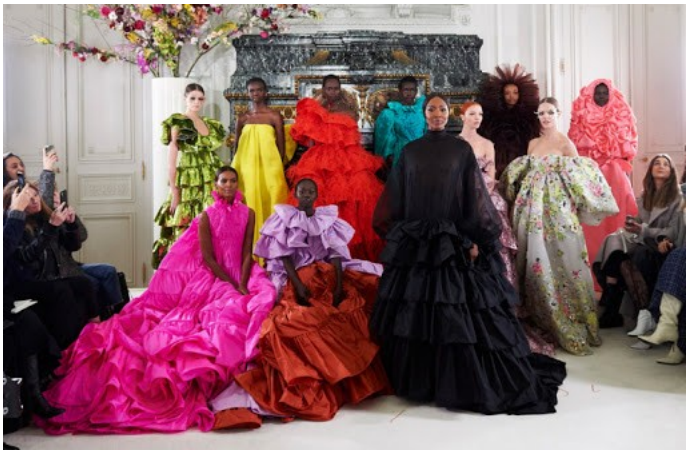
In addition to using the show to pair colors in a way that created new harmonies of color and silhouettes, Piccioli used the identities of the women wearing the garments to modernize the meaning of the colors and silhouette. Articles covering this event were largely focused on the diversity of his model lineup[CITATION Fol19 \l 1033] [CITATION Bow19 \l 1033]. The designer had drawn inspiration for the line, in part, from a 1948 photograph by Cecil Beaton (figure 3). The photographer, Beaton, also wrote an essay in which he explained that through the lavish dress and location, "designers literally fabricated the women they dressed" [CITATION Con10 \l 1033].

Figure 3: Cecil Beaton Photograph, 1948

Models wear Charles James gowns inside French & Co, New York in 1948 as photographed by Cecil Beaton.

Piccioli combined this image with another, “depicting several black women in less fancy festive mode”[CITATION Fol19 \l 1033]. He realized he was used to seeing this lavish, Victorian-style dress associated with white women, and less lavish dress with black women of the same time. In the 2019 show, he used the context of the lavish room and the Victorian silhouettes with the lineup of majority black models in order to challenge biases and revolutionize silhouettes for black bodies.

Figure 4: Valentino Spring 2019 Haute Couture



When considered in this way, the act of hosting a fashion show allows a designer to influence the cultural meaning of certain clothing items. If the shows were to be abandoned as a practice, designers would not be able to use the language of dress to define their brands in the way they can using these shows. They would have to present their designs through social media or online. In these cases, their content would be living in the context of a feed that they have no control over. This would both take away their ability to communicate more sophisticated identities and could cloud their intended message based on what other media is surrounding their content.

Fashion Shows as Live Theatre

There are intangibles to a presentation live and in-the-flesh which add value. As previously stated, there are communicative benefits to perceiving a mass of people's response to a cultural procession. Hearing a room full of people gasp at a display will convey more meaning than seeing that a video on YouTube received 10 likes and 5 dislikes. Throughout the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and subsequential quarantine, there

has been a sense of loss despite the social media and online communities which mimic real world interaction.

In June of 2020, a group of musicians from the UceLi Quartet performed, during quarantine, for an audience of houseplants [CITATION Sno20 \l 1033]. The musicians could have simply moved to online concerts as many others have, however they still found a way to hold a live event. While this does not comment on the communicative benefits of watching a show around other people, it does point to the fact that we are drawn to having events. Despite the increasingly digitized nature of our society, most people have still been eagerly awaiting the end of quarantine. I will not venture to define these intangibles here, as that is a thesis in and of itself, however it is important to recognize that there is a human preference to live sociality. Any digital replacement of the fashion show would not be able to replace this aspect of the runway.

Another way to prove the social benefits of an in-person event on consumer's experience is to look at shows in virtual reality. The increased popularity of social media did not replace the in-person runway. However, some researchers wanted to know if a virtual reality (VR) option could. This study from 2018 analyzed VR fashion shows and their impacts on consumer-learning, or, "an individual information process that aims to change a consumer's memory, behaviour and attitude towards the attributes of the brands" [CITATION KLa18 \l 1033]. Fashion shows of all kinds, as well as social media use by brands are concerned with this consumer-learning. When thought of in terms of identity, this is the process of teaching the consumer the identity that the brand seeks to emulate. This study found that an, "interactive platform with the stereo3D visualization and multisensory simulations work similarly to the traditional

ways of social media practices" [CITATION KLa18 \l 1033]. We have seen the survival of the in-person show through the social media era, and this finding implies even a digital show replication will not completely replace the physical show.

There social and communicative benefits to a live show, made clear during the COVID era, which make the fashion show irreplaceable by any digital experience.

Fashion Shows as Networking and Working Networks

So far, we have come to consider fashion shows as a way of creating an identity that people will want to align themselves with. Considering Social Identity Theory, or Identity Theory, the other members of a group will influence whether or not a person aligns themself with that group [CITATION Ste00 \l 1033]. Within this framework, we can consider the fashion show as a networking opportunity, or a way of communicating a brand's alliance with influential people.

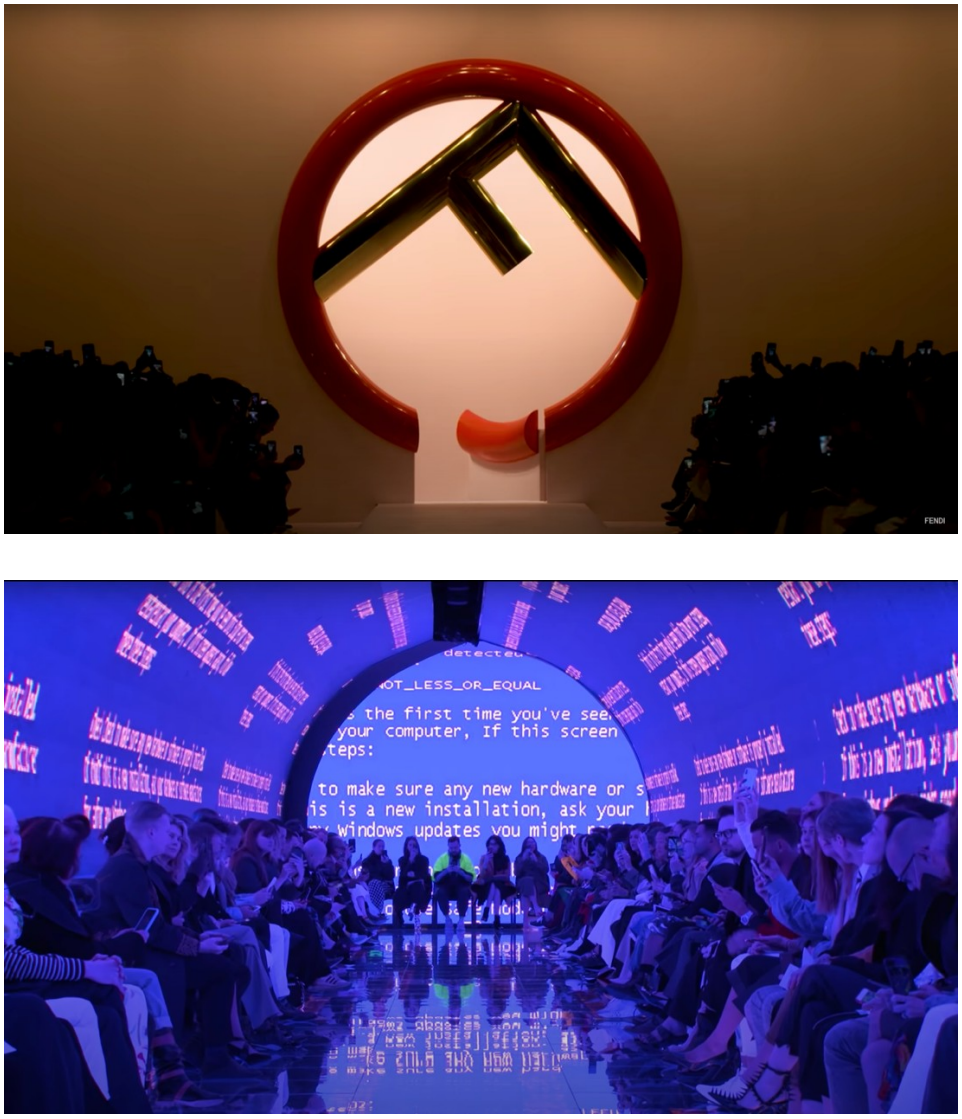
The Alexander Wang show previously mentioned perfectly represents this idea [CITATION Ale19 \l 1033]. A Vouge article covering the event in regards to the location stated, "The designer's Rockefeller Center show—the first ever held at the venue, [Wang] proudly noted…"[CITATION Phe19 \l 1033]. By choosing a location that has never before been used, he is showing that he has the social influence to be able to procure this space which means that the people in charge of the space must view him and his brand favorably.

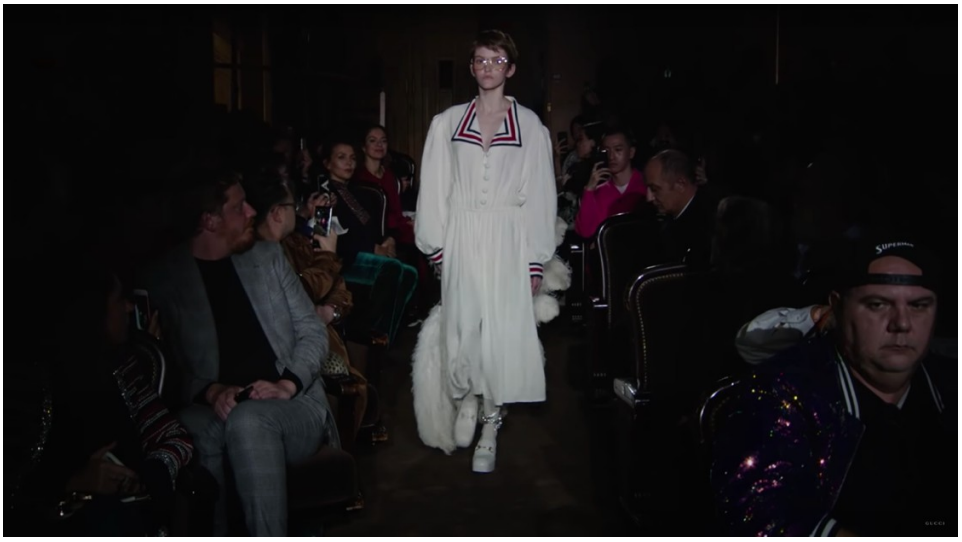
This show, as well as most of the shows mentioned in this chapter, feature celebrity models. Celebrity models, such as Gigi and Bella Hadid, Kendall Jenner, Winnie Harlow and Anok Yai, have gained a following for themselves in the era of social media. Using these models communicates that the brand is important and

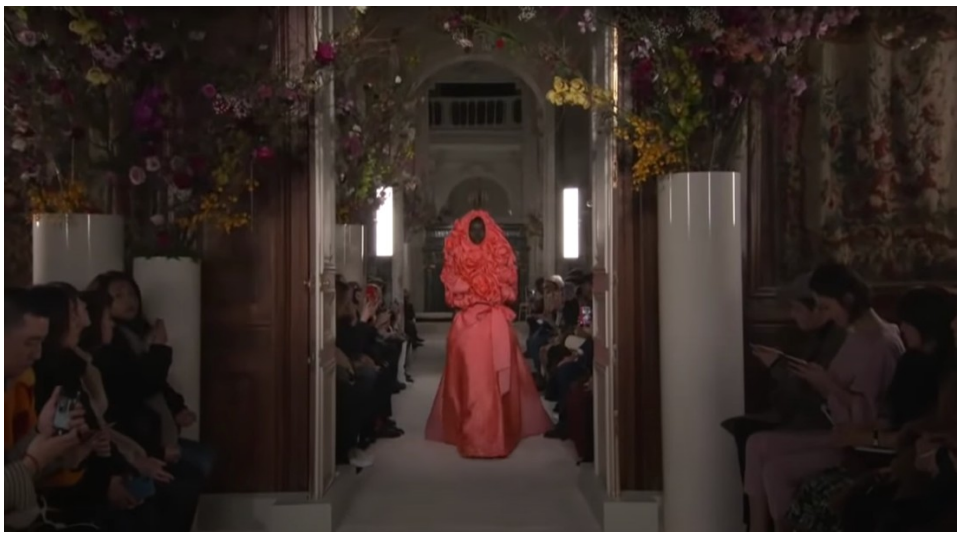
impactful enough to have these top figures present their clothing. This is another form of attaching elite identities to a brand to define an elite in-group that people will want to align themselves with considering SIT and IT [CITATION Ste00 \l 1033]. This also gains the brand free publicity anytime the models post about their work to their thousands or millions of followers.

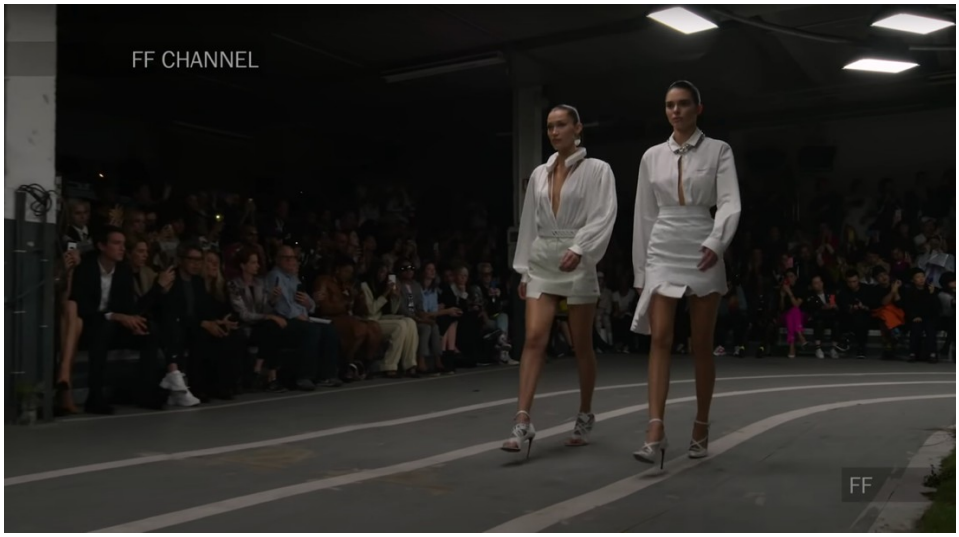
When watching these shows it is clear that the audience members are not only there to witness the event, but to magnify their reach. Here are a few images of the crowds at Spring-Summer 2019 shows for the five top clothing brands of the year's first quarter as listed by the Lyst Index[CITATION Q1219 \l 1033]. As the rooms at these events are often kept dark and the screen grabs in the below figure are from YouTube, they are not the best of quality, but they represent the high frequency of audience members recording the experience.

Figure 5: Spring-Summer 2019 Collection Crowds









From top to bottom: Fendi, Balenciaga, Gucci, Valentino, and Off-White openings for 2019 Spring/Summer collections

The importance of these visuals is the number of phones in the audiences. In the first image, the silhouette of the crowd is broken up by white rectangles of light as audience members try to capture the first glimpse of the collection to be posted on social media. This holds even more importance when considering how carefully selected these audiences are. The front row, or "frow," is often stacked with celebrities and influencers[CITATION Bla18 \l 1033]. Their ability to magnify the shows reach is akin to their ticket in the door.

This influence could be replicated by hiring social media influencers to post the brand's clothing without holding an event. However, celebrity posts are expensive. According to an article from BBC, for a single post on Instagram, Kylie Jenner is able to charge $1.2 million, Ariana Grande $966,000, and Cristiano Ronaldo $975,000. [CITATION How19 \l 1033]. Remembering that, "a 10 to 15 minute fashion show can cost anywhere from $200,000 to over $1 million"[CITATION Lon19 \l 1033], the runway begins to seem cost effective in comparison. The designers format the shows

with beautiful photo opportunities for their elite, celebrity audience members to post on their Instagram. Not only could this quickly bring back higher returns in social currency than spent on the event, it does so in a more covert, authentic way than simply paying someone to advertise.

This is closely related to controlling context. By curating the audiences, the designer is influencing the people whose names and social media handles the general public will see attached to these captures of the show. For the live audience, the context is the location, music and other guests. For the general public, the context is all of these things *and* the medium through which they are watching them. Due to the nature of the fashion show being an event, the designer has control over who is able to attach themselves to the identity of the brand in this way.

Chapter 4: Alternative Marketing Strategies

In the last two chapters, I argued for the benefits that runway shows provide based on the nature of clothing as highly communicative and the positioning of the couture brand as selling identity. However, the runway is not the only way these brands market to their audiences. Here I will present two alternatives and my reasoning for why they cannot replace the fashion show.

Hype Marketing

Hype culture is when products are desirable to one person only because they perceive them as desirable to others. The concept of hype marketing, a method of creating hype culture, provides a framework for successful fashion marketing outside of the runway show. Creators build hype around their project through high-density social media campaigns, as well as establish scarcity by releasing a limited number of an item. These tactics increase the demand for the product and, therefore, the price. Hype culture is highly linked to streetwear and sneaker brands such as Supreme and Yeezy as they are successful with this form of marketing [CITATION Fow18 \l 1033].

Yeezy is a brand of sneaker that has led the industry with this style of marketing [CITATION Fow18 \l 1033]. While the use of hype and scarcity are a powerful tool, the brand still releases regular fashion shows. This sneaker, associated with the broader Yeezy clothing brand, is a collaboration with Adidas. Adidas is another popular sneaker/clothing brand and they also release regular fashion shows. Supreme is the brand largely credited with pioneering this style of sales, as argued in “The ‘SUPREME’ theory of hype branding” [CITATION Kul19 \l 1033]. While this brand

does not put out their own runway shows, they have collaborated with Louis Vuitton, showing their accessories in tandem with designers outfits[CITATION Lou17 \l 1033].

Social Media Marketing

Another marketing option is the use of social media. Brands can post their own content or ask/pay others to post content for them. One study found that the content generated by users had a positive effect on the brand reputation *and* equity while the firm-created content only impacted brand reputation[CITATION Sch06 \l 1033]. Therefore, if a brand wants to utilize this avenue of marketing, they would likely enter the realm of influencer marketing. This term refers to the collaboration of a brand with a social media influencer to promote their products. The most common method is a brand paying an influencer to post content that tags their account or promotes their product. Influencer marketing is "on pace to become an $8 billion industry by 2020" [CITATION Car19 \l 1033]. A common rule of thumb for pricing is the once cent per follower rule [CITATION Car19 \l 1033][CITATION Joh20 \l 1033]. By this rule, an Instagram account with 10,000 followers could charge $100 per post. This can begin to add up, considering the prices for posts for some of the top accounts. For a single post on Instagram, Kylie Jenner is able to charge $1.2 million, Ariana Grande $966,000, and Cristiano Ronaldo $975,000. [CITATION How19 \l 1033].

When viewed in this way, elite runway attendees posting to Instagram can offset the show's cost. I will use the Jacquemas 2021 summer show as a case study cost-benefit analysis [CITATION Jac201 \l 1033].

Jacquemas Summer 2021

I had never heard of Jacquemas prior to seeing the coverage of this event. How did I know the runway occurred? An actress who I follow on Instagram had attended and posted beautiful images. This is a great example of the fashion show using the modern social influence economy to its advantage.

Held a few hours outside of Paris, France, the runway was created by cutting a path through a wheat field. 100 VIP guests were given seats along the path, all socially distanced to protect from COVID-19. By reading through the news coverage of the event and watching the video, I have been able to build a list of 8 celebrities with Instagram accounts who posted from the event. Two were models themselves, and the other six were guests. Using the one cent per follower rule, it is possible to determine the exact monetary value of these postings by multiplying the account's followers by .01. This number can then be multiplied by the number of times the account posted.

With these eight people alone, the brand brought in the equivalent of $193,224 worth of social media marketing. While the brand did not release their production costs for the show, this is a substantial return. This was only the social media value brought in by six audience members and two models. Considering there was a crowd of 100 people and 55 models, the actual amount returned was likely much greater.

Returning to the idea of benefiting from in-person events, Jacquemas was quoted as saying, in response to this show, "For me, the runway can't be a video. It's at the heart of what we do; it's not superficial. It's important to all of us to continue, just like a restaurant that reopens" [CITATION Isa20 \l 1033][CITATION Jac201 \l

1033]. Influencer marketing is a tool, but it is not enough on its own. When budget is spent on a runway instead, the clothing brand benefits from all of the communicative benefits mentioned previously, and they see posts rippling through social media for free.

Chapter 5: Communication Gone Wrong

In order for clothing to be a more refined means of communication, the audience must understand the same meanings associated with items that the designer does. Returning to the Valentino Spring Summer 2019 show (as shown in Figure 4) we see this process at work. There was a specific photograph that the designer drew inspiration from. Many journalists made this connection because they work in the fashion world and would be familiar with such a specific reference. However, audience members who do not understand this history as well, will not draw as much meaning from the reference. In essence, the language only holds as much meaning as people put in the work of understanding.

The language of fashion can go wrong as can the English language. If a scientist spends his career studying something specific, he will tell the story as though everyone has the information he does. When communicating with someone outside of their field, they will be unintelligible. The two people are speaking the same language but are familiar with different vocabulary. Similarly, a designer may have certain meanings associated with articles of clothing that the fashion industry itself has produced. The average audience member will not be able to decipher these meanings which renders the identity setting aspect of the show less effective.

Because there are more people involved in the fashion industry than understand the language of clothing at the level of a designer, the meaning must be interpreted by relying on other people's reactions. Audience members, celebrities, and photographers can use cues from other people to understand what a certain way of dressing means if they do not immediately understand it themselves.

Recently, a group of YouTubers published a video meant to satirize London Fashion Week[CITATION The19 \l 1033]. They dressed their friend in what they deemed to be a ridiculous outfit and attempted to convince those in attendance that this friend was a famous model. They sent him into the crowd and followed him with cameras screaming his name. Soon the other photographers joined in. By the second day, he was invited to sit front row at a show and was mingling with some of the top members of the fashion community.

This satire is vital to consider when studying the role of the fashion show. First, it shows that the language of clothing can grow to a point of intricacy where the audience no longer draws any meaning. Second, it shows that many people in attendance are focused more on celebrity and networking than on understanding a brand's communicated identity. If this communication were more important than the attention cues perceived from others, then these boys, uneducated in the language of dress, would not have been able to communicate so successfully. The industry has reached a point where the clothing can be, at times, inconsequential.

Is anyone supposed to "speak" the language of clothing other than the designers? Or, are the audience members supposed to walk away with a feeling, but without understanding exactly how that feeling was transmitted?

The latter has held truer in the shows I watched in completing this thesis, which is an important basis for a valid criticism of the industry. As mentioned in the introduction, many journalists questioned the legitimacy of all fashion shows due to their high costs. What this section seeks to clarify is that arguing in favor of the industry

is not validating the merit of every single fashion show. Fashion shows successfully communicate their vision when they deeply understand their audience.

For example, Medieval Europeans “developed sumptuary laws that allowed only the nobility to wear costly colors such as purple that was extracted from Mediterranean seashells” [CITATION Kod19 \l 1033]. If a designer were to rely on this meaning to communicate royalty through the color purple, their audiences would either have to be aware of this fact consciously, by knowing the history, or subconsciously, by having seen purple in movies or books worn by nobility. When this meaning is not found by an audience member, they turn to the reactions of others to decipher how to respond.

While this miscommunication can discount the ability of the show to build the brand’s identity, it shows the importance of the runway as live theatre and as networking. When the portion of the audience that is relying on other audience members’ reactions for understanding outweighs the portion of audience members who are understanding directly from the clothing, all it would take is one audience member to react favorably or unfavorably for the entire audience to follow in suit. This is exactly what happened in the case of the video satirizing the industry [CITATION The19 \l 1033].

Discussion/Conclusion

The main takeaway of this research is that, while there are alternative marketing strategies for clothing brands in 2020, the runway is still useful for all fashion brands and vital for the couture brand.

I presented the fashion show as a means of selling identity. The research surrounding hype-based and social media marketing show the runway is not the only option for clothing brand identity development. In the first, hype is developed by selling at a price less than couture and limiting stock in order to create a demand that increases the value of the company itself. Soham (2019) explained, in the context of the brand Supreme, “Instead of charging a premium price for their highly desirable products, they kept them relatively cheap and affordable.” One key here is “desirable.” While announcing product releases and using social media platforms such as Instagram can help achieve this goal, the runway is still a useful tool. Supreme, Adidas, and Yeezy, all brands who utilize some form of hype-based marketing, have either held their own runway shows or collaborated to show their products during existing shows.

Another key piece of Soham’s analysis is that this form of marketing forgoes, “charging a premium price.” The couture industry cannot utilize the same strategy without ceasing to be a couture brand. The Merriam-Webster definition of couture is, “the business of designing, making, and selling fashionable custom-made clothing.” Custom clothing is expensive, therefore merits a different kind of marketing than that of a brand that can lower their cost to increase their company value.

The other alternative method to communicate brand identity is social media marketing. In particular, influencer marketing has proven to be an effective yet costly

tool. As mentioned earlier, a celebrity post on Instagram can cost up to $1,000,000. Due to the elite nature of the guests for fashion shows, these events often produce their own celebrity or influencer posts for free. As shown through the Jacquemas example, through only eight guests and following the 1 cent per follower pricing rule, the designer brought in $193,224 worth of social media currency. If this money had been paid to the influencers directly, not only would the post have been marked as an ad, but the designer would have lost the other benefits of the fashion show listed in this thesis.

Neither of these alternatives, for the reasons mentioned previously, are as useful as the fashion show in establishing brand identity. The runway's ability to control context, provide the intangible benefits of live theatre, and allow for building a network make it a powerful tool in constructing the elite identity of the couture brand. They are also aided by coverage of the event. In the late 1900's and early 2000's the fashion show acted as a media spectacle. Designers invited the press to report on the elite members of the crowd and the details of the garments and show [CITATION Bla18 \l 1033][CITATION Zak20 \l 1033]. In the 2000s, social media transformed the industry. Sardone describes Instagram as "one of the biggest game changers in the industry," by creating, "a constant connection between brands and customers" [CITATION Sar19 \n \l 1033]. While traditional news sources like the BBC, Vouge, and New York Times still have written coverage of these events, they are also shown through attendee's posting on social media. While some of the articles mentioned in the introduction worried that these advances would render the fashion show obsolete, my findings surrounding influencer marketing prove that Instagram only magnifies the message produced at the show, possibly replacing the traditional news coverage.

This thesis found the fashion show is still relevant in the 2020 communications landscape for any clothing brand but is vital for the couture brand. It is important for clothing companies to recognize this as well as the frameworks for understanding fashion shows listed in this document. If designers do not deeply understand the communicative aspects of a runway show, they may not get their full return on investment. The show must evolve with what is popular to share on social media so as to continue producing free influencer marketing. The show must use the language of dress, as understood by its audience, and the context of the models and location effectively. They must encode their message so the audience can successfully decode it, whether this process is conscious or subconscious. A brand that cannot achieve this would be better off incurring the cost of influencer marketing directly and/or attempting a different branding strategy all together (such as hype-based marketing).

These findings are also valuable for fashion editorials. While the journalists reporting on these shows do a good job of relaying facts, they shy away from much criticism. It became clear to me that this was a symptom of fashion shows being accepted as a permanent cornerstone of the industry. If you perceive something as inherent, you will not question it. Exploring the transient nature of these shows through their history and examining exactly how and when they are successful will open the door for more interesting reporting. Currently, Vogue editorialists will report on runway shows by explaining who designed the line, where it took place, when it was shown, what the inspiration was, and how the clothing looked. Journalism that looks into economic estimates for the conversion of the event into high-profile social media posts

would add interesting dimension to this coverage. Criticizing how well the brand established their identity and what exactly that identity is add further dimensions.

The research is relevant to the fashion industry, the fashion editorial industry, and the broader economy. This finding will help companies avoid the mistake of investing too heavily into social media and influencer marketing without considering other options which could save money and perform more effectively. It is also important for any company to understand the irreplaceable aspects of in-person events as the world becomes more digitized. It is believed that the communications industry is facing a "Renaissance in real-world engagement" [CITATION Bro19 \l 1033]. In addition, the kind of identity sale we see in couture fashion is also a regular tool in other markets. Analyzing how the fashion show has been operating in this realm and how they have successfully established identities can provide an example for many other industries.

I urge researchers to continue to study these shows in order to learn more about real-world engagement vs. social media engagement as well as ripple-effects from events through social media. As I have nudged at the economics in play between social media marketing and real-world events which are covered through social media, the fashion show industry should be analyzed by economics researchers. Scholars specializing in gender studies, ethnic studies, and art should further develop many of the ideas I have presented. Considering that clothing stands to communicate identity to the self and others, it is important to consider how marginalized identity is treated within this system. Researchers in these fields can shed light on this aspect of the fashion show as an identity sale.

This research shows that complex PR events, such as the runway show, cannot be simply considered in terms of direct translation to sales. In the social media era, social currency is a large benefit that can offset some cost of these events. A couture brand's existence relies on having some input on their brand identity and, therefore, any sales made are inextricably linked to producing fashion shows. There has yet to be a digital replica of a runway show that has performed better than the in-person event. Social media marketing can mimic some of the networking and identity benefits of the shows, however they are costly to achieve the same impact and they forego the added benefits of controlling context and live theatre.

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