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Under the influence – For the past decade, fashion has tried and generally failed to grapple with the challenges of the digital revolution and the legacy of the 2008 crash. The conflation of these has caused huge and irreversible changes – especially in the way fashion markets itself – and has left brands grasping for new certainties. In the process, fashion has scrambled for magic bullets, sheltering in the gossipy echo-chamber of the industry bubble, fixated more on the endless carousel of creative directors than the cold hard fundamentals. Today the fashion press resembles business-to-business publications written for and by insiders as the real audience of paying customers looks elsewhere.

Luxury business experienced its last great growth spurt with the opening up of the BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India and China. These markets still hold major significance for most luxury brands, but the initial boom has plateaued into incremental growth and consolidation. This boom enabled many brands to ignore both the impact of the crash and the digital revolution. Many CEOs focused their energies on rolling out retail expansion in second- and third-tier cities within BRIC countries rather than tackle the challenges of digital, which was kicked like a can down the road and now requires urgent attention. The emergence of market specific digital platforms in Russia and China, for example, means that retaining a market share and gaining a competitive edge has never been more tied to digital. (Just try and buy something in Mainland China without WeChat wallet!) Ten years later and the departing tide has revealed just how exposed many brands are. In the face of shrinking or static sales, brands have either intensified the cycle of shows and collections or begun to roll back retail. One of the exceptions that proves the rule is undoubtedly the explosive creativity of Alessandro Michele at Gucci.

Back at the start of the new millennium, there was a lot of fuss about bloggers taking seats on the front row at shows. It's now almost comical to think of the level of anxiety they created in the traditional fashion press. Since then the media has been transformed. Instagram has superseded its rival platform's functionalities, functioning as a magazine, television, shop and village square all at once. On the one hand, social media offers an abundance of metrics: impressions, likes, shares and the ability to retain viral distribution; on the other, those metrics are hampered by an aggressive algorithm – inherited from Facebook – that typically gives users under 5% organic reach. If you are a brand or publisher who has already invested heavily to create content to grow your following, you now have to pay the platform to reach them; the bigger your following the more you pay. Crucially, social media's actual ability to generate sales remains undelivered, while the likes of Instagram do very well out of promoted posts. No wonder so many publishers and brands feel short-changed.

The anxiety among brands about the role and meaning of “influence” is one outcome of this fast-paced change. Once, the conventional wisdom was that being a retailer was all about real estate, the bottom line and sale seasons. Then the digital revolution happened and it supposedly became about branding, storytelling, content and “experience”. But the truth is that good retail has always included those supposedly digital concepts, they just had different names. When e-commerce was in its infancy there was the delusion that the typically hard and expensive costs of doing business off-line all vanished when it came to selling online. Experience has proved otherwise as the cost of customer acquisition has grown.

The boutique on Rodeo Drive or Avenue George V was how a brand paid to reach a particular customer and project a particular image. Now, that rent, or the cost of doing business, is paid to Google and Facebook instead. This might explain why traditional brick and mortar brands rush to digital and some digital native brands head in the opposite direction. But luxury brands can leave a city or a location if their landlord becomes too greedy or if the neighbourhood changes. Can they realistically do without the services of Google or Facebook? These digital compradors have become untouchable.

THE THIRD AGE OF FASHION IS KNOCKING AT THE DOOR

At the same time, a preoccupation with retail neglects the far deeper cultural currents at work. Fashion remains one of the top three polluters at a planetary scale. In May 2018, H&M admitted it had over £3 billion worth of unsold clothes. In July, Burberry admitted to destroying £23 million worth of unsold stock. High-end or fast fashion, the public response to these stories indicates a wholesale change in consciousness on the part of consumers, while the industry itself remains caught up in its bubble where “hype” is the latest big idea. To witness the total transformation of public discourse around single-use plastic is to know that any industry hoping to pivot to, for example, trainers and sportswear, or indeed, more collections, more “drops” and more product, has its work cut out.

The desirability of fashion is conditional on the believability of the story that brands tell you, aside from the feelings the creative director inspires. The past few years have seen the explosion of self-described sustainable fashion, mostly at a tiny scale and a premium price. This is a development driven almost entirely by consumer demand, but ignored by significant players, and it has remained marginal and commercially insignificant. Big fashion's proper embrace of the issue is the only way to begin to change an industry that is fundamentally wasteful, defined by luxury and waste. Just as the organic and slow food movements transformed the way we think about food, so luxury fashion needs to learn to define itself in terms of the wider good it does, rather than its margins. There is plenty of room in this space for innovation and fresh thinking. Companies like Worn Again, which, with its pioneering technology that transforms second-hand clothes into cotton pulp and polyester flakes, is redefining the recycling of fashion's “waste”. Crucially, this is no charity venture. Worn Again is approaching sustainability as a business opportunity, and pricing its end product competitively and aggressively.

As Worn Again shows, positive change in the fashion industry can only come from a genuine engagement with new technologies. There is a huge opportunity for bespoke, made-to-order, personalised clothes. Customer demand has never been greater and it could easily give us just-in-time clothing manufacturing with the potential of zero waste. This could transform and revive couture for a wider audience, while reducing the mountains of unsold clothes currently left around the world every year.

Fashion historians tend to see history in two ages: the pre-industrial era of haute couture and made to order, and the industrial factory production of prêt-à-porter, which eventually led to the globalisation of sourcing and manufacturing. Perhaps a third age is knocking at the door, one that could in many ways resemble the first, in re-embracing the direct relationship with the consumer through digital technology and modern logistics. I fundamentally believe that there is no industry more creative than fashion, and that its future lies in trusting that creative power. Creativity must come from the boardrooms as well as the design studios. Fashion can't continue trying to make consumers buy more and more. Today we need creative genius that champions technologically driven, ethically sourced and sustainably minded, community-oriented design. We need new solutions based on real innovative technology and fresh thinking from CEOs that has the capacity to make positive change in the sector. Faced by so much uncertainty, the choice is blunt: adapt or die. **Caroline Issa**