DIGITISED FASHION SHOWS AND FASHION WEEKS IN THE COVID-19 AND POST COVID-19 ERA: the changing formats and meanings of mediating fashion

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic that has spread across the world since 2019 has brought fundamental changes to the forms of fashion communication. These influences on fashion shows and fashion weeks in particular, as core fashion promotional vehicles, are highly noticeable. All fashion shows and weeks since the first established online fashion week, the Autumn/Winter 2020 season of Shanghai Fashion Week, have been promoted and broadcast online and all international fashion weeks (the 'Big Four' in particular) have been open to public audiences digitally via diversified forms such as films, livestreaming shows and events, and industry talks, rather than being exclusive to industry professionals.

The subject of the changing formats of fashion weeks has been widely discussed within the industry, drawing on the topics of the feasibility of fashion weeks in terms of sustainability, and the combination of womenswear and menswear, as well as the functions and meanings of fashion weeks for different types of brands. However, few academic studies have treated fashion weeks as an independent topic as there has been little fundamental or revolutionary change occurring in this field, especially in terms of formats and meanings. Contexts are now changing due to the global pandemic, which has triggered the further democratisation of fashion communication as fashion weeks are now all online and available to the public.

Under these circumstances, this paper will articulate, revisit and compare the different forms of online fashion weeks, as well as the corresponding fashion shows, from the start of Autumn/Winter 2020 Shanghai Fashion Week to the following fashion weeks in London, Paris and Milan in the Spring/Summer 2021 and Autumn/Winter 2021 season, the 2020 and 2021 Paris couture week. By revisiting and analysing the changing vehicles and multi-disciplinary formats of online fashion weeks and the corresponding shows, this paper will identify the new functions and meanings of fashion shows and fashion weeks during and after the pandemic, further elaborating on the new democratisation and cosmopolitanising of fashion communication in this era.

Visual netnography will be the main methodological approach of this research as most of the data used for this paper will be online and visual data. As mentioned above, the first online fashion week, which was Autumn/Winter 2020 Shanghai Fashion Week, and the following fashion weeks for Spring/Summer 2021 in London, Paris and Milan, as well as the 2020 Paris couture week, will be the main sources of data for this paper. All the events in these fashion weeks, particularly fashion shows, will be the focus.

The conclusion of this paper will articulate the changing formats, functions and characteristics of fashion shows and weeks during and after the pandemic, pointing out the changing system of international fashion shows and weeks. With comprehensive digitisation and deeper engagement with the public, fashion shows and weeks are further remediating the regimes and discourse of fashion, demonstrating cosmopolitanism within the global fashion industry.

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic that has spread across the world since 2019 has brought fundamental changes to the forms of fashion communication. These influences on fashion shows and fashion weeks in particular, as core fashion promotional vehicles, are highly noticeable. All fashion shows and weeks since the first established online fashion week, the Autumn/Winter 2020 season of Shanghai Fashion Week (hereafter referred to as 'A/W 2020 SHFW'), have been promoted and broadcast online and all international fashion weeks (the 'Big Four' in particular) have been open to public audiences digitally via diversified forms such as films, livestreaming shows and events, and industry talks, rather than being exclusive to industry professionals.

The subject of the changing formats of fashion weeks has been widely discussed within the industry, drawing on the topics of the feasibility of fashion weeks in terms of sustainability, and the combination of womenswear and menswear, as well as the functions and meanings of fashion weeks for different types of brands. However, few academic studies have treated fashion weeks as an independent topic as there has been little fundamental or revolutionary change occurring in this field, especially in terms of formats and meanings. Contexts are now changing due to the global pandemic, which has triggered the further democratisation of fashion communication as fashion weeks are now all online and available to the public.

Technology's role in showing fashion has long been explored and showcased by industry practitioners and documented and discussed by scholars (Duggan, 2001; Skov, L. et al., 2009; Evans, 2010, 2011; Sykes, 2015; Poletti, P. and McDowell, 2016; Stark, 2018). Triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the emergence and rise of digital and online fashion weeks, the new practices of digital fashion have now been further developed, exemplified by A/W 2020 SHFW with its online interactive showcasing system incorporating shows and films with 'see now buy now' functions, as well as the following seasons in 2020 and 2021, seen through the rise of CG (shorten for computer graphic)-produced shows and films proliferated by Chinese designers. Other European fashion weeks, such as the London and Paris fashion weeks, have also been exploring new practices since the A/W 2020 season, transferring their orthodox showing systems to a more digitised and interactive format. For instance, London Fashion Week has seen androgynous showcasing, more live and socially engaged events with AR techniques being applied, and custom virtual showrooms, as well as 3D virtual maps with VR technology since the A/W 2021 season (Lalonde, 2021).

Under these circumstances, this paper will articulate, revisit and compare the different forms of online fashion weeks, the corresponding fashion shows in particular, from the start of Autumn/Winter 2020 Shanghai Fashion Week to the following fashion weeks in London, Paris and Milan in the Spring/Summer 2021 and Autumn/Winter 2021 season, and the season of Spring/Summer 2022. What new disciplines have been explored and created in showcasing fashion digitally during the pandemic and how these new practices have revolutionised the orthodox perceptions of showcasing fashion are the main questions discussed in this paper. Furthermore, accompanied by the recent rise of the 'Metaverse' as an industry context earlier in 2021, the number of digitised fashion shows has risen rapidly, especially at SHFW and LFW

in the past two seasons. This paper also introduces how the concept of the Metaverse is influencing the format of showcasing fashion with further engagement with technologies.

Context and Literature Review (incomplete with future development specification)

As mentioned above, how the industry's engagement with digitisation is changing the formats of showing fashion, as well as the system of fashion weeks, is the key focus of this research, particularly the new practices. To research this topic, it is necessary to briefly review the prior research on digital fashion, as well as the formats and functions of shows and fashion weeks, especially those presented at the 'Big Four' fashion weeks.

With the expanding scale of international fashion weeks in terms of culture and commerce, the organisational structures of such fashion weeks are increasingly complex. The legitimate 'Big Four' fashion weeks have gained global recognition as the central focus of the fashion industry. They are highly influential in 'rendering and reproducing' the structure of the fashion field (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006, p.741). In the meantime, they have acquired mature operating systems and developed cultural characteristics embedded with each fashion city due to their hierarchical status and considerable cultural heritage in fashion. However, this hierarchical status has shifted with the emergence of fully digitised online fashion weeks triggered by the pandemic. As international fashion weeks have been the most renowned core platform for brands and designers to publish their new season's collections, the changing system and format of showcases will inevitably have a profound influence on the future of the industry's operating system as a whole. Being the core stage for emerging high-end or premium designer brands to build their brand identities and global images to boost their international sales, fashion weeks have also become one of the most crucial tools in driving the host city in becoming a globally recognised fashion city (Scott, 2001).

For designers' explorations in terms of digitising the formats of showing fashion, prior studies emphasise that from Issey Miyake to Iris van Herpen, as well as to Hussein Chalayan, as mentioned and studied by Duggan (2001), a number of 'science designers' have advocated for and invented new-tech fabrics and clothing construction techniques, as well as new techniques in showing fashion. These designers view technology as 'a break from the confines oftraditional art-making, and both recognize the physical process as the actual work' (Rush, 1999:48). Apart from fashion shows, both the academic field and the Western industry have long discussed the future of fashion weeks and the possibilities of completely digitising a fashion week or a fashion show (Jones, 2019; Ding et al., 2020), yet these virtual discussions have notbecome reality until SHFW 2020. Furthermore, completely digitising a fashion week and creating an interactive digital system for it with a series of theatrical fashion performances in which audiences can be immersed through a social platform in the cyberspace via smartphoneshas never appeared throughout the whole of fashion history from the modern to the contemporary period since the A/W 2020 SHFW. As a microcosm of the fashion industry (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006), a fashion week can represent the most up-to-date situation of its domestic fashion system, from manufacturing and design capabilities to international hierarchical positions, on both the commercial and cultural levels. Whether this

groundbreaking change brought about by the pandemic can expedite the democratisation of the whole industry is unfolded and discussed in the following core analysis sections, with emphasis on the new practices being created in digital fashion weeks.

For digital fashion research in general, the most recent studies have investigated post- digital artisans (Openshaw, 2015) and the revolutionisation that AI technology has brought to the fashion industry, from design and production to consumption (Perry et al., 2013; Luce, 2018; Arribas, V. and Alfaro, 2018). Technology connecting art and science, as well as helping to revolutionise the way that people engage with the fashion industry, are topics that have been discussed in the field of fashion in these studies. However, few have shed light on the changing format of the digital reproduction of fashion and the rendering of the structure of the industry through fashion weeks. Adding this to the fact that the current era involves image productions (such as shows and fashion weeks) being revolutionised by new technologies and the rise of the Metaverse, the importance of discussing the future in terms of how fashion is shown and mediated becomes clear. This paper explores this topic with a series of follow-up studies introduced on mediating fashion in the post-pandemic era within the context of the digitisation of fashion images.

To be continued...

Future development specification:

In this literature review, prior research on democratisation of fashion will be further explored, especially on discourse regarding the interconnections between the democracy of fashion and the interplay of technology and aesthetics. This serves as the theoretical foundations of the core analysis following the new disciplines of showcasing fashion brought by the online fashion weeks, especially in terms of how it has changed the format of mediating fashion through further democratisation. In this way, from a theoretical perspective, this paper will deepen the underdeveloped structures on the topic of mediating and democratising fashion.

Methodology (incomplete with future development specification)

Visual netnography (Rose, 2016; Belk and Kozinetz, 2017; Kozinets, 2019; Ong et al., 2021) is the key method applied throughout this research, which is feasible due to the nature of this online cultural ethnographic research. Most of the data collected for this research is online visual data, including photographs and videos collected as part of primary research or from secondary resources, such as the official websites of the London, Paris and Milan fashion weeks. As mentioned above, the first online fashion week, which was the Autumn/Winter 2020 Shanghai Fashion Week, and the following fashion weeks for Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2021, as well as the Spring/Summer 2022 season in London, Paris and Milan, are the main sources of data collected for this paper.

Visualised events, such as fashion shows, films and online immersive showrooms, are the main resources of data collected for this paper. As this research is being undertaken to investigate

the changing practices for showcasing fashion that incorporate the digital design genre and technologies in order to discuss the new interpretations of mediating fashion, the shows, films and events are selected for this research based on one criterion, which is that the format or methods of showcasing fashion, either commercially or aesthetically, need to be a new practice that has never existed or rarely been seen in the previous orthodox fashion weeks. For instance, live-streaming is not a key focus as a part of the digitisation of fashion weeks in this paper as it has existed for over 20 years since SHOWstudio introduced it in 2000 (Bartlett et al., 2013; Diaz Soloaga and Garcia Guerrero, 2016), although it is still a core method of digitising fashion weeks. Within these boundaries, the data collected could be separated into the following two categories.

Firstly, for the shows and films, they need to incorporate the digitised genre in terms of design and production, such as the application of CGI techniques or 3D designs, image capturing, body scanning, and VR, AI or AR technologies, not just a videographed traditional fashion show or events being displayed online. Secondly, the events selected for this research are mainly online immersive show spaces for brands and showrooms that have completelydigitised the conventional commercial system of fashion weeks, which are traditionally seen inphysical spaces.

More explicitly, a breakdown of the visual data collected through primary or secondary research is given in the following table (to be developed in the season of A/W 2022):

Fashion Week and Season	Shows and Events	Visual Data Collected or being Collected
A/W 2020 to S/S 2022	*The Parallel Universe*	Image Clips, Videos
SHFW	Shows of Designer Brands: Angel Chen, Xuzhi Chen, Roderic Wong, Fengyi Tan, Window Sen and Jiapei Li	Photography, Image clips, Video Recording, Shows Videos
A/W 2020 to S/S 2022 LFW	DiscoveryLAB	Image Clips, Videos
	Designers and Brands: Victor Wong, INGRID KRAFTCHENKO REPLIKANT, Ravensbourne's class of 2021, Tiger of Sweden, JENS LAUGESEN X GENERICSENS 2.0	Photography, Image clips, Video Recording, Shows Videos
A/W 2020 to S/S 2022 PFW	Official Online Website and Showcasing System	Image Clips

	The Simpsons Balenciaga	Film, Image Clips
	To be developed in the season of A/W 2022	

Future development specification:

The next season of A/W 2022 LFW, Paris, and SHFW will also be tracked as the netnographic data collected for this paper. The analysis method and data decoding processes will also be specified in this section.

The following analysis is unfolded in response to the core questions discussed in this article in two sub-themes. Firstly, to what extent is new technology being applied to show formats and what new practices have been created through these new formats? Secondly, how do these new forms of practices further democratise or remediate the orthodox regime of international fashion weeks' systems and what does this mean for future practices of communicating fashion businesses and images?

Core Analysis (incomplete with future development specification)

In response to the above-mentioned sub-questions, the core analysis will be unfolded into two sections. Firstly, virtual online showcasing systems will mainly analyse the online showcase and commercial system of the digitised fashion weeks regarding the new format of commercial fashion communication via a newly constructed showcase system. The emergence of newly created digital showroom systems was triggered by the pandemic and set up the new opportunities of the interplay between technologies and showcase regions seeing with the dissolving the geographic boundaries. Furthermore, the non-exclusivity of these spaces and activities as compared to the conventional physical showrooms in the prior insider-only fashion weeks and the developed democracy of fashion will be discussed under this context. The above- mentioned analyses will be exemplified with paradigm studies of the London Fashion Week's 'Discover Designer' system known as the DiscoveryLAB, as well as the Shanghai Fashion Week's 'The Parallel Universe', both being an immersive showcasing environment for audiences. Paris Fashion Week's online showcasing system will also be explored in this section.

The second section will be used mainly to introduce and discuss the CG shows and live-streamed performances as new disciplines emerge in digital fashion weeks. The brands' and designers' rising enthusiasm for these new disciplines will be exemplified with selected fashion shows, films, and live performances presented in the London and Shanghai fashion weeks. With increasing numbers of emerging designer labels, the industry is currently experiencing a turning point whereby fashion shows are further incorporating CG and 3D animations, as well as a new rising format of live performance embedded with a 'see now buy now' commercial

system. The increasing extent of multidisciplinary fashion showcasing will be fully introduced and the future of fashion shows and films will be discussed.

- Virtual Online Showcasing System

In A/W 2020 SHFW, the virtual online showcasing system was recognised as 'The Parallel Universe', created as an immersive phone-accessed digital series, embracing theatrical performances on a virtual platform. This was an entirely new way of showing fashion triggered by the unexpected worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 that involved theatrical performances and exhibiting systems completely produced digitally and open to the public audience through an interactive visual system. The whole system was gravity-detected while the audience watched using their phones in a virtual space (see Figure 4). When entering the series through the WeChat platform on a smartphone, it was divided into three spaces referring to three designers, namely, Xuzhi Chen's α space (see Figure 5), Roderic Wong's β space (see Figure 5) and Jiapei Li's γ space (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. The atrium for The Parallel Universe functioned as the shows' entry gateway as well as the online shop (images taken using Wang's iPhone from The Parallel Universe online system, and re-edited by Wang, 2020)

Figure 15. From left to right: the entry gateway to Xuzhi Chen's α space, Roderic Wong's β space, and Jiapei Li's γ space (images taken using Zhe Wang's iPhone from The Parallel Universe online system, and re-edited by Zhe Wang, 2020)

Future development specification:

Following the virtual online showcasing system created in A/W 2020 SHFW, LFW's virtual showcasing system of S/S 2021 will be reviewed and discussed. Some of the selected images in this section are as follows (see Figure 1-3):

Figure 1-3. The London Fashion Week DiscoveryLAB (images from London Fashion Week)

This newly constructed online showcasing system has now substituted the prior conventional physical showroom system, aiming to construct a digital universe of fashion weeks. The future analysis in this section will be unfolded together with the discussion of the 'metaverse' as a general context and the future possibilities of its incorporation with fashion week's online showroom system. A critical analysis of the metaverse will be emphasised in this section and how the concept of most cutting-edge industry phenomena could be addressed or interconnected with this virtual showcase system will be discussed.

- CG Shows and Live-streamed Performance

The shows digitised and displayed through Labelhood for SHFW's A/W 2020 season that are discussed in this paper are the digital fashion performances by Angel Chen and Fengyi Tan. Xuzhi Chen mentioned in the above section, and Roderic Wong, who have presented their show with performance genre, was produced by the same creative studio named Hexagon Collective and delivered a digitised systematic fashion performance that could be viewed on mobile devices. This systematic performance, named 'The Parallel Universe' (Figure 5), was produced by three designers, Xuzhi Chen, Roderic Wong, and Jiapei Li. As one of the main organisers of SHFW that is commercially run to collect artistic emerging designers and delver new aesthetics to SHFW, XCommons collaborated with ICY Designer Platform for the explicit digital production. The ICY Designer Platform is a newly established designer platform launched in 2019 that specialises in digital production and exploring fashion's affinities with new technologies in both sales and presentation methods to showcase this series of virtual fashion performances.

Figure 6. The film of the digital fashion show and performance system The Parallel Universe co-produced by XCommons and ICY Designer Platform. It incorporated three IBC designers, Xuzhi Chen, Roderic Wong, and Jiapei Li for A/W 2020 SHFW (images copyright to Angel Chen, and were taken and re-edited from the show using Zhe Wang's iPhone, 2020).

Angel Chen's CG animated show (see Figure 7) and Fengyi Tan's 'see now buy now' digital physical theatre performance (see Figure 8) were both operated by Labelhood through live broadcasts. The live-broadcasted video was recorded on Taobao's broadcasting platform and could be viewed at any time that the audience wanted. The works, co-staged by XCommons and ICY Designer Platform, Roderic Wong's digital fashion show and film (produced by HC studio directed by Zhao) for instance (see Figure 9), were performed using one digital show and one promotional film, respectively, as part of The Parallel Universe series which was performed virtually rather than through a live broadcast. The access to this series was limited to one week between the 15th of April and the 22nd of April 2020.

Figure 7. Angel Chen's CG-animated performance video for the online A/W 2020 SHFW, photo copyright to Angel Chen and re-edited by Zhe Wang.

Figure 8. Fengyi Tan's 'See Now Buy Now' digital physical theatre performance video, staged by Labelhood and broadcast on the Taobao live broadcast platform (image taken from the video and re-edited by Zhe Wang, 2020).

Figure 9. Roderic Wong's fashion film co-staged by XCommons and ICY Designer Platform, which was directed and produced by HC studio. It shows the consistent identity of the accumulated new aesthetic collective initiated by Zhao and Jin. The physical theatre applied and followed by other IBC designers in showing fashion (images taken from the show using Zhe Wang's iphone, 2020).

Future Development specification:

Furthermore, the fashion industry's reflection on the concept of the metaverse via image production will be explored in this section. This will be exemplified by the 3D animated fashion film with the concept of metaverse as a context. AI Robert as characters presented by WindowSen will also be used as a new paradigmatic showcase format displayed at S/S 2022 SHFW. The selected images as data are shown as follows (see Figure 10):
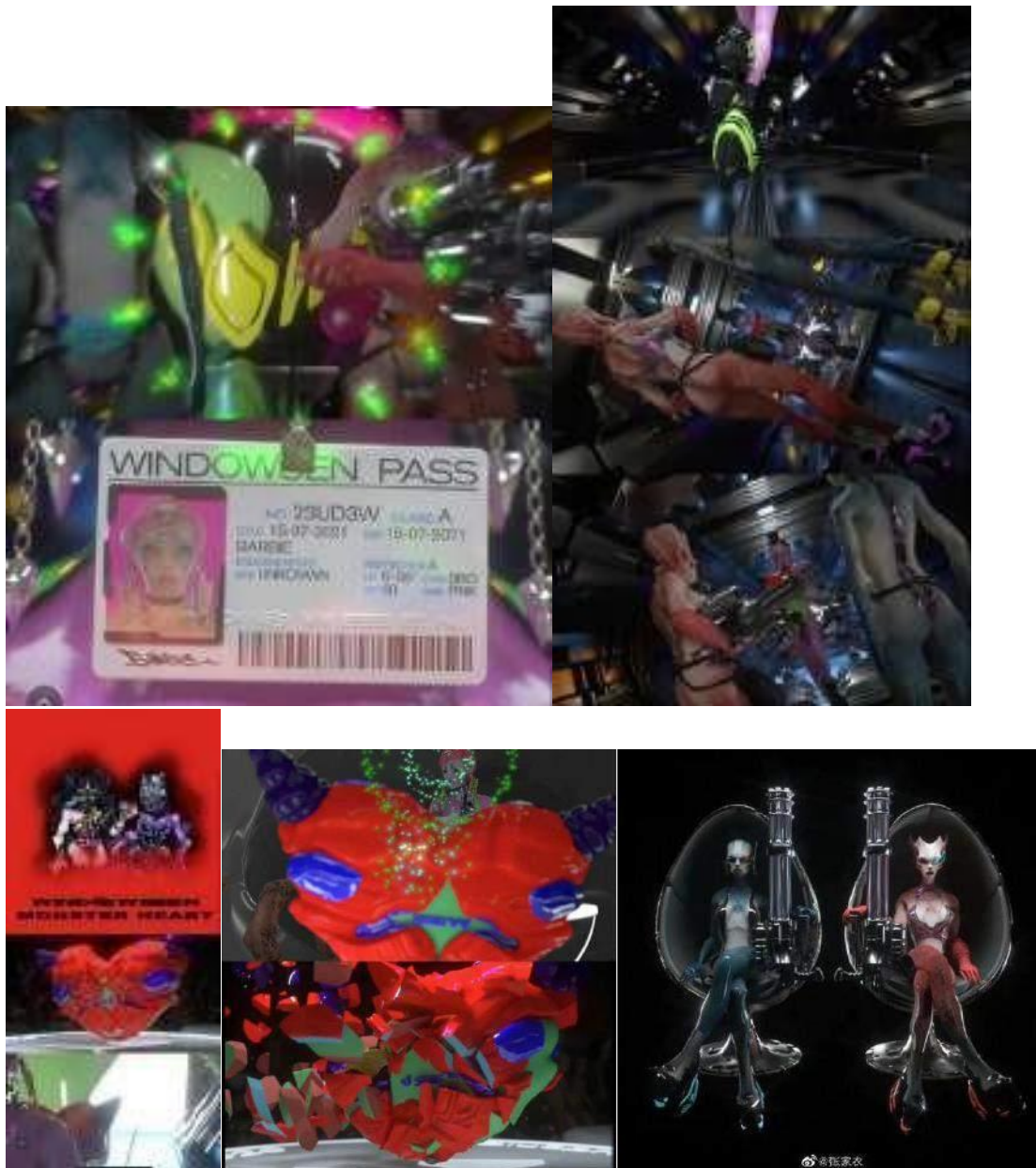
Figure 10: WindowSen CG and 3D animated fashion film 'Monster Heart' presented at S/S 2022 SHFW (images provided by WindowSen)

Furthermore, the CG shows presented at LFW and PFW will also be introduced and discussed, and Victor Wong's film with the theme of 'metaverse' presented at S/S LFW will be selected with the following images used as visual data (see figure 11):

Figure 11. Victor Wong's fashion film '*Timeling*' presented at S/S LFW within the online showcasing system.

Triggered by the pandemic, these newly-emerged formats of shows and films with the digitisation trend and rising new technologies of AI, VR, and AR as well as the metaverse as context have revolutionised the format of mediating fashion. Most of these shows and films could be accessed by mass audiences, which has to some extent fundamentally broken the orthodox regime and hierarchical status in the conventional fashion weeks. This will also be further analysed in this section.

Conclusion (To be developed when all core analysis are completed)

The conclusion of this paper will articulate the changing formats, functions and characteristics of fashion shows and weeks during and after the pandemic, pointing out the changing system of international fashion shows and weeks. With comprehensive digitisation and deeper engagement with the public, fashion shows and weeks are further remediating the regimes and discourse of fashion, demonstrating cosmopolitanism within the global fashion industry.

By revisiting and analysing the changing vehicles and multi-disciplinary formats of online fashion weeks and the corresponding shows, this paper will identify the new functions and meanings of fashion shows and fashion weeks during and after the pandemic, further elaborating on the new democratisation and cosmopolitanising of fashion communication in this era.

To be continued...

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