How the luxury and fashion industry is dealing with the explosion of digital content

By Dominique Muret  -  13 May 2022

The pandemic and digital transition have radically changed the way the fashion and luxury industry communicates and operates. With consumers constantly glued to their smartphones and players immersed in an increasingly digitalized industry, fashion houses have been pushed to multiply their digital content exponentially. This digital revolution is occurring at the very heart of the system and is forcing entrepreneurs to rethink their approach and business models, as explained by speakers at the e-P Summit, the fashion and technology forum organized by Pitti Immagine in Florence on May 4 and 5.

The rapid growth of online sales has led brands to shoot a whole series of photos for each product, not only for their online stores, but also for major online platforms that often require customized shots. The digitization of showrooms has prompted the creation of virtual catalogs, where the quality of the images must be impeccable. The latter must depict clothing and accessories with great accuracy, since they are targeted at buyers who until recently were seeing and touching the products up close, and are now placing their orders online.

Then, there is the production of content for social media; from the smallest of launches and seasonal campaigns, to capsule collections and more. These images are geared towards different media platforms and therefore, have different content. From packshot photos that show the product as is, to still-life photos that show the product in a specific situation, to photos of the garment being worn by a model; not to mention videos, any item that needs to be reflected in images requires at least five different elements. According to the industry, if you multiply this figure by the thousands of references in a collection and the number of collections each year, one quickly reaches almost 50,000 shots in one year, and that's just for e-commerce. This estimate refers to a medium-sized company.

“This has become a huge line item,” said Marco Milioli, marketing director at Hyphen Group, a company that provides digital services and solutions to luxury brands, including managing digital content production. “The commitment of brands on this front is significant. To meet this new demand, companies would need to manage this activity just as they do with their products. In addition to their regular production chain, they need to build a content production chain to deliver a digital version of their products. It’s a change of perspective and corporate culture,” he added.
It’s a matter of coordinating several different teams, which until now were used to working independently: studio, sales, marketing, merchandising, communications, advertising, and e-commerce.

"It used to be simple, there was only one content for all the products, which was the store. After that, it got complicated," summarized Antonio Farini, IT director, CEO of customer relationship management (CRM) and of the digital and e-commerce division at Max Mara Group.

"We usually delegate because it costs less, but we lose consistency and quality. A strong disparity between the image conveyed in stores and that conveyed online can destroy years of work. Another solution is insourcing. If each department takes care of the content, quality is maintained, but costs soar and consistency is not always guaranteed," he warned.

"In fact, the creative people in our fashion group develop new products every six months, which are then industrialized. We've always done this, but we didn't understand that the same process of creativity and subsequent industrialization applies to digital content," continued the manager, who initiated this transformation 10 years ago by largely centralizing the production of digital content, which was previously managed by different departments.

This streamlined the types of content and their production costs, while speeding up the process. “Today, if we don't deliver the image of the product at the right time, it becomes a critical problem. Its absence is immediately noticeable,” said Farini.

"We need a transversal approach, moving away from a model where each channel follows its own logic, to a global coordination that looks at the whole picture from the start. This requires being open to share insights, budgets and ideas, and also implies a significant change in management,” added Stefano Righetti, CEO of Hyphen, Max Mara's longtime partner.

"Every three months, a new story is written through digital content, with an impressive amount of data offering a return on investment for this content since we can measure its performance."

In addition to e-commerce, the internet and social media, another digital dimension is now being added, "the metaverse, which will undoubtedly increase problems," said Farini of the Max Mara Group, who, nevertheless sees new possible synergies.

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We are already developing virtual products. This could serve as the basis for new types of content in the metaverse, helping create a more coherent image."

However, before jumping headfirst into this novel universe, companies should think carefully about how they go about delivering relevant and innovative content while remaining true to their brand identity.

The footrace to the third dimension began with gaming and will only intensify with the metaverse.

"The world of gaming will surpass that of entertainment and movies combined. It has billions of participants. It's certainly a favored terrain for brands," said Tommaso Nervegna, head of metaverse strategy at Accenture.

"Consumers want to interact with brands. With the metaverse, they can become the protagonists of a story where they can see themselves while wearing the products of their favorite brands. It's kind of like the renaissance of customer experience," he said.

"The initiatives we've seen recently have given the impression of not living up to expectations. The public is used to fantastic virtual realities from cinema and is yet to find this level of quality in the multiple virtual platforms that exist today," remarked Nervegna.

Hence, the importance for luxury houses to find the right content and a smart way to interact with this parallel universe, as explained by his colleague Umberto Cigognini, head of art direction at the consultancy.

"The metaverse is a new tool for brands, with an ecosystem of opportunities that allows them to tell an engaging story. You can organize grand events without geographical or numerical boundaries. It's a new point of contact," said Cigognini.

"It's important to be there, but it's not just about being present. It's critical to remain relevant and consistent with the brand's image, values and strategies, while innovating and offering incredible experiences that you couldn't otherwise have in the real world."

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