



To what extent do virtual fashion shows present a feasible alternative to traditional fashion shows in light of changing consumer preferences and market conditions?

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Abstract

Since the 1800's, when the Charles Fredrick Worth executed the idea of using models instead of mannequins to display his clothing collections, and the early 1900's when Lady Duff Gordon made use of strategic lighting, seating and other theatrical elements to put together 'fashion parades', the fashion show has evolved greatly to become what we know it as today. However, much like other elements of the fashion world, even the concept of fashion shows is still evolving. The aforementioned has been most evident by the world being introduced to virtual fashion shows in the recent years. Such fashion shows have been enabled by technological advancements and are different to traditional fashion shows in many ways but mainly with regard to their ability to democratise this element of the fashion industry. In line with the aforementioned, this research paper aims to analyse the evolution of the fashion show over the years and thoroughly evaluate the concept of virtual fashion shows through an indepth case study of the Metaverse Fashion Week 2022 - the first of its kind. Ultimately, this paper aims to take a stance on whether virtual fashions shows are or aren't a feasible alternative to traditional fashion shows.

Introduction

Are traditional fashion shows now a thing of the past?

With fashion being so fluid and forever evolving across cultures, times and people, the fashion industry is no stranger to change. One area of the fashion industry which has and continues to evolve is what we know as fashion shows. In the early years, fashion was exhibited to small crowds via mannequins. This concept evolved when, in the 1860s, Charles Fredrick Worth, a pioneering English fashion designer used models in the form of live mannequins to exhibit collections. The advent of fashion parades was in the early 20th century when leading British designer Lady Duff-Gordon showed her collections at her Hanover

Street salon (Blanchard, 2018). These fashion parades introduced certain features surrounding lighting and seating which gradually evolved to create what we may recognize as the fashion show.

In recent years, the world has faced a digital transformation whereby technology has integrated and transformed almost all industries and/or practices with fashion shows and weeks facing a similar phenomenon. Moreover, changing consumer preferences in light of the pandemic have also further fuelled such transformations in the industry. In line with the aforementioned, the research question that this paper aims to answer is **“To what extent do virtual fashion shows present a feasible alternative to traditional fashion shows in light of changing consumer preferences and market conditions?”**

This research paper aims to analyse how fashion shows have evolved over the years before conducting an in-depth evaluation of how they have been impacted by the digital revolution and technological innovations.

An Introduction to Fashion Shows, their Relevance and Evolution

Fashion shows are now also known as “runway shows” or “catwalk shows”. In many ways, fashion shows may be recognized as a marketing tool for brands as they are capable of attracting the attention of people from around the world and promoting the purchase of items worn by the models (SanMiguel, Rus-Navas and Sádaba, 2023). Over the years, particularly since the integration of digital technologies, there have been several advancements made to fashion shows as well as the manner in which consumers can interact with them and complete subsequent purchases. However, to truly understand why fashion shows look the way they do today, it is essential to return to the very beginning. An essential component of any fashion show is the models partaking in the same and history points to Charles Frederick Worth as being one of the first to originate and implement this idea around the 1860s. The House of Worth started a new phenomenon in fashion when they started using models or then recognised as young women called ‘demoiselles de magasins’ instead of mannequins to display the clothing. As per many, it was this development that successfully changed the relationship which previously existed between the client and the dressmaker whereby the designer was no longer required to go directly to the customer and the designs were instead presented to the clients through a ‘defile’ i.e. a simple presentation without any music or other fanfare (Evans, 2011). Moreover, these shows were small and usually banned photographers due to a fear of designs being copied.

Maria Costantino, a lecturer in cultural and historical studies at the London College of Fashion explains how the next development in fashion shows came about in 1901 as a result of Lady Duff Gordon, an English designer, debuting what may be considered the first ever ‘catwalk show’. As per the lecturer, “Lady Duff Gordon presented her ‘Gowns of Emotion’ and we saw, probably for the first time, models appearing on a stage with scenery, lighting and music, while their entrances were choreographed with poses. This theatrical innovation, complete with a printed programme, not only introduced the first fashion show as a performance, but it also introduced the idea of showing fashion to a larger assembled audience, albeit an audience of the same social class and tastes, who attended by invitation” (Klerk, 2021). It is also expected that this show format introduced other elements that we associate with catwalk shows today. For instance, the introduction of a stage was a big development as it established a divide between the models and the audience. Furthermore, the spatial distribution of the audience itself also became of importance at this time which led to the development of the front row and much thought being given to who occupied which seats and where (Klerk, 2021).

That being said, the traditional catwalk, i.e. the raised runway projecting from the stage, came from department stores organising fashion presentations in the early 20th century by using the large spaces they had available (Fortini, 2006). These presentations were essential for middle-class shoppers as they provided a platform to validate and disseminate the fashionable styles set by designers. Eventually, even these rigid spaces were broken away from and by the 1960s, designers noticed a need to be more innovative with the location and setting for their fashion shows. Some remarkable fashion shows that the world witnessed as a result of this were Balmain's presentation of their 1965 collection in a wine cellar as well as Paco Rabanne's showcase at the Crazy Horse Saloon (Manning, 2023). This was one of the big evolutions in fashion shows because it now implied a requirement for the shows to adapt to the spaces in which they were being held and for each seasonal collection to be developed alongside a unique exhibit idea.

As the world headed into the 90's, fashion shows only got bigger and bigger. The concept of a supermodel developed and by the 1990's fashion shows cost millions - a strong representation of the economic investment and market value of major fashion brands and of the consumer culture during this period (Klerk, 2021). One may, however, argue that this was still a time when fashion designers were able to control the imagery and video footage of their shows since it was set in a pre-social media era - with this, exclusivity was maintained to a higher degree than in more recent years. Overall, the evolution of the fashion show is well described by Steven Kolb, CEO of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, who states that fashion shows "have always been about creating visibility and exposure for a designer's collection with the ultimate intention of selling clothes. As the world became more connected, the fashion show evolved from smaller, local events to larger international experiences. The onslaught of technology put fashion weeks within reach of people who otherwise had no access to the shows. With that, fashion became a pop-culture phenomenon and a source of entertainment" (Klerk, 2021).

Virtual Fashion Shows

The use of digital technologies to enhance and make fashion shows more accessible is not a new concept. In 2010, London Fashion Week was the first fashion week to allow audiences from around the world to view their shows through live streaming (Blanchard, 2018). Back in 2014, Ralph Lauren presented its new Polo line for Spring 2015 in a water-screen projection at Central Park (Howarth, 2014). Whilst the aforementioned may seem like a regular occurrence now, virtual fashion shows are something newer and more innovative. Virtual fashion shows are not only about the integration of digital technologies into normal fashion shows. Instead, it almost flips the narrative and provides brands with an opportunity to introduce their fashion to the world via digital technologies.

The concept of virtual fashion shows was introduced to the world as a result of social factors and facilitated thanks to technological ones. In 2020, the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic which had adverse effects on all industries including the fashion industry. Elaborating on the aforementioned, from a more holistic perspective, the fashion industry felt the changes resulting from COVID-19 on both a supply and demand front. With regard to the former, governments around the world were forced to shut down stores, stop events and also close manufacturing plants, all in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus (Ilchi, 2020). On the demand front, there was a massive shift in consumer behaviour and demand. More specifically, consumers started prioritising necessities over luxuries - with much of the fashion industry falling in the latter category, demand for

products declined drastically. The numbers highlight this with a report by the Census Bureau, published in mid-April 2020, estimating the decline of retail sales to -8.7% in March 2020, with clothing sales falling hard with a 50.5% sales drop (Maheshwari and Casselman, 2020).

As mentioned above, one of the impacts of COVID-19 on the fashion industry centred around the stop to fashion events which include fashion shows and weeks. This presented a challenge to the entire industry as most fashion houses and brands had long relied on fashion shows as a means to market and generate buzz around their fashion lines. That being said, this restriction also gave rise to an innovative technological solution i.e. virtual fashion shows. Virtual fashion shows are those that do not necessarily have to be like their physical counterparts. Elaborating on this, many may confuse virtual fashion shows for recordings of catwalks which audiences can view in real time. However, virtual fashion shows are so much more than that in the sense that they rely on virtually created runways and clothing, through the extensive use of augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), providing the fashion sector an opportunity to write a new digital fashion playbook and offer never seen before immersive experiences.

Further analysing the technologies that enable such fashion shows, when wanting to put a virtual fashion together, one of the first steps is to design the virtual environment to host the same. In this instance, platforms and tools like VRChat, Mozilla Hubs, or Unity can come in handy and help brands design virtual environments that reflect their concept whilst keeping user experience elements such as navigation, interaction and visual appeal in mind. After that, brands can use software like CLO, Marvelous Designer, or Blender to transform their fashion pieces into 3D designs. Moreover, using ML and AI, brands can create their 3D models with differing body types and sizes, skin tones and hair types and colours (Tamer, 2023). Furthermore, using ML, clothing can be created for the 3D models in as little as 2 to 3 days. As per an article by Choudhury (2023), “AI and ML engineering combined with deep learning and image recognition provides various fashion brands with a diversified library of 3D human models”.

Case Study of the 2022 Metaverse Fashion Week - The First of Its Kind

In February 2022, Digital Fashion Week New York announced the Metaverse fashion show which was to be hosted on the platform Second Life and would be the first of its kind. Unfortunately, due to technical errors and the technology for virtual fashion shows still being in their infancy, this event did not go ahead as planned (Mahlich, 2022). However, shortly after, in March 2022, Decentraland - “a 3-D digital game-like social environment which is a user-owned, Ethereum-based virtual world platform that allows users to be part of shared digital experiences” (Lodge, 2023) - hosted the world's first-ever metaverse fashion week.

Prior to the launch of the event, Giovanna Graziosi Casimiro, head of Metaverse Fashion Week, told WWD, “I think people will be amazed because our team has been working so much to really achieve unique spaces in 3D and unique shops for the stores.” The team created a broad range of activities, with multiple simultaneous events. Casimiro added, “But they will be planned in a way that people have a chance to see all of them.” There will be plenty of after-parties. The idea is that we bring people to see the events, but they can stay inside the platform and see great performers and DJs. It’s going to be really fun” (Lee, 2022).

Well, the event definitely was in line with the vision Casimiro had. The event was attended by more than 108,000 people who were able to get involved with many fun activities including attending the fashion shows and after parties and even shopping for merchandise from the collections exhibited (McDowell, 2022). Those attending could buy both the physical items, which were deliverable in real life, as well as virtual objects in the form of non-fungible tokens (NFTs), at the stores (Outlook Money Team, 2022). The aforementioned was possible as a result of participation from more than 60 brands including both luxury fashion brands as well as emerging brands in the event who set up stalls and organised shows to exhibit their Spring 2022 collections in different 'districts' or 'neighbourhoods' within the newly created 'Fashion District' on Decentraland's platform. Some of these districts included (Decentraland, 2022):



The 'Luxury Fashion District' presented by UNXD and Vogue Arabia saw some of the most iconic brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Etro, Elie Saab and Imitation of Christ make their Web3 debut. Even Franck Muller, the high-end luxury Swiss watchmaker, participated in the event and led the way in crypto and metaverse-themed watches with its Encrypto collection (labelled the world's first functional Bitcoin watch). Pictured above is a view of the Luxury street at the Metaverse Fashion Week.

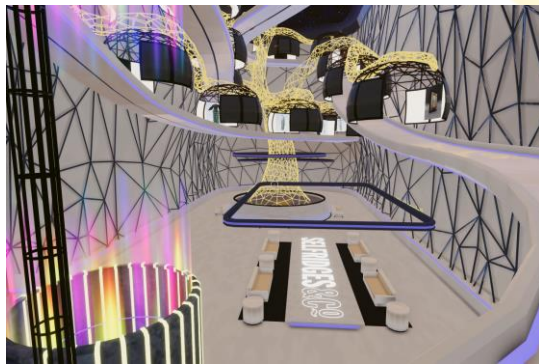
'Rarible Street' - pictured below - was designed as a fashion street that hosted many pop-up shops with brands and labels such as Placebo Digital Fashion House, The Fabricant, Artcade @ Fred Segal participating



The 'Parcel-MetaParty Community Precinct' which celebrated the Decentraland creator community. Fashion shows and panels, as well as mini-games, DJs, music performances and parkour, were all featured in this multi-layered space.

Boson Protocol technology exhibited its first metaverse marketplace, 'Boson Portal' in which they built a boulevard of metaverse stores where leading brands and NFT projects offered their products for sale. Some of the brands that participated included Tommy Hilfiger, Hogan, Cider, IKKS, Deadfellaz, 8SIAN and The Rebels by House of Kalinkin. Pictured below is

the Tommy Hilfiger store at the fashion week which stocked digital apparel NFTs, which came with physical versions that ship to customers' home addresses.



Beyond these districts, some brands even purchased real estate in Decentraland as part of a plan to debut their flagship stores at the Metaverse Fashion Week. For instance, Selfridges, the iconic British upscale department store, unveiled its Decentraland store featuring an immersive journey with Paco Rabanne and artist Fondation Vasarely within a space inspired by Selfridges' Birmingham store (as pictured on the left) (Burgos, 2022).

Furthermore, PHILIPP PLEIN debuted the Plein Plaza which is a prime district covering 65 Decentraland parcels and has been developed by NFT Auction House and Metaverse Development Studio Portion (Lim, 2022a). Within the Plein Plaza, users were able to visit the Phillip Plein founded Museum of NFT Arts (M.O.N.A) - pictured on the right - and also witness the brands first ever collection originating in the metaverse which featured a fashion show in collaboration with 3D artist Antoni Tudisco. The exclusive wearables from this show were also made available to shop in Decentraland or on plein.com.



Other examples of brands pushing their creative boundaries and experimenting with the Metaverse included Estee Lauder, the exclusive beauty brand participating in the Metaverse Fashion Week, partnering with Decentraland to engage Alex Box and create a signature wearable look which the attendees could virtually wear on their avatars. Moreover, Hogan, in collaboration with Exclusible, hosted the "HoganX" Untraditional afterparty on March 26th (pictured to the left). The event presented the

first-ever dance competition in the virtual world and was hosted by the acclaimed DJ superstar Bob Sinclar (Wightman-Stone, 2022).



An Evaluation of Virtual Fashion Shows

When considering virtual fashion shows, there has been much debate with regard to whether they provide a feasible alternative to their physical counterpart. One area in which virtual fashion shows have an upper hand is with its ability to create a level playing field - for both the audiences and the designers. There is no doubt that when it comes to virtual fashion shows, there is a sense of democratisation and diminishing barriers to entry. For

years, the 'Big Four' have dominated the fashion week calendar with most events following a hierarchy of exclusivity and limiting their audience (Ryder, 2022). With the Metaverse Fashion Week, for instance, the ethos is completely different as confirmed by Sam Hamilton, Decentraland's Creative Director, who stated that "Metaverse Fashion Week serves as the perfect, monumental event to introduce to the world the philosophy behind everything we build. A space built by and run for by its community" (Lim, 2022b). In fact, with audiences being able to access such shows on a global scale, there are bound to be significant increases in viewership as well and this makes fashion shows much more effective as a marketing and publicity tool.

Such virtual fashion shows and weeks also present the advantage of turning the focus back to the art that is the foundation of fashion. For years, the fashion industry has gotten stuck in the rut of overproducing and relying on quick turnaround trends, the charm of genuine collaborations and unique creative outputs has been minimised. In line with the aforementioned, Casimiro adds that "the metaverse allows for fashion to be perceived as art once again, instead of simply a commodity we consume. The physical and digital aspects complement each other rather than compete, and brands should utilize both to communicate a larger story to their audience" (Ryder, 2022).

Furthermore, it may also be argued that such fashion shows are far more sustainable than traditional fashion shows for myriad reasons with the most prominent being that they minimise the requirement to design prototypes and thus mass production is avoided and items get made only when they are ordered. This is incredibly important given that the fashion industry is responsible for around 8% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, according to the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (Feldner-Busztin, 2022).

All good things aside, there are still certain restrictions and drawbacks of virtual fashion shows which need to be considered when evaluating if they are a feasible alternative to traditional fashion shows or not. Firstly, learnings from the Decentraland Metaverse Fashion Week itself showed that whilst the claim of virtual fashion weeks may be that they are for everyone, the slow and sometimes confusing interface can limit this. Moreover, such platforms may download with a very low-level graphic display as a result of everyday computers and wifi lacking the power to fuel high-fidelity experiences (McDowell, 2022).

Another observation has been the restricted ability to socialise during such virtual fashion shows and weeks. With traditional fashion shows, one of the biggest advantages is the opportunity to network with some of the most known and emerging names in the industry. Platforms such as Decentraland, unfortunately, “are not naturally sociable places and there have been limitations on how many people can attend events” as per Max Vedel, co-founder and creative director at Swipe Back, a metaverse creative agency. However, Vedel also added that it is expected that “these are issues that will improve with time. The space is still being built and like the first versions of web pages, people will build on top, improve and create something that gets better over time” (McDowell, 2022).

Conclusion

Fashion shows are an essential component of the fashion industry and have long been used as platforms for brands to showcase and market their products to some key industry players as well as the market. With the fashion industry always evolving, this research paper aimed to analyse the evolution of fashion shows over the years and further evaluate the concept of virtual fashion shows to understand if they could stand as feasible alternatives to traditional fashion shows.

As analysed in this paper, elements of what we today recognize as the fashion show can be traced back to the 1860's with Worth exploring the possibility of using 'demoiselles de magasins' or models instead of mannequins to display his collections. The first evidence of exploring a theatrical element to fashion shows through the use of strategic lighting, seating and choreography was seen when Lady Duff-Gordon put on fashion parades, displaying her collections at her salon. The aforementioned was followed by many more developments including the more modern version of fashion shows being witnessed in the early 20th century as a result of department stores putting up such shows. The latest change to the fashion industry, however, has been one that can only be recognised as a result of technological advancements and changing consumer behaviour and expectations due to the pandemic. Whilst digital technologies have been integrated to enhance fashion shows for quite some time, virtual fashion shows/weeks have come around as a unique and revolutionary choice available to brands. One of the most prominent and first-of-its-kind examples of this was the Metaverse Fashion Week hosted on Decentraland in 2022. As seen in the case study, several brands participated in this and it truly stood as a testament to what heights can be reached when digital technologies combine with the world of fashion.

As to the question of whether such virtual fashion shows present a feasible alternative to traditional fashion shows, the answer would be to some extent. As seen, many elements of traditional fashion shows are enhanced in the virtual world but more importantly, such platforms ignore a social hierarchy and instead provide the opportunity for people around the world to get involved with fashion events. The aforementioned is advantageous as an increasing number of consumers are starting to prefer experiences over possession of material items and these platforms cater to such requirements. Furthermore, virtual fashion shows hold great importance in the fight for sustainability as well. That being said, certain elements of traditional fashion shows such as the ability to socialise are still not entirely replicated in the virtual space. Additionally, technological glitches and the requirement for advanced streaming devices and high-quality wifi could also restrict the accessibility of such platforms.

All in all, virtual fashion shows are really in their early days and there is a lot more development to be done - after which the feasibility of them as an alternative to traditional fashion shows could increase.

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