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## Marketplace icon: the fashion show

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we reconstruct the history of fashion shows and highlight the crucial role mediatization process have played in the turning of these events into marketplace icons. As the media and image reproduction technologies changed, so too did fashion shows, providing a different basis for their iconicity. During their long history, the goal to diffuse promotional fashion collection images had to be balanced with the need to protect intellectual property rights. During the haute couture era, the latter prevailed, resulting in fashion shows having limited iconicity. With prêt-à-porter, the benefit of media coverage more than compensated the risks of imitation and counterfeiting, facilitating fashion shows' elevation to full iconicity. The rapidity of fast fashion retailers' adoption of catwalk trends makes intellectual property rights' protection more salient in today's social media-saturated environment. Seen as a historical process, marketplace elements' iconicity rises, evolves, and, if not adequately sustained, may fall.

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Fashion shows; haute couture; prêt-à-porter; fashion models; marketplace icons; intellectual property

Fashion shows emerged as an important marketplace element during the second half of the nineteenth century when the practice of showing clothing on a living person eventually turned into spectacular mannequin<sup>1</sup> parades. During their almost 170 years of history, these events have experienced various incarnations as the fashion system changed. Today, fashion shows often, but not always, take place in the context of fashion weeks in Paris, Milan, London, New York, and a growing number of fashion cities. Others are individual events outside of the fashion week circuit. These include the so-called destination fashion shows that brands organize in emerging geographic markets or exotic places to promote their cruise<sup>2</sup> collections (think of Fendi's 2007 show at the Great Wall of China) and the lavish TV-broadcast Victoria's Secret fashion shows that the lingerie brand organized from 1995 to 2018.

Previous studies have analyzed the history of fashion shows in specific places and times (e.g. Duggan 2001; Evans 2001; Grumbach 2006). Building on these historical analyses, this paper sheds light on the iconicity of these events. We show that, during the haute couture era, their iconic potential was limited by intellectual property right protection concerns and by the fashion market being very limited, as it only comprised elite consumers from the aristocracy and high bourgeoisie. These various factors restricted the media's diffusion of fashion show images to wider consumer audiences, which is a prerequisite for iconicity. As Gopadals (2016) reminds us, “[m]arketplace elements become iconic, and sustain their iconicity, through frequent mentions in diverse media and creative adaptations in multiple spheres of social life” (Gopadals 2016, 264). Only with the advent of prêt-à-porter did the catwalk turn into a media spectacle reaching masses of adoring consumers. While not necessarily able to afford designer labels, these consumers' interest and attention helped make these

events larger than life and a true marketplace icon. Today, pictures and videos of fashion shows are a key social media content that brands, designers, influencers, models, traditional media, and consumers themselves diffuse. This development marks a new stage in the iconicity of these events, which are increasingly designed to be consumed digitally on computer or smartphone screens. Nevertheless, social media have brought changes to the field of fashion that threaten fashion shows' sustainability. In a context of brands doubting the effectiveness of these events as promotional tools, only the future will tell if fashion shows will remain a marketplace icon or are doomed to disappear in a social media environment that no longer needs them to diffuse glamorous fashion content.

Fashion shows are just one element of the institutionalized fashion system<sup>3</sup>, and not necessarily the most important one (Kawamura 2005). However, their cultural role goes far beyond their economic significance as promotional events that a minority of upscale fashion brands use to promote their latest collections. Aspers (2010) suggests that "status markets", such as fashion, are structured according to status hierarchies, ranging from the most prestigious producers at the top to the least prestigious ones at the bottom. Owing to the few brands at the top of the fashion hierarchy investing massive financial resources, fashion shows have turned into a highly iconic form of mass spectacle, producing visual appealing fashion content spread across multiple media platforms that reaches countless consumers who are inundated with glamorous, eroticized images that are difficult to ignore.

Similarly to Chaney's (2019) work on rock festivals as marketplace icons, we frame our reconstruction of fashion shows' history by highlighting the nature of iconicity at different periods. We show that this iconicity has evolved over time, reflecting the changes in the underlying media environments (see Table 1). We also selected videos made with different purposes and from a variety of sources as illustrative examples of the key developments at each stage (see Table 2).

### Proto-iconic fashion shows during the haute couture era (1850s-1950s)

The core of today's fashion shows is a succession of models wearing clothing complemented with accessories, parading on a catwalk to the sound of music to promote a fashion brand's new collection to an audience of buyers, journalists, influencers and, ultimately, consumers. These elements emerged at different moments – mostly, but not only, in Paris. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the French *couturière* was a humble seamstress. Clients chose their fabrics directly, buying them from drapers. At a time when the prevalent way of displaying finished dresses was on wooden or wax dummies, some dressmakers preferred using young women as living mannequins. Dress creativity was more a question of the choice of fabric than its design; etiquette dictated the fabric types appropriate for a given season and clothing design was rather conventional, not changing much from one year to the other.

A 20-year-old Englishman Charles Frederick Worth arrived in Paris in 1845, eventually revolutionizing the status quo. After an initial experience as a sales assistant at Gagelin, a draper specialized in luxury silks, Worth started designing increasingly creative dresses, eventually opening his own *maison de couture*. Worth is recognized as the creator of haute couture and for having turned the *couturière's* humble craft into a higher-status job suitable for men (significantly, the masculine term *couturier* also applies to women). For the first time, women's wear *à la mode* was the creation of a single person, who not only selected the fabrics and the matching trimmings, but also developed the shape and style, and produced it. By doing so, he changed the power relationship between the couturier and his wealthy and upper-class clients, who were increasingly dependent on couturier dictates. At Maison Worth, several mannequins were always available to wear clothes and show them off in front of potential customers. These young women were of a humble social class, and not attractive enough to distract the onlookers' attention from the dresses.

Following Worth's lead, various other couturiers set up their fashion houses in Paris, establishing themselves as arbiters of style. In 1868, they formed the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture, des Confectionneurs et des Tailleurs pour Dame* (hereafter the *Chambre*) (Pouillard 2016; Grumbach 2008) to better represent their nascent profession's interests. Worth and the couturiers who followed (in

**Table 1.** A history of the iconicity of fashion shows.

Stage	Key developments	Role of media	Iconicity of fashion shows as marketplace element
<i>Paris hegemony during the haute couture era (1850s-1950s)</i>	Increasingly theatricalized, fashion shows become Parisian couturiers' main promotional instrument. Their public comprises elite consumers from the aristocracy and the high bourgeoisie and, increasingly, corporate buyers, such as artisanal dressmakers, foreign department stores, and manufacturers. During this period, department stores also start organizing fashion shows, but the primacy of Parisian couture showings remains unchallenged.	Although invited to fashion shows, journalists' presence was strictly regulated to limit design thefts. Sketching and photography were forbidden. Photographers are only admitted to couture showings after WW II.	Proto-iconicity. Borrowing from the logic of theater, fashion shows already have an iconic potential. However, this potential is only partially manifested due to the market's limited size for haute couture products and the media's diffusion of fashion show images (sketches first, photography later) being limited due to the couturiers' intellectual property rights concerns. Department stores' shows reproduce Parisian couturiers' fashion, which has limited media appeal and iconicity potential.
<i>The haute couture system is in crisis (1950s-1970s)</i>	Haute couture shows in Paris face crises with the number of couturiers shrinking and the advent of the youth and street culture. Young consumers no longer want to dress like their parents, and look for inspiration outside the institutionalized fashion system. Other fashion weeks emerge in New York, Florence, Rome, and later London and Milan, challenging the supremacy of Paris. Couturiers initially resist the idea of using their design skills to cooperate with manufacturers. Only towards the end of this period, the first prêt-à-porter experiments pave the way for a new generation of spectacular fashion shows. Couture shows no longer break even, and they are increasingly seen as a promotional investment to justify premium prêt-à-porter prices and higher royalties from licensing agreements. Consumers are excluded from fashion shows, which are increasingly designed to generate media coverage.	Contrary to those in Paris, competing fashion weeks based on different local fashion cultures and with far fewer risks of imitation, tend to welcome media coverage. With the advent of prêt-à-porter, the press (particularly consumer magazines) and television are increasingly welcomed at both couture and prêt-à-porter shows. By opening these shows up to journalists, photographers, and cameramen, protecting designers' intellectual property rights becomes more difficult.	Challenged iconicity. The iconicity of haute couture showings in Paris decreased, due to media limitations being maintained. With the advent of streetstyle, young consumers look elsewhere for inspiration. New fashion weeks focus on different fashion categories with a limited iconicity potential due to their more commercial focus, or fail to attract international media attention for various reasons. Only towards the end of this period, with the synergies in Paris between haute couture and prêt-à-porter, as well as the rise of Milan as a fashion hub in Italy, does fashion shows' iconicity potential increase, paving the way for the rise to full iconicity in the 1980s.
<i>Prêt-à-porter and the democratization of fashion (1980s-2010s)</i>	The economic boom, the rise of the middle class, and consumers' quest for distinction facilitate the interest in fashion. Financial groups invest in fashion, which is increasingly managed with a branding logic. Fashion shows are consequently conceived as promotional investments that need to generate results in terms of consumer awareness and brand image at the international level. Higher than ever budgets lead to these events becoming increasingly spectacular, with the light displays, music, settings, and top models skillfully orchestrated to generate favorable brand meanings. A global circuit of international fashion weeks with coordinated calendars is established in this period (the Big Four: Paris, Milan, London, and New York). A growing number of fashion weeks of more limited importance are organized in other geographical areas, sometimes with a specific product or market focus (e.g. kids clothing, LGBTQ consumers). Outside of the fashion week circuit, fashion brands organize	The media (particularly consumer magazines and television, including cable TV and networks such as MTV) become a key audience segment for fashion shows, whose returns on investments are calculated by means of the media coverage's volume and quality. Previous limits on the diffusion of runways images become less important at this stage, since media coverage benefits offset the negative consequences of style imitation and counterfeiting. American network television broadcast Victoria's Secret's fashion shows on prime time (2001-2018). Mixing entertainment with lingerie promotion and directly targeting consumers to drive sales, the shows are viewed by several million viewers. Fashion-show-themed TV shows appear in this period. These include <i>America's Next Top Model</i> (2003-ongoing) and <i>Project Runway</i> (2004-ongoing).	Mediated iconicity. Thanks to the direct presence of hundreds or thousands of media workers, fashion shows diffuse images from the catwalk to an incommensurably larger consumer audience. The enchanting media spectacle of the various catwalks reaches masses of interested consumers who, while not necessarily able to afford designer labels, contribute with their attention and interest to make these events bigger than life and a true marketplace icon. Fashion show-themed TV shows expose viewers to the inner working of the fashion system, inspiring some to pursue a career in the field.

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Stage	Key developments	Role of media	Iconicity of fashion shows as marketplace element
<i>The social media revolution (2010 and beyond)</i>	<p>'destination fashion shows' to promote their cruise collections as needed (e.g. Fendi's 2007 show on the Great Wall of China).</p> <p>Fashion shows (and the collections themselves) are increasingly designed to be consumed online on a digital screen. The trends emerging from the Big Four runways inspired the collection of fast fashion retailers such as Zara and H&amp;M. Brands are increasingly questioning the 6-month delay between the presentation of collections at fashion shows and these products' availability in stores, leading to experiments with 'see now, buy now' formulas. Online broadcasts of fashion shows also allow consumers to watch them from a digital front row, sanctioning a virtual return to these events' consumer-oriented origins.</p>	<p>Despite some initial resistance, social media influencers are the new key audiences of fashion shows. Fashion designers, models, editors, and other fashion professionals are also increasingly present on social media, helping diffuse fashion show content to their followers. Brands adopt new social media metrics to gauge the returns on fashion show investments. In some cases, consumer-generated fashion show content is more salient than that of traditional media or influencers.</p>	<p>Digital iconicity. A new stage in the iconicity of fashion shows, which are now at the center of multiple flows of social media content from brands, designers, models, traditional media, influencers, and consumers. At the same time, social media have brought various changes to the fashion field, some of which question fashion shows' enduring role as an iconic marketplace element.</p>

particular, Jacques Doucet, Paul Poiret, and Jeanne Paquin) represented the fashion creator as an artist in various ways (Troy 2003), ranging from associating themselves with artists, distancing their actions from commercial motivations, to extending their activities beyond clothing to the decorative arts, and designing theater costumes. In the haute couture era's initial period, mannequin parades took place in front of interested clients as the need arose but had not yet turned into today's spectacular events.

An Englishwoman, Lady Duff Gordon (better known as Lucile), is believed to have been the first to stage theatrical mannequin parades when she opened her atelier in London in 1901. Drawing on her experience as a theater costume designer, Lucile made ample use of performing arts elements in her fashion shows by including lighting, music, and the use of matching accessories to highlight the product symbolism. She chose mannequins for their physical attractiveness and trained them in deportment and gesture. Instructed not to talk, to barely smile, and strike dramatic poses, Lucile's mannequins exuded sensuality and contributed to male spectators attending fashion shows. As the business grew, Lucile also installed a stage in her atelier for her mannequin parades – another borrowing from the theater. She opened branches in New York (1910) and in Paris (1911), bringing her theatrical fashion shows with her. Parisian couturiers – while resenting the foreign competition – soon imitated the new formula.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts emerged to coordinate the scheduling of fashion shows, turning these uncoordinated individual events into what eventually became today's fashion weeks. From 1908 onward, Paris fashion shows were organized at fixed times in the afternoon. Unlike today's one-off events lasting 20 min at most and attended by hundreds, if not thousands, of guests, the Parisian mannequin parades lasted much longer (an hour or more). They were also repeated over extended periods of time in front of a much-reduced audience. At the institutional level, in 1910 the original *Chambre's* was abolished, and the newly created *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* configured haute couture as an autonomous trade distinct from confection. In this period, the *Chambre* started coordinating an official fashion show calendar. North American buyers were the first to be shown collections, followed by those from Europe and South America. Important clients placing large orders were invited to advanced previews. In this period, theatrical fashion shows co-existed with more mundane mannequin parades that allowed clothing to be inspected without *coups de theatre*, which facilitated department stores' purchase decisions.

During the twentieth century, mannequin parades spread from the couture houses of Paris to department stores in major European and North American cities, making the fashion show genre

**Table 2.** Selected fashion shows iconicity moments.

Stage	Illustrative examples
Proto-iconicity	<p>1920s <i>Haute couture show in Paris</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-QnqSRkPgc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-QnqSRkPgc</a> Finding footage from haute couture fashion shows in this period is difficult. This short clip from the Kinolibrary Archive Film Collection shows a 1920 mannequin parade from an unknown couturier. Note the absence of fashion sketcher or photographers and mannequins walking on the floor and not on a stage. The former facilitated interaction with the audience members (they could be affluent consumers and/or corporate buyers), who could ask the sales assistant to interrupt the parade momentarily to allow them to better examine what a mannequin was wearing.</p> <p>1947 <i>New York Press Week</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sc9XNM2PJ34">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sc9XNM2PJ34</a> This short clip from the Kinolibrary Archive Film Collection shows footage from the fashion shows of designers Clare Potter and Nettie Rosenstein. Note the abundance of media handouts prepared by publicists, such as professional photographs of fashion models wearing the promoted outfits and press releases. The mannequins walk on the floor. The audience comprises newspapers and consumer magazines' fashion editors, who diligently take notes for their subsequent articles.</p>
Challenged iconicity	<p>1952 <i>Pitti fashion show in Florence</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s82XSVtXJFQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s82XSVtXJFQ</a> The video is of a newsreel from La Settimana INCOM, a weekly news program showed in cinemas before the actual movie started, at a time when very few households owned TV sets in Italy. The first part of the video shows fashion photographic sets from key tourist sites in Florence, such as the Boboli Garden and the Pitti Palace. During the fashion show (starting at 4'14") the mannequins walk on a stage. The audience comprises corporate buyers, but also, as the reporter notes, more than 80 journalists from the Italian and foreign fashion press. The reporter highlights the mannequins' most noteworthy clothing. Note the absence of photographers.</p> <p>1966 <i>All the Gear Carnaby-style fashion show</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MoA2aMTSGo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MoA2aMTSGo</a> Video from a Carnaby Street fashion show in Hanover Square, London, from the British Pathé newsreel archive. The models dance on the stage, a parading style quite different from the Paris shows of the time. This suggests that allowing the audience to examine the details of the fashion products is a less important goal than communicating an overall image.</p> <p>1970s <i>Prêt-à-porter shows in Paris and London</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHyhid9XP90">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHyhid9XP90</a> Video from the Kinolibrary film collection archive on prêt-à-porter fashion shows of designers Kenzo, Zandra Rhodes, and Bill Gibb. There are many photographers among the audience, suggesting that an important goal of these events was to make photos available to the media. The models dance on the stage, and some of the products' style details and accessories are exaggerated to be more visible on the captured video images.</p>
Mediated iconicity	<p>1984 <i>Thierry Mugler's "mega" fashion show</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htsV5DKoKqY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htsV5DKoKqY</a> Television report (unknown source) on various Thierry Mugler fashion shows, with a focus on the celebratory 10th anniversary organized in Paris in 1984. The show had an estimated budget of €2,750,000 and an audience of 6,000 visitors, of which 4,000 were paying consumers – a controversial decision that attracted criticism at the time. The reporters mentions that Mugler "breaks the code of classical presentations and transforms his shows into true spectacles." His 1984 show was closer to a movie production than a fashion show, and was designed to be broadcast live. The models' clothing also serve the spectacle's goals, and do not necessarily correspond to the designers' collection available in stores later.</p> <p>1991 <i>Gianni Versace fashion show Autumn/Winter 1991/1992</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DepJtxVIA9c">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DepJtxVIA9c</a> A Fashion Channel report on the Gianni Versace's Autumn/Winter 1991/92 fashion show during the Milan Fashion Week. This show was noteworthy due to the most famous top models of the time (Linda Evangelista, Cindy Crawford, Claudia Schiffer, Naomi Campbell and others) being present. Facing the constant flashes of the photographers' cameras, these models, one after the other, parade on the catwalk. During this period, accredited photographers took pictures from the so-called 'pit,' an elevation, from which frontal photographs of models can be taken when they stop for a moment at the end of the catwalk. This video's footage is taken from the pit, and highlights the presence of photographers on the side of the catwalk, which is not an ideal position for high-quality pictures. Additionally, these photographers are standing, making it harder for those in the front row (influential magazine and newspaper fashion editors, as well as department store buyers) to see the catwalk. The presence of a stellar cast of newsworthy top models probably increased photographers' requests for accreditation beyond those who could be accommodated in the pit, which resulted in Versace's publicists admitting them despite the sub-optimal working conditions.</p> <p>2001 <i>Victoria's Secret's first TV-broadcast fashion show</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eICnYTFXm0k">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eICnYTFXm0k</a> Broadcast by the US TV network ABC and hosted by Rupert Everett, the show took place at Bryant Park in New York. Taped on November 13th but aired two days after, its record audience was of 12.4 million viewers. The show was conceived as a lavish form of branded entertainment, mixing traditional elements of a fashion shows (i.e. models on the runway wearing Victoria's Secret lingerie) with music performances by Andrea Bocelli and Mary J. Blige, and a spectacular segment with acrobats with angel wings flying over the catwalk. The show ended with a parade of 'angels' wearing elaborated costumes and wings, which featured</p>

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

Stage	Illustrative examples
Digital iconicity	<p>some of the world's top models of the time including Gisele Bündchen, Heidi Klum, Adriana Lima, Tyra Banks, and Eva Herzigová.</p> <p>2009 <i>Alexander McQueen's Plato's Atlantis show</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=967&amp;v=CVN4WUKIzjA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=967&amp;v=CVN4WUKIzjA</a> Video of the first show that a fashion brand broadcasted live (and the last before McQueen passed away). Streamed by Showstudio.com during the Spring/Summer 2009 Fashion Week in Paris, the show has a dystopian future theme. Two imposing robot-mounted camera were used to capture images of the models at different angles. Just before the beginning of the show, Lady Gaga tweeted the link to stream the show to her 6 million followers, revealing that her new single <i>Bad Romance</i> would have premiered on the runway. The live stream obtained so many hits that it crashed.</p> <p>2010 <i>Fashion bloggers at D&amp;G's fashion show</i>, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4N1H-tQ5Kck">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4N1H-tQ5Kck</a> Video published by Dolce &amp; Gabbana on their YouTube channel, showing interviews with, among others, fashion influencers Bryanboy and Chiara Ferragni before the Spring/Summer 2011 D&amp;G show at the Milan Fashion Week. The year before, the two designers' decision to open up their shows to fashion bloggers for the first time, made news headlines. In the zero-sum game that is the number of front row seats, this meant that some senior fashion veterans were relegated to the second or even third row. Given that fashion show seating signals status in the fashion field, their decision, which other fashion brands soon imitated, was regarded as a sign of a new balance of power between traditional media's fashion gatekeepers and the new social media influencers</p> <p>2016 <i>See now, buy now?</i>, <a href="https://www.msn.com/en-ca/sports/baseball/mlb_videos/see-now-buy-now-catwalk-to-shop-retail-model-divides-fashion-houses/vi-AAgFqkr">https://www.msn.com/en-ca/sports/baseball/mlb_videos/see-now-buy-now-catwalk-to-shop-retail-model-divides-fashion-houses/vi-AAgFqkr</a> International Business Times video showing an interview with various fashion brands and retailers with polarized opinions on the see now, buy now model.</p>

accessible to a larger customer audience (Brachet-Champsaur 2006; Leach 1993). This new wave of fashion shows did not, however, challenge Paris's supremacy as the origin of new fashion styles, as these events mostly contributed to diffusing established couturiers' trends. Department stores still sent buyers to Paris to attend their fashion shows in order to organize their own fashion shows later and showcase original Paris garments, or those inspired by Parisian fashion. Nevertheless, the increasing international importance of Parisian showings came at a cost, as they were opportunities for later unauthorized reproductions, design piracy, and counterfeiting. Haute couture houses' clientele comprised private customers (female consumers, who, in the 1930s, still represented 75% of haute couture sales) and business buyers from both France and abroad. To delay imitation, the *Chambre* maintained highly selective lists of corporate buyers, private clients, and journalists. The shows were strictly guarded, with sketching and photographs forbidden, although stories of leakage and espionage abound in this period. The *Chambre* even fixed the date the press was allowed to publish reports about and details of the haute couture garments presented at fashion shows (Pouillard 2016).

We characterize this initial stage in the history of fashion shows as one of proto-iconicity. We use the prefix proto (from the Greek, meaning "first") to refer to the early stages of these events' iconicity. During the long haute couture era, borrowing from the logic of theater, fashion shows already possessed a quite remarkable potential as an iconic marketplace element, which could not, however, be fully manifested for two reasons. On the one hand, the market was limited to very affluent consumers who were the direct audience of these events; on the other hand, the media, which could have played a role in turning Parisians fashion showings into spectacles for the masses with the advent of photography, were prevented from doing so due to intellectual property rights concerns. Department stores' fashion shows, which were less restrained from this point of view, could not aspire to haute couture showings' iconic status because of their more limited media appeal.

### Challenged iconicity of fashion shows due to haute couture's crises (1950s-70s)

WW II foretold the end of the Paris fashion monopoly. From 1943 onward, a Press Week was organized in New York, which presented American fashion designers' work to journalists prevented from

visiting the Paris showings because of the war (Rantisi 2004; Moore 2018). From 1951 onward, fashion shows presenting both *alta moda* (high fashion, similar to *haute couture*) and sportswear and boutique fashion (artisanal ready-to-wear) were held in Florence. Despite their more commercial nature, the US media and retailers appreciated these shows, which contributed to the affirmation of Italy as a fashion country (Belfanti 2015; Pinchera 2009; Pinchera and Rinallo 2020). During this period, Rome also became a fashion capital, when a group of local dressmakers left the Florentine shows to present their collections in their ateliers. These dressmakers also benefitted from the presence of Hollywood stars shooting movies at the Cinecittà studios (Capalbo 2012). Nevertheless, at the end of the war, Paris's supremacy was re-established, which was to no small extent due to the debutant Christian Dior, who presented his first collection in 1947. His luxurious gowns, characterized by remarkably tiny waists, majestic busts, and full skirts, was praised by the American press as a "new look" and sanctioned a renewed international interest in the *couture* showings in Paris.

At the end of the 1950s, however, fashion was on the verge of the *prêt-à-porter* revolution. French couturiers found working with manufacturers to design industrially produced fashion difficult. Having long considered themselves artists and having downplayed the commercial motivations behind their endeavors, or at least pretending to do so for promotional reasons, their direct involvement in mass-produced clothing was hard to justify. At the institutional level, *haute couture* and *confection* had long been configured as autonomous trades represented by different associations. In fact, some couturiers had cooperated with American manufacturers to create products bearing their names. However, they mostly only took this step to prevent unauthorized reproductions, since US law gave couturiers' intellectual property rights very little protection. In addition, these collaborations in a market far from their home did not challenge the rules of the game in France.

Some exceptions started appearing with *haute couture*'s economic crisis. In 1959, Pierre Cardin launched a ready-to-wear collection for women at a fashion show held at the Paris department store Printemps (Evans 2001). In 1960, 11 couturiers formed a short-lived association that showed *prêt-à-porter* collections before their *haute couture* collections. In the years that followed, many more couturiers experimented with *prêt-à-porter* (e.g. Yves St. Laurent, 1966; André Courrèges, 1967; Emanuel Ungaro 1968), paving the way for the organization of a *prêt-à-porter* fashion week two weeks after the *couture* shows. No longer open to consumers, *prêt-à-porter* fashion shows became spectacular one-off events for buyers and the press. Even *haute couture* shows' function changed when the number of houses shrank from 39 to 17 in the course of this period (Grumbach 2006).

During the 1950s, most couturiers had secured licensing agreement with perfume, accessory, and make-up manufacturers. Facing increased competition from *prêt-à-porter* collections, *haute couture* turned its shows into marketing events. The limited sales to the increasingly fewer consumers who could afford or were willing to buy *haute couture* could not compensate for the huge investments they required. Instead, *couture* houses used these fashion shows to create media visibility and symbolic value, which they in turn employed to generate greater royalties and, therefore, profits through licensing deals. At the institutional level, the creation of the *Fédération Française de la Couture, du Prêt-à-porter et des Créateurs de Mode* (French Federation of *Couture*, Ready to Wear, and Fashion Creators) in 1973 legitimized *prêt-à-porter* further. As a constituting member of the *Fédération*, the *Chambre* changed its name accordingly (*Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-porter, des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode*), taking over the management of the *prêt-à-porter* shows' calendar (Grumbach 2006).

The advent of the youth and street culture also caused difficulties for *haute couture*: For the first time ever, young people did not want to dress like their parents and looked for inspirations outside the institutionalized fashion world. Starting with the Swinging Sixties, London became a fashion capital due to its numerous subcultures (mods, punks, etc.) and the many self-taught designers, who opened stores in neighborhoods that were subcultural hotspots. Mary Quant, for example, not only contributed to the popularizing of miniskirts and hot pants, but also to changing the catwalk's ritual and rhythm by presenting dozens of garments in just 15 min (Evans 2001). Only in the mid-1970s, did British fashion designers and brands start organizing more structured fashion shows at the *British*



*Designer Shows* and the *London Designer Collections*, which were later unified when the *British Fashion Council* was founded in 1983. Meanwhile, Milan was preparing to become Italy's next fashion capital (Merlo and Polese 2006). The Florentine fashion shows were in decline, and Rome was too concentrated on *alta moda* (high fashion) to seize prêt-à-porter's emerging opportunity. In 1969, the first ready to wear fashion shows were launched in Milan (Pinchera 2009). Italian *stilisti*, such as Giorgio Armani and Gianni Versace, were not socialized into the French haute couture system, and faced no difficulties with adapting their stylistic choices to manufacturing requirements and market demands. They also paid equal attention to men's fashion, which the Parisian couturiers had neglected.

With prêt-à-porter, consumers were no longer a key target group at fashion shows. In Paris, Milan, London, and elsewhere, fashion shows were designed to generate consumer awareness through media visibility. The venues, mannequins, catwalk setups, music, styled accessories, and other elements of the fashion show assemblage were orchestrated to capture media attention and generate coverage. Designers routinely created products exaggerating key stylistic elements for the catwalks in order to ensure that journalists noticed them and the news, magazines, and TV stories mentioned their shows. Mannequins were increasingly chosen for their charisma, thus paving the way for top models' emergence in the 1990s. They started earning more and the advent of men's prêt-à-porter also saw male mannequins enter the profession. By opening up fashion shows to journalists, photographers, and cameramen, the protection of designers' intellectual property rights became increasingly difficult. Unlike clothing and textile trade fairs that banned photography during these periods (Rinallo and Golfetto 2011; Bathelt, Golfetto and Rinallo, 2014), the mediated fashion shows meant that images of new collections circulated, and fashion houses could do little to avoid design piracy and counterfeiting.

We characterize this stage in the history of fashion shows as one of challenged iconicity. Paris haute couture showings' iconicity decreased in this period, because media limitations remained and, with the advent of streetstyle, young consumers started looking for inspirations elsewhere. In addition, new fashion weeks emerged, all seeking international media attention and market space for their collections. These new fashion weeks' iconicity was, however, low compared to that of the haute couture showings in Paris. Only towards the end of this period, with synergies in Paris between haute couture and prêt-à-porter, and the rise of Milan as a fashion hub in Italy, did the required ingredients come together for fashion shows' rise to full iconicity.

### **Prêt-à-porter and the elevation of fashion shows to mediated iconicity (1980s-2000s)**

The 1980s were an important turning point in the history of fashion. Lasting for most of the decade, the economic boom in the USA and Europe changed consumer culture forever. The growing middle class was increasingly willing to pay for differentiated products that facilitated their quest for distinction. These factors facilitated the emergence of prêt-à-porter emerged as a cultural and economic phenomenon (Pinchera 2009). New media, such as cable television, and networks, such as MTV, helped globalize, popularize, and diversify fashion, giving fashion shows even more visibility.

Fashion houses' ready to wear fashions attracted the attention of financial groups. Not only could these financial groups provide the investments that fashion houses required to expand internationally, but they could also finance the increasingly expensive fashion shows and the advertising budgets necessary to ensure high levels of media coverage (Rinallo and Basuroy 2009; Rinallo et al. 2013). Fashion was increasingly understood as a luxury industry and the 1990s saw the start of fashion houses and brands being concentrated in the hands of a few luxury conglomerates (LMVH, Kering, Richemont, Puig, Jab Holding, and OTB). By attracting managerial talent from other industries, these companies treated fashion as a business – making concessions for its art-based institutional logics, but introducing marketing and branding skills, as well as rationalizing the production processes. Consequently, fashion designers' artistic freedom was subjected even further to market and financial considerations.

In this new context, fashion shows became “the thing” – the fashion business’s key marketing and communication tool. The skillfully orchestrated light displays, music, and settings turned catwalks into live performances with models in the leading role. In Milan, designers such as Gianni Versace launched and crystallized the supermodel phenomenon (see Table 2). Linda Evangelista, Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell, and others were the first of a new generation of highly paid and charismatic top models who soon became celebrities as well-known as fashion designers and other front-row personalities. The presence of celebrities – usually part of their endorsement deals with fashion brands (McCracken 1989), although often camouflaged as personal friendships with the designers – also contributed to focusing the media’s and consumers’ attention on the brand. While determinants of the creation of brands’ cultural meanings, all these elements made the products that models wore less interesting and noteworthy. Designers had to exaggerate some stylistic features to appear more visible on fashion show videos and photographs, and, at times, resort to impossible-to-wear dresses especially designed for communicative purposes. The actual collections sold to consumers reproduced these style elements in a more wearable form.

This period also saw the consolidation of a global circuit of fashion weeks. These Big Four (Paris, Milan, London, and New York) weeks, whose calendars are formally or informally coordinated, allow international visitors to attend them all in sequence. New York was the last to be added to this global circuit. During the 1970s, New York already had dozens of fashion shows scattered across the city. In 1993, the Council of Fashion Designers of America convinced all the designers to show their garments under one roof. During the years that followed, the new format allowed New York fashion to grow in size and prominence to finally be on par with Paris and Milan (Mell 2011). Beyond the Big Four, many other cities host fashion weeks (Breward and Gilbert 2006; Skov 2011). Their number has grown exponentially since the 1990s, and according to an online listing (<https://fashionweekweb.com/fashionweeks-around-the-world-list>), there are more than 130 fashion weeks across the world. The days when a handful of Parisian fashion houses dictated the styles that polite society followed throughout the world are long gone. The fashion world is now polycentric (Skov 2011; Rinaldo 2017) and increasingly fragmented. Still, the diffusion of fashion weeks to different parts of the world, and sometimes with a different focus (e.g. ethical, black, LGBT and queer, curvy) is another demonstration of the level of iconicity that this marketplace element has reached at this stage and which has been creatively adapted to multiple local markets and consumer cultures.

During the 2000s, the media also facilitated the emergence of new ways of consuming fashion shows outside of the fashion week circuit. Victoria’s Secret’s fashion shows, which the brand had organized since 1995, after two editions of webcasting in 1999 and 2000 landed on US prime time television on 2001. Turned into highly spectacular forms of branded entertainment, these events were viewed by millions of consumers attracted by the shows’ mix of music performances, elaborated costumes and stage design, and catwalk eroticism offered by each year’s models (called Angels because of the wings they were wearing as part of their outfits). In the same period, various fashion show-themed TV shows appeared in US television and elsewhere, including *America’s Next Top Model* (2003-ongoing) and *Project Runway* (2003-ongoing), which constitute creative media adaptations of this marketplace element with limited connections to the institutionalized fashion world (Parmentier and Fischer 2015).

This stage in the development of fashion shows is characterized by what we term mediated iconicity. During this period, fashion brands started considering fashion shows as promotional investments, whose results needed to be evaluated in terms of the volume and the quality of coverage in traditional media, such as television and consumer magazines. Owing to the direct audience of a few hundred or thousands of media workers, fashion show diffused catwalk images to a far larger consumer audience. Outside of the fashion week circuit, new ways of consuming fashion shows appeared as these events were turned into media spectacles directly targeting consumers. Previous limits to the media’s diffusion of images were less important during this phase, as the benefits in terms of media exposure and brand awareness/image compensated fashion brands for the negative effects of style imitation and counterfeiting. It should be noted, however, that the fashion brands initially resisted

the World Wide Web. In 1995, *First View*, a pioneer catwalk database website, already gave fashion professionals access to fashion week photographic and video coverage. Condé Nast's Style.com followed, marking the beginning of fashion's digital era (Rocamora 2013). But compared to those of other consumer good brands, fashion brand web sites were still rather underdeveloped during this stage and did not diffuse images from the latest collections. The technology was there, but it was only with the advent of social media that the iconicity of fashion shows entered a new digital phase.

### **The digital iconicity of fashion shows and its discontents (2010s and beyond)**

Social media triggered various changes in the fashion field (Delisle and Parmentier 2016; Dolbec and Fischer 2015; McQuarrie, Miller, and Philipps 2013; Rocamora 2017; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Today, fashion shows are increasingly designed to be consumed online, on a digital screen, and have opened their doors to bloggers and social media influencers. At the start, fashion brands did not know what to do with this new public, caught as they were between the desire to exploit the visibility that this audience could engender, and the need to safeguard their intellectual property from imitation due to the immediate diffusion of the catwalk images. It took a few years for the first fashion brands to decide to upgrade influencers to the front row and to broadcast their fashion shows digitally. Organizers of fashion weeks, too, were forced to take a stance on this new challenge. Less encumbered by tradition, the New York Fashion Week was among the first to embrace the digitalization of fashion by allowing the taking of digital photographs and videos, and providing fashion influencers with infrastructures and services. Milan and Paris resisted for a few years before embracing the new regime.

The digital mediatization of fashion shows has resulted in various other changes in the fashion field. Fashion designers are increasingly social media influencers, and they bring their followers with them when they leave one fashion brand to assume the creative directorship of another. Fashion models (as well as make-up artists, hair stylists, stylists, and other professionals involved in the staging of fashion shows) are increasingly hired for their social media visibility, which adds to social media's impact on fashion shows. Traditional media, particularly the press, are now all present on various digital media platforms. Brands have increasingly adopted new social media metrics to gauge fashion shows' returns on investments. Fashion design itself has increasingly taken the visual impact of fashion images on computer or smartphone screens into consideration, realizing that clothes' photogenic characteristics are becoming more important than their tactile, material qualities (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006).

In this new environment, fashion shows are being increasingly scrutinized. Are these events a necessary marketplace element or an "evolutionary dead-end"? (Khananushyan 2018). Since the end of the 1990s, fast fashion retailers, such as Zara and H&M, whose business model is based on the rapid mass production of trendy clothing at cheap prices, have been a disruptive influence in the fashion field (Aspers 2010). These retailers call the rhythm of new collection development and promotion into question. Fashion shows have long presented collections approximately six months in advance of the relevant season. For example, the Paris fall/winter 2019–2020 women's fashion week took place between the end of February and the beginning of March 2019. Owing to their quick time to market, fast fashion retailers can present collections inspired by the trends seen on the catwalks long before the established brands that led to them. The protection of fashion's intellectual property rights is so limited that these brands can do little to prevent this from happening. Social media contribute to these dynamics by freely circulating pictures and videos of fashion shows, which allows them to be sent to overseas factories while the mannequins are still on the catwalks. Additionally, when luxury fashion products are finally available in the stores, consumers may feel that they are rather old hat, as they have been exposed to the fashion show pictures, videos, and media coverage for months.

Fast fashion and social media have thus pushed some fashion brands to question the six-month delay between the promotion of a collection on runways and its availability to consumers, and to

experiment with a “see now, buy now” model. Fashion insiders still debate whether this model is just a publicity stunt that will not last, or whether it is the seed of a change that will eventually revolutionize fashion weeks despite institutional resistance. Fashion show critics also highlight the increasing costs of these events (€1,000,000 and more for established luxury brands, which needs to be multiplied with the number of fashion shows organized every year). Fashion brands have wondered for decades whether their fashion show investments generate sufficient financial returns and whether alternative uses of their promotional budgets (say, a million-dollar social media campaign) might yield better results.

The opening up of the once-closed world of fashion weeks’ shows to consumers is another relevant social media effect. Some fashion weeks, unable to attract international media and corporate buyers, have turned into consumer-oriented initiatives. More importantly, with the digital broadcasting of fashion shows, all consumers can now have a front-row seat. According to a study that the Council of Fashion Designers of America sponsored (Launchmetrics and CFDA 2018), a significant share of the digital voice during the Big Four’s fashion weeks targets consumers, in some case generating a higher media impact value than influencers or traditional media. To some extent, this is a return to the original fashion shows, which were mostly a consumer event.

To sum up, digitalization is a new stage in the iconization of fashion shows, which are now at the center of multiple flows of social media content from brands, designers, models, traditional media, influencers, and consumers. At the same time, social media has brought various changes to the field of fashion, some of which question fashion shows’ enduring role as an important marketplace element.

### **The sustainability of the fashion show as a marketplace icon**

Fashion shows materialize the fashion field (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006) and, unsurprisingly, these events have evolved considerably as macro-level social, cultural, and technological changes have affected fashion production, marketing, distribution, and consumption. In this paper, we highlighted the crucial role played by mediatization process in the turning of fashion shows into marketplace icons. As the media environment and the affordances of image reproduction technologies changed, so too did fashion shows, providing a different basis for their iconicity. This affected not only fashion shows’ direct audience, but also the design of these events to facilitate media coverage, whether in the form of newspaper picture, television footage or Instagrammable moment. We also noted that during their long history, the goal to diffuse fashion collection images for promotional reasons had to be balanced with the need to protect intellectual property rights. During the restricted market era of haute couture, the latter prevailed, resulting in fashion shows having limited iconicity. With prêt-à-porter and the enlarged market that the democratization of fashion produced, the benefit of media coverage of new collections more than compensates the risks of imitation and counterfeiting, facilitating fashion shows’ elevation to full iconicity. The rapidity of fast fashion retailers’ adoption of new catwalk trends makes intellectual property rights’ protection more salient in today’s social media-saturated environment.

Even consumer-oriented fashion shows are facing some difficulties. Victoria’s Secret fashion show was not renewed for its 2019 edition after only 3.3 million viewers had watched its 2018 edition compared to the 12.4 million of its first broadcast edition in 2001. Not only the show was reportedly failing to boost sales of Victoria’s Secret products, but it had been subjected to criticism over its objectification of female bodies and lack of inclusiveness towards trans and plus size models. *America’s Next Top Model’s* audience, too, has reduced over the years (Parmentier and Fischer 2015). Seen as a historical process, marketplace elements’ iconicity rises, evolves, and, if not adequately sustained, may fall.

Owing to social media, consumers, long excluded from fashion shows, have regained a central place. Not all consumer-generated content is, however, positive. In 2018, Dolce and Gabbana had to cancel their Shanghai fashion show “D&G Love China” – reportedly the most expensive the Italian brand had ever planned – after Chinese consumers found the brand’s pre-event social media

campaign racist and disrespectful. The campaign consisted of three short videos depicting a female Chinese model attempting to eat traditional Italian food such as spaghetti, pizza or cannoli with chopstick. The campaign and the designers' poor reactions to initial protests resulted in a widespread consumer boycott of the brand in Asia and elsewhere. In September 2019, Extinction Rebellion, an international consumer movement that uses non-violent civil disobedience to save the planet, organized a boycott of London Fashion Week to sensitize the public opinion to the fashion industry's ecological unsustainability (see <https://rebellion.earth/event/ugly-truths/>). Fashion shows' iconicity makes them a good target for such forms of consumer protests.

## Notes

1. The term mannequin originally indicated a dummy used to display clothes rather than a person employed to model them. Today, the term – while old-fashioned – is still used to refer to fashion models. For historical consistency we use the term mannequin when covering the period before the 1960s and fashion model, or simply model, for subsequent periods. We also use the term model occasionally to refer to the clothing rather than to the person wearing it on the runway.
2. Also known as resort collections, these pre-seasonal lines of spring/summer clothing originally targeted wealthy consumers who could afford to go on holiday (cruises or sea destinations) during the cold winter months and needed to buy spring/summer apparel. With the advent of fashion fashion, cruise collections started to be offered by luxury brands as anticipation of their spring-summer collections. The phenomenon consolidated during the 2000s.
3. Kawamura (2005) regards fashion as “a system of institutions, organizations, groups, producers, events and practices, all of which contribute to the making of fashion” (p. 43). Although we highlight fashion shows in this paper, we will often note how these events have changed as a result of supply and market-side changes in the fashion system.

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