



Fashion Shows: The Greatest Show on Earth

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Abstract. Fashion shows are one of the most important communication and marketing tools through which fashion brands their brand image, personality, values, and culture. Also, Fashion Shows give brands high visibility online and offline. This study presents the evolution of Fashion Show studies through the literature review and proposes to return to the four elements –model, location, theme, and final– that make up a great show and the spectacle effect explained by Duggan, 2001, with the aim of proposing a systematization of the analysis of Fashion Shows from the perspective of communication and marketing. Therefore, the research presents the analysis of the Balmain Spring Summer 2023 Fashion Show, studying the validity of the four elements and how these elements are developed nowadays.

Keywords: Fashion Show · Fashion · Luxury · Communication · Balmain

1 Introduction

In 2001 Duggan defined Fashion Shows as “The Greatest Show on Earth”, linking one of the key events of fashion brands to the performing arts and likening designers as “designer-as-artist” [1]. This vision is still totally valid more than 20 years later. On the one hand, Fashion Shows are nowadays big shows that generate a lot of expectation, and the figure of the designer has been transformed into that of creative director, influencing the decision making of all the communicative elements of the brand [2].

The Fashion Shows are also called “Runway shows” or “Catwalks Shows”. They can be defined as “marketing events for fashionable clothing (both with regard to stylistic innovation and production), often related to fashion weeks held biannually” [3, p. 34].

Carolina Evans [4] developed a detailed study of the evolution of the Fashion Show, starting with the fashion shows that resembled theatrical plays with the themes of the designs of the haute couture houses in Paris and the strict fashion shows in the couturier’s salons or hotels (1950–1960); to the production of major spectacles in the 1960s, which saw the rise of prêt-à-porter, men’s fashion and the communication of fashion through specialised magazines. Evans highlights great precursors of fashion shows as spectacles such as Lucille and Poiret, Jean-Paul Gautier or Vivienne Westwood.

With the introduction of digital technologies, fashion shows have witnessed numerous changes [5]. The most important one is the change of their target. If fashion shows

were originally created for buyers and fashion journalists, the Internet has opened a democratization process also in the runways, consumers can now buy what they see on the catwalk through the model: ‘see now, buy now’ [5].

Besides, influencers are now first protagonists in the front rows, replacing the traditional target of buyers and members of the press. Therefore, it could be claimed there is no reason to have fashion shows anymore, and “it might seem that fashion shows were doomed to disappear” [5, p. 277].

Then, the pandemic came and made things even more complicated. There was no possibility to have fashion shows and brands started to launch their collections first as live broadcast and after that with more creative digital formulas [6]. However, this new scenario originates a big opportunity to connect with the audiences; spectacular productions as the well-known show of Jacquemus spring/summer 2020 in the lavender fields or a mix between fashion shows and fashion films introduced by Dior replace the position of fashion as a dream and evasion in a moment of social suffering.

Precisely, this idea of recovering what fashion is about (aspiration, desire) was the leading one once the pandemic period ended. Now, fashion shows are living a new golden era of spectacle, visual impact and great productions. Fashion shows are relevant communication tools for brands, at least in the luxury sector. Therefore, this paper tries to explore how brands are using fashion shows to communicate their values and to introduce some methodology to analyze them.

2 Fashions Shows and Communication

Fashion shows are one of the most important communication and marketing tools through which fashion brands their brand image, personality, values and culture through the senses [7]. “Fashion shows give high visibility to brands” [3].

For Strömberg [3] these shows have a primary commercial goal: present new collections to media and Fashion buyers, but at the same time, as Evans [4] explained, now contemporary designers work with conceptualized collections, and through the Creative Director [2], the Shows are associated to marketing strategies and “become a vital part of the orchestration of the garments as a cultural statement” [3, p. 35], being an essential part of the communication of brand values.

“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 organise in emerging geographic markets or exotic places to promote their cruise collections” [8, p. 479].

There is a variety of academic literature that analyzes the subject of Fashion Shows from very different perspectives, directly or indirectly, and mostly with theoretical analysis or qualitative research. Some of these studies analyze the relationship between fashion shows and communication and marketing.

Sung & Know [9] explained the importance of Storytelling in Fashion Shows as an element to transmit brand values and the story and inspiration of the fashion show. Their aim was to design a method of fashion storytelling as a strategic instrument for building a fashion show with art and popularity.

Xu [10] points out that the functions of marketing in Fashion Shows are brand promotion and sales, and proposes to analyze fashion shows by applying the 4P perspective: product, price, place, promotion. Rocamora [11] highlights the Fashion Show as an element of mediatization, and how individuals are increasingly exposed to information about fashion shows and brands. In the same perspective, Pichera and Rinallo [8] also highlight how parades have developed a crucial role in the processes of mediatization and in the development of the iconicity of parades in the market, especially with the advent of social networks. “The core of today’s fashion shows is a succession of models in clothes complemented by accessories, parading down a catwalk to music to promote a fashion brand’s new collection to an audience of buyers, journalists, influencers and, ultimately, consumers” [8, p. 480].

Shu & Tzu [12] study the Fashion Show from the curatorial perspective and its relationship with experiential marketing, in their study they affirm: “Fashion show is to connect clothing, performers, story situations, in specific space with hardware equipment, carrying extra skills, to achieve the design of the creative theme and purpose of the presentation” [12, p. 479].

With the development of technology and social networks, we find studies on social media analysis on Fashion Shows [13], where it is explained that shows are now broadcast by a mix of media. The relationship between videos and fashion shows and the role of YouTube [14] have also been explored. Similarly, a recent study analyzes the “Instagrammability” of the runways, highlighting the importance of architecture and scenography for the communication of the shows [15], and refers to Fashion shows as a spectacle of digital influence.

3 Methodology

Having seen the evolution of Fashion Show studies through the literature review, this paper proposes to return to the four elements that make up a great show and the spectacle effect explained by Duggan, 2001. The latest research on fashion shows does not present any methodology, theoretical framework or variables that allow researchers and professionals to systematically analyse fashion shows from a communication perspective. Therefore, this paper makes a first approximation to propose a methodology for the present and future analysis of fashion shows.

To this end, we first examine the validity of the four elements: model, location, theme, and final. Secondly, we analyze how these elements are developed nowadays and how people can perceive them through the evaluation of a Fashion Show.

Therefore, the elements are explored through the official video of a particular Fashion Show, since it is the platform through which most people see the Fashion Shows and are part of these spectacles [14]. The fashion show for the study is the Balmain Spring Summer 2023 Fashion Show in Paris, the central capital of fashion for the Haute Couture collections. Selected video is one of the most viewed videos on YouTube [14].

4 Communication Perspective of the Fashion Show

A Fashion Show is first and foremost a show. “Designer shows that fall into the category of spectacle are closely connected to the performing arts of theatre and opera, as well as feature films and music videos. As with stage performances, shows created by spectacle designers feature far more than garments. In most cases, they read as mini dramas, complete with characters, specific locations, related musical scores, and recognizable themes. Often, the only element setting fashion shows apart from their theatrical counterparts is their fundamental purpose—to function as a marketing ploy” [1, p. 246].

Shows have an entertainment function that can reinforce the idea of fashion beyond a simple information transmission function, i.e. an eventful character that can attract the attention of the audience [16]. Nowadays, fashion shows are used as a central tool of communication, emphasizing the visual and performance aspects of modern media. The actual fashion shows exclusivity must not be preserved but can be used as a marketing tactic. Furthermore, the installations do not simply illustrate that these fashion companies are digital innovators but promote the use of media efforts on its own sake [17]. When analyzing and developing a fashion show, it is important not to forget the elements related to marketing and communication strategy. Therefore, the constancy and continuity of fashion shows every season work to consolidate the brand and position it in the market.

As mentioned above, in a fashion show there is no clear limit between what is fashion and what is art. All the elements that a fashion designer uses, such as popular culture or historical precedent, promote the integration of fashion and performance [1]. There are four main elements that all designers can work with in order to make a unique show: model, location, theme and finale. The Spectacle effect can be added to these four, with other implicit elements such as music and lighting.

4.1 Model

There are many types of models in the fashion industry and they can be used for different purposes. For each Fashion Show the brands try to choose the right ones for the project. We can find: Runway models, Fit models, Glamour models, plus-size models or Alternative models. When the brands work with the models they have to take into account if they work with agencies or representatives, if an exclusivity contract is desired or what is the licence fee [18].

Some researchers point to Gianni Versace as the person responsible for the rise of the supermodel, which gave rise to the association with celebrities especially during the late 1980s and early 1990s [19, p. 1]. The model possesses a leading role in the show where the subject is not only a mere wearer of the garments as an object of expression but also shoes, accessories and branding. In addition, they play the role of showing the costume through their actions and movements on stage. Therefore, at the communication level, the models are also a key element to create attraction towards the event, to generate news and virality [20].

4.2 Location

Beyond seeking novelty through unconventional models, designers also experiment with the location of their shows. The stage where a show takes place is of great importance

for the designer and the brand. The shows associated with the official fashion week calendars are located mainly in: Paris, Milan, London, and New York. Each brand searches within these cities for the best place in relation to the inspiration of the collection, the media power or allowing a wide audience. Brands also organise shows outside of the fashion week circuit shows, known as cruise collections or ‘destination fashion shows’. In these runways, the location is an essential element to attract the media. “Sometimes the location is related to national or regional origins of a label and are often centred on mythical fashion cities” [15, p. 9]. Many cities present a symbolic capital that helps shape the Storytelling of a brand or a collection [15]. “In the case of the runway shows, concentrating on the house’s geographical origins is not the only way to create added value for a fashion brand. Increasingly, in addition to the birthplace of the house, other more exotic locations are used as fantasy projections and mythological reference points” [15, p. 9].

4.3 Theme

The theme of the show is the source of inspiration for the designer, the theme can be specific or abstract. The theme is an essential element in communication and marketing as it not only determines what the collection will look like, but also its communication, from the press conference and invitations to all the production of communication and sales materials, such as events associated with the shows. The theme will be the hook for all audiences: experts, media and consumers. As Evans (1999) explains, one of the first designers who gave great importance to the theme was Elsa Schiaparelli, who gave each collection a theme, two of them very renowned, inspired by the Circus Collection and the *Commedia dell’arte* [19]. Other great renowned designers were also highlighted by the themes of their shows such as Alexander McQueen, John Galliano or Karl Lagerfeld. The theme is associated with “StoryTelling”, which is the technique of telling stories through Fashion Shows. Sung & Know [9] explain that it is an essential element to transmit the brand and the history of the show and that it can be described as: “Story” = Fashion Design; “Telling” = Show. In other words, every Fashion Show must have and be a Storytelling, since people associate fashion design with the substance of a story, a show with the way of telling and a fashion show with the storytelling.

4.4 Finale

For Duggan [1] all shows, and therefore also fashion shows, have to pay special attention to how the event ends. This is one of the points where the Fashion Shows come more in connection with other arts such as theatre. The finales have to be designed to produce a great impact on the attendees that makes that show memorable and also generates conversations and news. The conclusion and the tone of the end of the show become determining factors for the audience, where the designer’s creative idea is reflected.

4.5 Spectacle

Fashion designers or Creative Directors tend to turn their Fashion Shows into big spectacles. For this purpose they usually focus on specific themes, create large stages, take care

of the lighting, music, staging. They seek to produce visually impressive performances tied to a particular theme, time, and place [1]. Sometimes, fashion shows also feature great choreography that tries to effectively showcase the theme of the fashion show and make an impact on the audience. In fashion shows, choreography also involves how the models walk and their facial expressions, enhancing the image of the show [9]. In this paper we associate to the Spectacle variable all the elements related to the experience of the audience in the Show. Fashion shows are a form of multisensory stimulation [7].

5 Balmain Fashion Show Analysis

In the framework of Paris Fashion Week, Balmain, under the creative direction of French designer Olivier Rousteing since 2009 [20], achieved one of the most viral moments of the event. Not only thanks to the show's mobile photographic experience, but also to the presence of the American actress and singer Cher as a special guest.

The maison's successful Spring/Summer 2023 proposal inspired by French, Italian and Swedish picturesque works did not leave the public indifferent [21]. According to Olivier, "a statement of intent to society, a love letter to the land and to our origins" [22]. So much so that the savoir-faire of the brand founded by Pierre Balmain in 1945 [23] around Rousteing is reinforced in each collection.

5.1 Model

The fashion show was attended by an army of models of the brand where Cher was undoubtedly the great and unexpected star. Among the cast of the 100 looks that paraded through the show, the other great face known and cheered by the attendees was the revolutionary model Ashley Graham [22], who wore a blazer style dress with renaissance and 'arty' print, where the pictorial prints took great presence. In its defense of diversity and inclusivity, the firm continues to bet on a diverse casting, made up of models of different sizes and ethnicities [24].

The 76-year-old actress kicked off and closed the maison's runway show with a surprise appearance, Cher, who wore a latex ensemble composed of black fitted pants with metallic details, a matching bodysuit that highlighted her figure and closing the look chunky boots from the collection with black fingerless gloves [25]. It is not the first time that the singer has been part of the image cast of a fashion brand, she did it once before with Versace [26].

Among the selection of celebrities and "it girls" in front row seating included Nicola Peltz and Brooklyn Beckham, Kylie Jenner, Dove Cameron, Barbier Coralie with Stromae, singer Nathy Peluso, Bretman, Hiba Abouk and player Achraf Hakimi, model Jon Kortajarena, Ajani, Devin Way, Jesse James, Emily Carey and footballer Neymar [27]. All of them wore designs from the collection. However, they did not count with the presence in the SS/23 collection of the model, businesswoman and image of the brand, Kim Kardashian, nor the attendance of the singer Carla Bruni who paraded for the firm in the previous edition of SS/22 [23].

5.2 Location

The show took place at the Jean-Bouin stadium, next to the Parc des Princes of Paris Saint-Germain in the French city of Paris. The start was delayed by one hour and the show was almost thirty minutes in long. A total of almost 6,000 people attended. The renowned French stadium is a space that combines design and spaciousness [28]. The firm opted for a renaissance and sustainable style for its décor, giving all the attention to the models. A catwalk reproduced with marble and large totems in the background that changed color as the show progressed framed and contextualized the fashion show of the French firm in a very Olympic panorama [29]. The choice of space is a milestone that generates a lot of expectation for lovers of the brand. Balmain chose once again a large space that began as an outdoor catwalk and is now known as the Balmain Festival [25].

5.3 Theme

Olivier opened the show at last fashion week with the following statement: “I want to create something that lasts forever”. The designer presented his joint ready-to-wear and couture proposals for Spring/Summer 2023 under what is known as his most sustainable collection to date. Futuristic (3D) and architectural designs and a lot of craftsmanship have taken the firm as a reference in its material inspiration for a collection that looks back to Renaissance art under the artistic works of painters [30]: The French Jean-Baptiste Frédéric Desmarais, the Swiss Jean Étienne Liotard and the Italian Paolo Veronese [22]. An example of this is the sculptural silhouettes that can be seen in the footwear of the collection.

Michelangelo’s cherubs, Da Vinci’s drawings and Galilei’s doodles were also sources of inspiration. Despite the strong presence of Renaissance motifs, the way in which he combined craftsmanship with ancestral transculturality and sustainability made the collection’s theme stand out from previous editions [23]. It should be noted that this collection experiments with wide-brimmed hats, great protagonists in the Dior Cruise [31] 2023 fashion show, and graphic prints in pieces where the model’s naked body becomes the pattern of the garment.

Delving further into the creative director’s DNA and following the success of the documentary about him, “The Orphan Prodigy” (Netflix, 2019), one can also appreciate the great influence on the recent collection designed by him for the firm Jean Paul Gaultier [32]. Serving as a closure to the theme chosen as inspiration, Olivier wanted to echo the renaissance men who preceded him, trying to seek science and push art to understand the world by involving Egyptian artisans in the creation of the pieces of the collection [23].

5.4 Finale

As a finale, Balmain chose garments characterized by silhouettes, feathers and embroidery. Despite the inspiring creations of the firm, the big surprise was the unexpected appearance of the American singer and actress Cher, who under the chords of her theme

song *Strong Enough* (1998) strutted the catwalk wearing a tight jumpsuit from the brand [23].

Despite the delay in the start of the show, the surprise factor -the presence of the pop star- made the audience go crazy before ending in an effusive hug and farewell with an emotional Olivier. The brand took advantage of the moment to make it the resource for the show's communication campaign. Unlike many attendees, there were many editors, critics and press people that penalized the brand by leaving the show before Cher even arrived [25].

5.5 Spectacle

The French luxury fashion house Balmain, celebrated its third edition of the "Balmain Festival" called "The Moment" coinciding with Paris Fashion Week, a show where in addition to presenting their new collection, they offered musical concerts and gastronomic experiences [25]. The result was the creation of a unique and ephemeral atmosphere that orchestrated the SS/23 collection and where the practice of dandyism was appreciated on the catwalk.

Without ever losing sight of the theatricalization of fashion, the French designer defends a more democratized fashion, thus replacing the more conventional closed-door fashion shows with macro-events where thousands of admirers gather every edition. For the creative thread of the "performance" [4] show known as Balmain Festival, the great star of the show was Cher, who welcomed the attendees to the fashion show through a video that showed that the star will be the image of the campaign of the new handbag of the maison, *The Blaze*. The delicate piece was built in 3D thanks to the work of the Spanish production company *Olímpic*, focused on sectors such as fashion, sports and music [29].

6 Conclusion

After the analysis of the show, we can affirm that the four variables proposed in this study are adequate in evaluating the communication of a fashion show. The collection reproduced a revolutionary encounter between the African craftsmanship of Rousteing's roots and the essence of the European culture that permeated his life.

Without losing its emphasis on novelty and spectacle, the show became a walking identity of its creative director, where through insignificant details and spectacular events he fused reality, fiction, and idealization. It should be noted that the importance of a fashion show is not just each individual collection, but instead, it's that special feeling that continues even after a show ends, such as what happened in the case of the Balmain fashion show.

The digital show was the other big show that the brand showcased through its various social channels. The panorama of new technologies is not alien to the world of fashion but is part of it, including behind the scenes of the show. Growing the impact and what is more important, the expectation towards the collection. Balmain's most relevant social networks and platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, showed the Festival live to their community [33].

The fashion industry is known for changing the status quo and an example of this was the creation of the new launch in three-dimensional format [31]. Through the maison's social networks, following a content planning and a very careful aesthetic, the brand was revealing different details of what happened in the big show, dividing the show experience into: pre-show, show and post-show.

The proposal of analysis based on the four elements validates their importance in the fashion shows and opens a path to future research. Given the proliferation of brands that want to make fashion shows as a communication tool, or the ability to perform in a more democratic way with the digital shows, it could be interesting to systematically analyze those elements that make the Fashion Show a unique communication or marketing action. Fashion Shows can not only be a moment where the new collections are shown. For the creation of brand experience for the followers and buyers of the brand, it is relevant also to highlight the elements that make this event unique.

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