

BUILDING A FASHION INFLUENCER IMAGE ON INSTAGRAM

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Abstract

This article examines the shift from analogue to digital transmission of information, the metaphor of virtual community, and the everyday life of social networks. It also studies the construction of virtual identity taking place under the influence of the influencer system on the Internet. Viewing fashion as a process of constant production and reproduction of the social, of imitation as a means of social adaptation, the text examines the transformation of fashion into a primarily digital representation through influencer marketing. The analogue and digital evolution of codes is distinct, and the need of media and digital literacy are a growing challenge for modern society. This work will provide a clearer delineation of the fluid nature of identity and social belonging as well-articulated behaviors.

Keywords: virtual community, influencers, fashion, digital literacy, identity, CGI

Introduction

Having lived for several decades now in a digital world that is evolving in a multifaceted way and at an unstoppable pace, we have a large amount of available information outlining the changes that have occurred as a result of the Internet in our daily lives. It is difficult, however, to summarize the variable processes which occur on a daily basis. Information about these changes relates not only to culture, ways of working, automation of processes, but also to self-presentation in different social environments online. Identification and individuation in the construction of our identity are related to copying the style of our modern idols. Unmediated communication through live contact has overwhelmingly been replaced by virtual contact with the everyday lives of those we like. The mythology still exists, only the way has changed, because analogue media formats are now online. In addition to being easily accessible, they are characterized by enabling two-way communication as well as the rapid exchange of information, ideas, and cultural capital.

This paper aims to outline the difference in the construction of image and identity, and for this purpose it will use interdisciplinary theories, including those of Roland Barthes, Lev Manovich, Lawrence M. Friedman, Charles Taylor.

Flashback

I take the liberty of using this term for several reasons. The first is the present moment in which witnessing the transformation in terms of computer use continues to be part of our modernity. In the early sixties this technique was used mainly for production purposes. Now only three decades later there is already talk of using the computer as a universal media machine (Manovich 2001). The second half of the previous century is still not that far back in time. The repercussions of the penetration of technology into everyday life are multifaceted. While the future trends of influencing our cultural foundations are beyond the scope of this paper, I will mark them as unpredictable. For this reason, I assume that in a few more decades, mention of factual technological changes, both in terms of the computers and devices themselves and the effects on our culture and behaviour, will be an artifact and an artifact alone.

Between 1936–1945, the German engineer Konrad Zuse (1910–1995) built the first working digital computer. A few decades later, all extant information media are being converted into digital data. The 1990s already saw a variety of interactive installations and websites. The media revolution

is a fact. In fact, the new media is the old, the difference lies in the conversion of the analog representation of information into digital. The main reason is that digitization allows information files to be easily opened and manipulated by a computer. Culture and artistic production itself passes through the computer filter, in such a way that the texts distributed online essentially become the new media. There is talk of comparing the semiotic nature of the code with the computer interface (Manovich 2001).

According to Manovich, one of the three common trends of culture is automation. This means a partial removal of the human factor from the creative process itself. The restriction of human intervention and facilitation achieved in the technological use of websites, applications and web-based system is compensated by the interactivity of the media themselves. The Internet user is not just an observer, they are involved as an active participant and “director” of what is happening in front of them in their own virtual world. When we talk about social environments – they actively participate in the construction of another reality. (Manovich 2001)

Being Social

In the years when the increased penetration of the Internet into our daily lives and the unfolding of the media revolution became evident to all, the ways of communication between users also underwent development. Blogs and microblogs, forum directories, chat programs and software (mIRC, ICQ, Skype and others). There are many examples of social environments and technology solutions that enable users to communicate, share information about themselves and the world they care about. Examples are: MySpace, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and a number of others. The reason why different media exist is because different people exist. The world’s largest free social network, Facebook, came into being in 2004. At last count, just over eight years on, Facebook has been translated into over 110 languages and has over 2.96 billion users worldwide.¹ In his article for *Brandingmag*, Louis Reyes points to interactivity as a feature of much of the Facebook ecosystem. User posts, reactions and the ability to chat are a great way for users to interact and share.² Instagram’s emerged in

¹ How Many Users Does Facebook Have? (2013–2023). *Oberlo*. Available at: <https://www.oberlo.com/statistics/how-many-users-does-facebook-have> (accessed 3 February 2023).

² Reyes, L. 2022. Succeeding in Platform – Based Marketing – Part 3: What Is Unique to Each Platform? *Brandingmag*, 24 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.brandingmag.com/luis-reyes/succeeding-in-platform-based-marketing-part-3-what-is-unique-to-each-platform/> (accessed 3 February 2023).

2010, and just two years later, it was purchased by Facebook because of the potential of the growing image-sharing network. In 2022, there 1.28 billion³ users. A characteristic of Instagram is the connection to personal aesthetics, which explains the dominant content of photos and images.⁴ The power of traditional media's impact on consumers is progressively losing steam. Interactive social environments are providing new ways of disseminating information. Users themselves are involved in the process through sharing and commenting. Participation in this process builds a community of individuals united by similar interests.

In 'The Digital Sublime. Myth, Power and Cyberspace' (2004) Vincent Mosco (1948) describes in detail the six metaphors that inhabit cyberspace. One of which is that of virtual community. This represents the development of a real online social experience which brings users together to share their lifestyle and build and strengthen a sense of community. This metaphor suggests that it is possible to engage the user electronically and connect people not only emotionally but also cognitively. (Mosco 2004). Not only the existence and functioning of micro-groups, but the right and freedom to build and claim individuality is based on this.

People realise and exercise their right to plan and develop their own lives with as much freedom as possible. (Friedman 1999) They assert and affirm their individuality, while at the same time, with this shaping, seeking selfhood. "They look for those with whom they share a common standard, a common language their understandings (literally and figuratively); they arrange themselves in categories that they find psychologically convenient." (Friedman 1999: 69). Interactive media prompt us to identify with someone else's mental structure (Manovich 2001): we clearly distinguish this process in influencers and their followers. In Compliance, identification, and internalization: Three processes of attitude change (1958), Herbert Kelman (1927–2022) describes three varieties of social influence: compliance, internalization, and identification. The latter is observed when individuals are influenced by a well-liked and respected personality. The essence is that "identification differs from imitation in that it is an unconscious imitation,

³ Dixon, S. 2022. Number of Instagram Users Worldwide from 2020 to 2025. *Statista*, 29 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183585/instagram-number-of-global-users/> (accessed 3 February 2023).

⁴ Reyes, L. 2022. Succeeding in Platform – Based Marketing – Part 3: What Is Unique to Each Platform? *Brandingmag*, 24 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.brandingmag.com/luis-reyes/succeeding-in-platform-based-marketing-part-3-what-is-unique-to-each-platform/> (accessed 3 February 2023).

whereas imitation is conscious copying” (Sharp 1991: 94). People in both the real and digital world are affected by those around them. Using the behaviour of others as a basis for deciding one’s own correct behaviour has also been observed (Cialdini 1984). Another observed factor is unconscious imitation and conscious imitation. Individuals with pleasing appearances have a generally recognized advantage in social interaction (Cialdini 1984). The scope of this advantage falls into a category called “halo effects.” The latter occurs when a positive characteristic dominates the way in which others perceive it. Physical attractiveness is such a characteristic, and we automatically attribute additional qualities to the individual: intelligence, high morals, kindness, etc. (Cialdini 1984). K. Bankov’s interdisciplinary approaches in his study of the face-trust-semiotics relationship suggest that “a trustworthy face is a tangible and objectively measurable asset; one that gives indisputable advantages to the owner and creates difficulties for those who lack it.” (Bankov 2021: 538). Thus “The face of the professional influencer is monetized trust.” (Bankov 2021: 539).

The concept of modern influencer marketing originated not from the aforementioned social media, which currently provides fertile ground for the existence of such personalities, but from Melinda Roberts. In 2002, she created TheMommyBlog.com. Her online space is dedicated to sharing the moments of happiness, anxiety, and uncertainty: all part of the parenting routine.⁵ Despite the lack of clear evidence as to who was the first social media influencer, one thing is certain: the rise of social media has undoubtedly changed influencer marketing.⁶ The emergence and evolution of social media provides users with new opportunities to connect with each other. Influencers are using this opportunity skillfully to connect with their users on a new, emotional, level through curated self-expression. The process of communicating (actively or not) with someone whose photos inspire thoughts of belonging to the same social paradigm.

Participation in social networks has conditions, of course. These conditions apply not just for influencers or less popular users, but to everyone. Self-presentation is one of the fundamental requirements: online communication in this intangible space demands it. In order to be a Facebook

⁵ Weinstein, G. A History of Social Media Influencers. *Find Your Influence*, 26 July 2021. Available at: <https://findyourinfluence.com/a-history-of-social-media-influencers> (accessed 3 February 2023).

⁶ Peker, B. 2020. A Brief History of Influencer Marketing. *Storyly*, 20 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.storyly.io/post/a-brief-history-of-influencer-marketing> (accessed 3 February 2023).

audience for others' self-presentations, you need to present yourself. In this exchange, the same people occupy both positions: that of participant and audience, of recipient and addressee. (Thumim 2012) An element which can be called "essential", without which online communication would be difficult, is the image. Photos of family events and celebrations, photos of pets, tourist attractions and natural landscapes. Every user has the opportunity to communicate their interests, as long as their choice of presentation does not go against the rules of the community (distribution of pornographic content, propaganda of violence, etc.).

Barthes (1915–1980) notes that we live according to a kind of universal imagery, giving the example of the USA: "only images exist, are produced and consumed" (Barthes 2001: 118). Another characteristic difference for advanced societies is that the increased consumption of images comes at the expense of beliefs, suggesting a characterization of societies as more liberal, yet less authentic (Barthes 2001). Photographs are taken deliberately: not to be kept as a personal memory in an archive, but to be shared online for others to see. They are taken until they become "beautiful" and appropriate, until we are sure they will garner enough likes and reactions. Realistically, image building has no connection to identity. (Taylor 1989) The effort and deliberate "directing" of the images is a testament to how users are trying to meet the requirements for certain socially challenged standards. 'One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it' (Taylor 1989: 35) and the individual can only be him/herself when among others.

The Rebellion

Accepting and rejecting fashion elements are choices which each of us uses as a way of expressing our own relationship to the world and constructing our identity. The selection of an outfit and the act of dressing are choices about how we will show ourselves to others, given that objects and situations constitute the actual code of dress (Barthes 2005). Fashion itself is an imitation of an example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation; it is a product of social demands. At the same time it satisfies the need for differentiation, the tendency towards dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast (Simmel 1957: 543). We strive for the choices of those in whose social groups we want to be present. At the same time we try to differentiate ourselves, though not entirely. There is ample evidence of rebellion in the history of fashion. This is as a consequence of significant historical, economic and political factors. Disapproval and meek resistance

gave rise to fashion trends that have left a cultural legacy which continues to echo today.

Opposition to the Vietnam War in 1967, the emancipation of women, and demands for equal civil rights for blacks in the United States built the foundation of the hippie movement. The mid-seventies saw the emergence of the ever-rebellious punks in England who obliterated the notions of good and bad taste in one fell swoop. A few years later followed the panic in the financial markets, the stock market crash of 1987, the Gulf War that followed, the fear of the AIDS epidemic, rising unemployment, and emerging environmental and humanitarian concerns about the global balance. All these events generated a discontent which is evident in the appearance of fashion. The models are too thin, almost anorexic; they have piercings and tattoos. Seattle-born grunge spread rapidly across Europe. The movement was a descendant of British punk and also developed against the backdrop of rocking music. The rebellion was evident in the quite undisguised rejection of fashion (Ormen-Corpet 2000).

The development of codes in the semiotic structure of fashion is no less impressive than the speed of change in the digital world. The dissemination of images of fashion creations nowadays is instant, thanks to the internet. Four decades ago, it was a strictly controlled and well-kept secret among professionals. In the late 1990s, nearly 2,000 journalists from 40 countries, 100 television stations and 400 radio stations were involved in the prêt-à-porter collections in Paris, covering more than 100 fashion shows in one week. International media coverage with the widest possible audience is particularly important for fashion houses, since the potential development of perfumes, cosmetics, accessories and other complementary products lie behind the perfect image of each of the top models, dressed in dream clothes and with flawless make-up and hairstyles, not to mention the large number of jobs as well.

Fashion is often seen as an art, but it is first and foremost an industry that has repercussions all over the world (Ormen-Corpet 2000). The fashion capitals of Milan, London, New York, Paris, Tokyo have not lost their charm, but thanks to the Internet attending fashion events can happen today without leaving the comfort of your own home. Contemporary fashion cities are in an electronic format: fashion blogs, Instagram profiles and social media whose perception goes beyond the virtual space. (Calefato 2021) Today's top models are the debonair influencers on social platforms and their communities. The drive to select clothing in a manner consistent with a particular lifestyle is based on an emotional mechanism which places the subject in a relationship with the object based on social approval (Calefato 2004).

The Common Ground

Print media and illustrated magazines are online today. Culture is overwhelmingly in the digital world. These are the communities we choose to be a part of. They are the idols, communicating through a variety of means their lifestyles, values, preferences and worldviews, including fashion preferences expressed through the publication of the plastic structure of the garment-image (Barthes 2005) We want to be like them, while at the same time looking for ways to assert ourselves. All this requires a high level of media literacy. It concerns the culturally conditioned relationship between three processes: institutional governance; symbolic and material representation of knowledge, culture, and values; dissemination of interpretive skills and abilities among a diverse population. (Thumim 2012)

We have an unlimited opportunity expressed in the ability to access the vast amount of information available on the internet, and knowledge itself is an inexhaustible resource. Therefore, determining an individual's social status is consumption (Taylor 1989), and relates to the very ways in which users use and exchange digital culture. The process of choosing information in our own digital world reflects on our clothing and lifestyle choices. Identity is a process of change, unfolding throughout existence, and the identity presented in virtual space usually does not fully correspond to that in reality.

The line between real-world and virtual-world identity is slender. Returning to the beginning of the text, where we mentioned the unpredictable impact of future trends on cultural foundations and the subsequent approach to the discourse of appearance and identity, we will turn our attention to the predictions of a coming period of CGI. One of the examples I will refer to is Knox Frost: a virtual identity of a non-existent person in the real world. In his communication, Knox Frost shares his current story as an Atlanta robot. His main goal, like many young people his age, is to fit into a social group, and his behaviour is marked by finding new ways to help his community and others along the way. His content generates strong discussions in the comments underneath posts, and the effect of engaging with his followers around the world has seen exponential growth, reaching over one million organic followers in just one year.⁷ Knox Frost's communication is characterized by its advocacy on topics and issues of

⁷ Knox Frost. 1M Total Reach. *Find Your Influence*. Available at: <https://findyourinfluence.com/knox-frost> (accessed 3 February 2023).

social relevance, even entering into a collaboration with the World Health Organization and helping to spread the word about COVID-19.

Brands around the world are also using virtual influencers as an alternative way of reaching new audiences and potential customers. The successful construction of their artificial images is a new reading and application of advertising principles which serve youth as a fetish. In addition to the cosmetic and medical industry, fashion also sells a dose of immortality through its periodic change. (Meinhold 2013) Thus, popular virtual idols, although artificially created, are a great example to follow – a trendy and young template, mostly between the ages of 16 and 20.

One such template is Rozy, a robot launched in 2020 by a subsidiary (Sidus Studio X) of a South Korean advertising agency. Following her rapid rise in popularity, Rozy secured income and sponsorships from media companies and luxury brands, including such names as Chanel and Hermes.⁸ Lil Miquela is a robot collaborating with fashion brands such as Dior and Prada, and includes in her portfolio collaborations with supermodel Bella Hadid for a Calvin Klein campaign. Lil Miquela's name is on Time magazine's list of the most inspiring people of 2018⁹. According to the same article, the robot created by Aww Inc in Tokyo, Imma, has 2.3 million likes on TikTok and Instagram followers to date number 400,000. He has collaborated with luxury brands including Dior, Valentino, Puma, Nike. Collaborations with cosmetics companies (Goshi), the design house Marimekko, Swiss luxury watches (Carl F. Bucherer) are also evident in the content shared by Imma. The robot even decorates the cover of Grazia magazine.

In "The Fashion System," Barthes defines the person on the cover primarily as a paradox. The body is both an abstract institution and an individual body. The representation is not just of his beauty, but of a body deformed by the need to produce a generalization, which is the modern outfit. So, the model's body becomes nobody's body. The artificially created virtual image of CGI not only has no physical body, but its communicated image is not his work, but the result of the collective work of specialists.

There is a significant difference between the images presented by human influencers and those presented by CGI. For the latter, creating content for social environments is considerably easier,¹⁰ which in turn allows for targeted

⁸ Virtual Influencers Rivalling Human Instagram Models. *News.com.au*, 6 August 2022. Available at: <https://www.news.com.au/technology/online/social/virtual-influencers-rivalling-human-instagram-models/news-story/6a32fc537f4bd7b4efac1ee877f2fc1c> (accessed 5 February 2023).

⁹ See note 8.

¹⁰ See note 8.

consistency of their images and what they communicate. Russel Belk writes about our limited ability to segment the audience of our online presentation and about consciously managing the presentation of ourselves. According to him, “the self is much more managed, co-constructed, and interactional” (Belk 2013: 490). For us as users of social media, the diligence to minimize the presentation of controversial entities, even if required, at CGI is an expected outcome of agency teamwork working on building a good image for their robot. Here again we can emphasize the difference between image building and identity building. (Taylor 1989) The second is absent in CGI.

The strong presence of this image in the virtual everyday life of so many people does not address the question of which is the current dominant opposition: analog- digital; young- old; individual – collective? Or, by taking our lives online, are we seeking to assert individuality and recruit followers for virtual images which are suspiciously close to our real identities, while our new idols are themselves robots?

From the theory examined here and drawing a dividing line between image and identity, we can conclude that the more democratic societies are and the more freethinking their units are, the more their credibility fades. The virtual intersection with the everyday life of those we like and emulate requires authenticity in that which is presented. This is shown by data from a survey conducted in the spring of 2022 in the UK, nearly 67% of respondents defined as fashion consumers demand authenticity from influencers.¹¹

A Final Word

The digitalization of most of our daily lives is no longer a novelty, but a routine. Whatever the results of the analyses and discussions devoted to comparing the years before and after the Internet entered our lives, there is a constant need to seek out peers and develop our networks of contacts. Rifkin (1945) adapted Descartes’ maxim “I think, therefore I am” and modified it to read “I am connected therefore I exist” (Rifkin 2000: 223). The digital age provides almost countless opportunities for communication and a stage with a wide audience on which to present ourselves to both those with whom we are connected and those with whom this process is forthcoming. Good literacy and conscious judgment are needed to distinguish the valuable from the illusory, of mass from individual culture.

¹¹ Level of Importance of Authentic Influencers to Fashion and Lifestyle Buyers in the United Kingdom as of Spring 2022. *Statista*, 3 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1320926/authenticity-influencers-fashion-lifestyle-buyers-uk/> (accessed 5 February 2023).

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