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BRANDING & STORYTELLING IN FASHION COMPANIES. WHEN STORYTELLING PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CUSTOMER

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Riassunto

La pandemia ha creato un enorme ostacolo: nessun evento aperto al pubblico e parziale interruzione della vecchia catena dello storytelling della moda.

Il settore della moda coinvolge molti campi professionali, un'estensione globale, un enorme valore economico che in Italia genera un settore correlato che vale la seconda voce del PIL.

Il lockdown ha accelerato la trasformazione digitale portando le imprese a dover ripensare la storia e la rappresentazione della moda, ridisegnare le visioni e interrogarsi sul futuro. Pertanto, tutti i brand della moda hanno dovuto ripensare non solo le strutture organizzative interne, ma anche il modo di raccontarsi e i luoghi dove farlo.

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La letteratura scientifica presenta contributi limitati che indagano la funzione dello storytelling *negli eventi legati alla moda al netto dell'attuale scenario digitale e omnicanale. L'obiettivo del presente studio è comprendere in che modo il* digital storytelling, *anche in un settore esclusivo come quello della moda, può contribuire a far vivere al consumatore un'esperienza unica ed autentica, connettendo brand e consumatori in un modo che questi ultimi si sentano sempre più coinvolti e ingaggiati con i brand.*

Attraverso la conduzione di interviste semi-strutturate con alcuni esperti di comunicazione, operanti nel settore della moda, si è indagato come il processo di storytelling *sia entrato in un evento totalmente digitale per la prima volta come la Milano-Fashion Week. Lo studio contribuisce alla letteratura e alla prassi aziendale fornendo interessanti* insight *su come lo* storytelling *sia uno strumento utile ai brand per suscitare desiderabilità e trasmettere un'emozione verso i consumatori finali da un lato e, dall'altro, strumento utile al consumatore per esprimere se stesso attraverso il brand.*

Parole chiave: branding, storytelling, social media, fashion, Milano-Fashion Week.

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Abstract

The pandemic created a huge obstacle: no event open to the public and partial interruption of the old fashion storytelling chain.

The fashion sector involves many professional fields, a global extension, a huge economic value that in Italy generates a related sector that is worth the second item of GDP.

The lockdown has accelerated the digital transformation leading companies to reconsider the history and representation of fashion, redesign visions and questioning about the future. Therefore, all the fashion brands have had to rethink not only the internal organizational structure, but also the way to tell about themselves and places to do it.

The aim of this research is to underline the importance of storytelling in Milano-Fashion Week in a digital key.

The scientific literature presents limited contributions that investigate the function of storytelling in fashion-related events, within the current digital and omnichannel scenario. The objective of this study is to understand how digital storytelling, even in an exclusive sector such as fashion, has managed to give the consumer a unique and authentic experience, by connecting brands and consumers in a way that makes people more engaged with their favorite brands.

By conducting semi-structured interviews with some communication experts operating in the fashion sector, it was investigated how the storytelling process entered a totally digital event for the first time such as Milano-Fashion Week. The study contributes to literature and business practice by providing interesting insights on how storytelling is a useful tool for brands to arouse desirability and convey an emotion to end consumers on the one hand and, on the other, a useful tool for the consumer to express himself through the brand.

Keywords: branding, storytelling, social media, fashion, Milano-Fashion Week.

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1. Introduction

The rise of digital media is a phenomenon of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and we are still in the process of sorting out its impact on

storytelling. The world wide web is a repository of virtually endless stories, from gossip and urban legends to case studies (Benjamin, 2006).

However, social media also elevates the role of consumers in the co-creation of brands and communications (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). While a brand may initially embody a manufactured commercialized story, consumers' storytelling of personal experiences and opinions becomes absorbed into the brand narrative, hence changing, diluting or disintegrating its identity (Adawal and Wyer, 1998).

When people connect in social media and share content with their virtual friends and acquaintances, they are in essence all storytellers and the sharing of stories is how they perform socialites. If a story has sufficient appeal and interest, it can spread beyond people's own networks in social media and potentially be shared around the globe (Lund *et al.*, 2018). Hence, if people have the right storytelling competencies, the potential dissemination and reach of stories can result in them influencing millions of people. Thus, great storytelling leads to influence and power; it can affect discourses (Heejin and Childs, 2016). It is important to consider the role of storytelling as central of the four technologies of power as social media consist of text and images through which users tell stories to communicate their actions and ideas and to produce self-representations. As stories are the means of communication, it underscores the notion of social media as spaces of storytelling (Yang and Kang, 2021). The relationship that sees brands and their audience protagonists has been revolutionized by the increasingly frequent use of social media by brands, global and not (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012).

From Instagram to Facebook passing through simple messages to the number of the store or brand contact person on WhatsApp, the relationship consumers live with brands nowadays is a direct relationship, of mutual contact (Heejin and Childs, 2016).

Digital platforms are the main way of salvation to conquer the exponential increase in time that everyone, out of duty and pleasure, spends online. In the virtual world, fashion brands have colonized the digital places most frequented by the public: social networks, but in particular, gaming platforms or those platforms where, by nature, there are people who do little shopping and a lot of video games online (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010). Contaminating the storytelling of the fashion show with gamification languages is an investment if not for long, at least in the medium term.

Georges (1969, p. 323), proposed that storytelling events be researched as holistic communicative events, however, he constrained the meaning of a storytelling event to the particular event.

Boje (1991, p. 106) described storytelling as "[...]the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders".

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Another approach to the study of storytelling resided within the field of communication theory. Rhetorical discourse has a lengthy tradition and included both argument and narrative as forms of speech. Approaches to narrative have been developed and described by numerous scholars (Burke, 1955; Campbell, 1970; Fisher, 1987). Even if all these lines of research underline the importance of creating stories of value, capable of transmitting contents that remain etched in the head of the listener, only few studies have investigated the power of storytelling as a means of transferring not only content but also emotions (Spierling *et al.*, 2002; Blom and Beckhaus, 2005). Moreover, in today's environment organizations are struggling to understand how to use storytelling as a strategy to offer a customer experience of value, different from their competitors (Chan and Yau, 2019).

To bridge this gap, this paper aims to understand if, with the advent of the pandemic and the need to transport everything online, storytelling has maintained its goal of making people excited, and if social media have in some way contributed to both clarity of the message, allowing it to reach even more consumers, and to let emotions pass through a digital screen.

Specifically, by combining storytelling strategy with the use of social media, the study analyzes the digital storytelling as a new tool that organizations today have at their disposal to promote their heritage and products.

The paper theoretical contribution is threefold. First, this research adds to the extant literature focused on brand heritage and storytelling by shedding light on how fashion brands have adapted to this new social environment, also modifying their organizational strategies in order to better blend with the new markets, born thanks to the new social networks introduced by social platforms. Only few studies have analyzed the role of storytelling in the fashion world, and more specifically the storytelling strategies used during the Milano-Fashion Week. Thus, this study fills a gap in the literature by going to deepen the influence of the digitalization process of storytelling strategies in general, and in a particular context of the 2021 digital Milano-Fashion Week.

In this regard, findings reveal that storytelling could be an effective differentiation element that allow companies to achieve a superior competitive advantage.

Second, this article contributes to social media and storytelling literature by shedding light on the fact that social storytelling is a double edged sword. In other words, this study emphasizes that, on the one hand storytelling can allow fashion brand to reach a broader audience by emotionally engaging customers; while, on the other hand, stories on social media can also lead to disastrous brand image and value damages by making narrative inconsistencies more visible and noticeable.

Finally, this paper contributes also to the new stream of literature focused on analyzing the impact of Covid-19 on omnichannel strategies and customer experience. Even if during the Covid-19 fashion brands were damage, the study highlights how the social storytelling strategy has facilitated the transmission of brand values, heritage and products by establishing emotional connections, interpreting experiences and shaping the social identity of individuals.

The remaining part of the paper is organized as follows. First of all, the theoretical foundation, the literature review of branding and storytelling, and the methodology used are described. After that, the findings of the study in terms of conceptualization of the storytelling approaches are presented. Afterward, this study discusses the managerial implications of the findings. Finally, the paper concludes with limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Digital Storytelling

Storytelling is defined in many different ways. Barbara Benjamin (2006), defines storytelling as "a way to transfer knowledge from the storyteller to others, a way to help people look at reality and formulate ideas and ideals" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 2).

Storytelling is the sharing of ideas and experiences through words and actions to communicate and make meaning about our lives and the lives of others. Well-managed brands have a story at their core, which is consistent with its core values. Telling a story is not a guarantee for success, it is also important to know what kind of story to tell and in which manner (Baker, 2014).

The principle of storytelling is one of the key strategies in digital and mobile marketing, this principle is found in video marketing strategies, social media, events and exhibitions open to the public, which seek to interact with the public and show their history (Gonzàlez Romo *et al.*, 2017). In marketing strategies, convincing consumers to join the brand journey is key, and this is what creates the "storytelling" principle. In addition to inviting consumers to travel the brand, digital and mobile marketing strategies through blogs, digital forums and social networks create a parallel communication with their consumers, interacting and creating viral messages in social networks, talking with their consumers, making them part of the brand world (Yang and Kang, 2021).

Telling the story of a brand requires images, words and videos that are specifically studied and organized since the ultimate goal is to attract customers, intrigue them and lead them to follow that particular story.

According to Bendoni (2020), the goal of storytelling is to connect the audience with the transmitted message. The more attractive is the story, the more potential customers will be interested in the brand. An effective storytelling campaign includes a process of relational development between the public and the company. The consistency of a brand story maintains customer interest, and strengthens their long-term engagement. This, according to Bendoni (2020), is the true essence of storytelling.

A good narrative also needs visual support, a symbolic contribution that manages to arouse emotion. With the help of meaningful and powerful images and words on a symbolic level, the narration helps the listener to identify with the story and become the protagonist of it (Bendoni, 2020).

An advertising model par excellence in the field of storytelling, also for the social commitment shown, is Nike, a company that has always distinguished itself thanks to commercials that promote social progress, closeness to ethnic minorities, support to public figures (athletes, politicians, social movements) who take sides against social injustices, using images of high symbolic value and words that directly affect the souls of the audience.

One of the particularly communicative examples was the commercial published by Nike on June 30, 2020 "You can't stop us", in which Nike tells the strength of sport and its ability to integrate anyone without any barrier or difference through the innovative use of a dynamic split screen, which shows the moving images of different athletes and sports that intertwine harmoniously; thus a multiple narrative is born enriched by exciting words that lead to a single final message, namely that the passion for sport is the same for everyone, regardless of nationality, sexual orientation, disability or skill or religious profession (theJapanTimes.co.jp).

The short video has reached almost sixty million views on YouTube alone in just five months, enjoying a not indifferent global success thanks to its narrative peculiarities.

2.1.1. Fashion events in a social key

Much of the literature present has analyzed how fashion companies use digital storytelling to promote their values, in particular sustainability (Connel and Kozer, 2012; Chan and Wong, 2012).

Also, due to the increasing openness of fashion weeks, not only are carefully constructed brand constellations created by professional fashion marketers contributing to the position of fashion brands. This is also the case in terms of brand constellations created by digitally savvy users of social media. In view of

this development, and fashion's ever increasing integration in the social media landscape (Laurell, 2014), more knowledge is needed with regards to how brand constellations in social media emerge in the context of fashion weeks and as a result of engaged social media users.

The principle of storytelling is one of the key strategies in digital and mobile marketing, the principle is found in video marketing strategies, social media, events and exhibitions open to the public, which seek to interact with the public and show their history (Brun and Castelli, 2013). In marketing strategies, convincing consumers to join the brand journey is key, and this is what creates the storytelling principle (Moore and Doyle, 2010).

Starting from the dawn of this social revolution, Bendoni (2020) highlights how, thanks to social media, there is much more pressure on the fashion system, more need to adapt to a greater speed of recycling styles and trends; we are therefore talking about a world that is now obliged to adapt to the immediate availability of information to which the public is accustomed. Historically, in fact, in the pre-social era, the fashion world was based on a precise protocol that determined an equally precise timing regarding access to boutique collections (Yang and Kang, 2021). Suffice it to say that the public, having only the traditional media available, could get to wait four to seven months to be able to see an entire collection published in a magazine or broadcast on television (Bendoni, 2020). The pace and trendsetting were therefore well-marked elements and organized in a very precise order. The same was true for exclusive and private fashion shows, open only to staff members, press and photographers.

RQ1: *The digital storytelling strategy can be considered a showcase for brands?*
RQ2: *Digital storytelling strategy can be a form of customer attraction?*

3. Research design

The aim of the paper is to shed light on how storytelling plays a fundamental role in companies' branding strategies. Storytelling is also facilitated by the spread of social media.

This purpose suggests a need for the richness of data that can be achieved through a qualitative study.

This study is exploratory in nature (Stake, 1995).

Given the exploratory nature of the research, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10 communication experts, specialized in the fashion sector. In addition, the social media of the major fashion companies were analyzed and the fashion shows (where it was possible) on the various social networks were followed.

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3.1. Research setting

The research focused on Milano-Fashion week because for the first time, in almost 40 years of history, it took place entirely online, with closed doors. No one was able to attend the fashion shows, but for most of the brands it was possible to follow the show, sitting comfortably at home.

For this reason and to successfully address the research aim, the study investigates the online storytelling strategies realized by fashion companies during the Milano-Fashion Week for five main reasons.

First, the Milano-Fashion Week annual event hosts the fashion shows of the world's leading fashion brands, and is enriched with worldly events and high-sounding presentations, as well as influencers and celebrities.

Second, the social media have transformed this event by opening the catwalks to a wider audience and by making the information related to the collections of the brands immediate usable.

In fact, originally fashion week was open only to the media and buyers so as to give a preview of the collections before they were submitted to the public; this led buyers to shop based on their own sensations and sales forecasts made on the products according to their market target (Bendoni, 2020).

Starting in 2006, fashion weeks began to invite even the first fashion bloggers and with the advent of these new figures within the Fashion Week we arrive at today when the audience of the fashion shows is mainly composed of celebrities and influencers, who are often the first communicators of images, news and opinions regarding products seen on the catwalk and who are brand ambassadors of famous brands.

Third, today, it has emerged a totally different approach to trendsetting based on social trends and virality such as, feeds, likes, shares on platforms (Mittenfeller, 2019).

Fourth, in recent years a new trend emerged also in the fashion companies is the social commerce phenomenon that allows consumers to buy fashion product directly through social media platforms without having to resort to third parties or the use of web browser such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

Finally, brands are storytellers: who speak to a transgenerational audience, tune in to their needs, adopt their language codes and meet them on their online platforms. A good story can be rich in elements and details, which can make people with different characteristics fall in love with the brand. Telling a story, and letting emotions pass can bring out memories that will allow people to become attached to the brand.

Therefore, the Milano-Fashion Week seems to be a suitable research setting since it represents a unique and rich case for analyzing the power of storytelling as a means of transferring not only content but also emotions.

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3.2. Sample and data collection methods

In addressing the aim of this study, a purposive sample was used because in case of studies the sample size is too small to guarantee a random sampling (Stake, 2000). The sample is compost by 10 communication experts, specialized in the fashion world.

With regard to data collection, different information sources were used to provide depth to the cases, enhance data credibility and triangulate findings (Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1990). Data was collected mainly through semi-structured interviews and secondary data analysis, such as information available on social media and websites.

Interviews were chosen as a primary source of data because they are highly intuitive and useful, especially when the phenomenon of interest is largely unexplored (Creswell, 2008; Eisenhardt and Grabner, 2007), and because of their flexibility and exploratory capacity (Maxwell, 2005).

For this approach, a set of open-ended questions provided the structure of the in-depth interview protocol. Open-ended questions are useful in exploratory research because they allow respondent to freely express their point of view (Malhotra, 2010). Because of the high compatibility of open-ended questions, the interviews were conducted by Zoom. Each interview lasted from 30 to 50 min. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed *verbatim* (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Besides interviews, secondary data were gathered from different online sources. In particular, from Facebook, YouTube and Instagram official accounts. All these secondary data have been analyzed to corroborate and make findings from primary sources more accurate (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Stake, 1995).

Nowadays, social networks have become places of comparison and discussion widely used by members of society, regardless of gender, social class and ethnicity (Bendoni, 2020).

Online, users form real communities by creating bonds that overcome traditional space-time constraints and generating a network of personal relationships in which the fundamental element is the circulation of information. A virtual community, like the real one, is based on a sense of belonging and trust, the principle of interdependence between members and the desire to contribute socially and take care of others by sharing intellectual and emotional resources.

3.3. Data analysis

With regard to interviews, before coding the interviews' *verbatim* transcriptions, the data were examined and analyzed for recurring themes and concepts across the different cases to develop an initial code list according to the specific research aim (Miles and Hubermann, 1994).

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Content analysis was performed by two authors separately using the software Nvivo 11, in accordance with the principles of the literature (Kassarjian, 1997; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). A structural coding was performed by identifying and tagging the text associated with a particular topic using codes within nodes (Krippendorff and Bock, 2010). Subsequently, the nodes and codes identified were validated by a third coder.

At the end of the coding process, some conceptually similar codes were summarized and regrouped into higher-order nodes, while others were excluded because they were considered marginal (Lewins and Silver, 2007). This process was repeated until all transcriptions have been satisfactorily coded (Krippendorff and Bock, 2010).

Tab.1 – Codes and themes

Themes	No. of quotes	Sample codes
New way for attractiveness	5	Eye-catching story; information sharing; brand perception; social media
Increased differentiation against competitors	3	Influencer increased popularity; partnerships with different stakeholders; omnichannel strategy
Customers' perceptions	6	Emotions; new forms of narrations; interaction

More, in detail, data retrieved from secondary sources were cataloged, coded and grounded in the interviews' results (Yin, 2003).

Tab. 2 – Distribution of respondents' main characteristics across the sample

ID	Organizational Role	Gender	Length of interviews
1	Communication Manager	F	35 minutes
2	Marketing Manager	F	50 minutes
3	Communication Manger	M	25 minutes
4	PR Manager	F	40 minutes
5	Key Account Fashion	M	36 minutes
6	PR Manager	M	28 minutes
7	Key Account Fashion	M	48 minutes
8	Marketing Manager	M	23 minutes
9	Communication Manager	F	45 minutes
10	Marketing Manager	M	33 minutes

Finally, as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003), in the first step of the data analysis process each case was studied and analyzed by itself.

4. Findings

The present research is based on an analysis of the digital storytelling strategies implemented by some fashion companies during Milano-Fashion Week, and from the interviews carried out with fashion companies experts.

In general, it emerged that, despite the fashion companies have adopted a digital approach with more effort than others sectors, the Milano-Fashion Week was a success (Pambianco.it), perhaps paving the way for blended approaches also for the next few years.

The interviews reveal that compared with mainstream brands, fashion brands has experienced a slow start with social media marketing, albeit a rapid growth in the digital universe. Social networks, especially photo – and video-sharing platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest, are attracting attention as effective venues for brand advertising and communication. Nowadays, through social networks, fashion brands not only provide information about products, innovation, design and trends but also they can engage customers by involving, moving and getting them exciting with brands.

In fact, as stated by a manager:

In the fashion and luxury sector, a brand with an eye-catching history is a brand that provides information about itself and at the same time capable of seducing those who listen to it, those who research it and those who live it; strengthening and raising the perception of the brand itself (Marketing Manager, 8).

Interviews also reveal that social media play a crucial role in telling story. This leads to the emergence of a freer and more shared luxury thanks to the development of platforms made available by social media that substantially change the brand-user relationship: from a product to sell to a story to tell. In this regard, a manager said:

Luxury is an experience that cannot be relegated to a specific product or category, but rather represents a lifestyle. For luxury brands who want to communicate their lifestyle, digital and social media are not tools to promote their products, but represent an opportunity to tell the complete and complex history of the brand in a new way (Communication Manager, 9).

Moreover, the interviewees emphasize that fashion brands can be effective storytellers by integrating different communication channels, and using each

content as a piece of their own story. The sense of discovery is what drives consumers and users to continue their research journey.

Today, social media and apps are an effective tool to set up a communication strategy that takes the form of a diary, a story, a narrative.

Brands have therefore begun to use these tools as they are using by real users. They have profiles on Tumblr and Twitter, they post videos, images and links on the new Facebook timeline, they keep their diary photo up to date on Instagram and lately they have been constantly populating Pinterest boards.

The new frontier is that of T-commerce – or trade via a smart digital TV-set – undertaken, for now in a very simple way.

It is now unthinkable not to talk about omnichannel. In this vision there is no dichotomy between the physical store and the online one, but one becomes an integration of the other and vice versa, overcoming the barriers between digital experience and in-store experience. Users can by products and services through social commerce directly through the social platforms, but the important thing is that they have the plus of sharing their shopping experiences directly on social platforms (Key Account Fashion, 5).

Storytelling has emerged as a cost-effective technique to engage consumers with an advertised brand.

The introduction of social networks is seen as an alternative for communication and commerce, in fact the advantage offered by these social networks is precisely the reduction of distances and the opportunity to advertise or sponsor a certain product.

The advantage is that many social networks have a content promotion system that generally requires a small investment, just think of Instagram, Facebook as the most popular ones; but during this Fashion Week we have discovered many others, especially gaming platforms (Marketing Manager, 2).

On the one hand, social media community represents a positive aspect for fashion brands due to the fast dissemination of information; on the other hand, however, this advantage can immediately turn into traps for fashion brands, always in the spotlight. In other words, if the coverage of a larger and faster audience on the one hand, on the other hand the "go viral" can also lead to disastrous damage. Narrative inconsistencies are today more visible and very noticeable. But other limits can be analyzed, such as the lack of physical contact, especially in this sector, it can be a great limitation, the lack of immediacy and the impossibility of capturing with one's gaze.

Storytelling is definitely a form of attraction for customers, you have to speak their language, you have to use their symbols; like all things, however, it can be a double-

edged sword, on the one hand if you find the right words you will have more visibility and therefore more consumers who will be interested in what you say and therefore what you sell; but as soon as you communicate something the wrong way, you risk losing everything. Storytelling is like it's a business card for the company, just miss a single word and you risk failing (Communication Manager, 1).

Findings reveal also that social media storytelling can be seen as a strategy of differentiation for fashion brands since by integrating videos and photos into a more interactive way brands are enabled to directly engage customers and to provide a desirable and a seamless experience.

Social media offer fashion brands the opportunity to communicate their history in a richer, qualitative and "aesthetic" way. From the moment that these brands are closely associated, and sometimes defined by the proverbial beauty of their products, the possibility of integrating these images with content that is always up-to-date and able to create a strong engagement, within the new pages is particularly effective.

Not only will it attract many more followers but brands will be able to pass on their heritage to their followers in a way that is more attractive and distinctive. The result will be a fervent storytelling, able to combine the classic tools of communication (photos, images and videos) in an element of interactivity capable of attracting and retaining enthusiasts.

It helps the consumer dress for what they stand for and subtly tells their story through what they choose to wear. It definitely shapes how people view the brand (Marketing Manager, 2).

From an omnichannel perspective, interviews suggest that stories and storytelling strategies can be considered as an enabler of brand value and image since they help fashion brands to involve consumers in the world of the brand in a more emotional way and coherently with the brand history and tradition. In this way stories allow fashion brands to build awareness, comprehension, empathy, recognition, recall, and provide meaning to the brand. As stated by the majority of interviews, in recent years, storytelling has become an important brand strategy within the fashion sector through which fashion companies create authentic brand stories.

This allows fashion brands to build an engaged community around their values, improving word of mouth, trust, recognizability and loyalty.

In recent years the world has become democratized and now practically anyone can decide to make their own collection and sell it on the web, thus bypassing the traditional distribution channels. But a seemingly simple recipe has filled thousands of dry and cold

virtual store sites where the products, photographed against a white background, all look alike and no longer have any feature of recognizability (Key Account Fashion, 5).

However, interviews reveal that creating an authentic story across all touchpoints in an omnichannel perspective can be very complex. To go further, interviewees suggest that the function of brand storytelling have to be carried out especially by focusing on their website, e-commerce, Instagram and offline stores where companies can tell brands and collections to the end user in a much more innovative and passionate way.

The adoption of an omnichannel strategy certainly presents a high degree of complexity for companies, and in fashion we are not exempt, quite the contrary. The most frequent mistake in an omnichannel strategy is certainly to consider the sales channels as independent by attributing different objectives and functions to them: all this is reflected in the customer experience which is highly disorganized when the final consumer passes, for example, from the physical channel to the digital one. But, there are other complexities such as the difficulty of updating in real time the references still available in stock, reviewing the entire supply-chain. Obviously, with adequate training, everything can be overcome! (Key Account Fashion, 7)

With the advent of the pandemic situation, fashion brand storytelling has become more digital than ever. Also the fashion shows have changed going digital, given the opportunity to brands to experiment themselves in order to not to change the essence of the event, namely a place to connect with and reach a wider global audience. In fact, as stated by a manager:

Brands had to maintain the grandeur of the event and even push further because digital platforms are crowded with a much wider audience than fashion (PR Manager, 6).

Both in general terms and in the fashion industry, interviewees declared that the Covid-19 has accelerated the digitalization process that was already taking place, but taking it to an extreme level. In fact, the fashion industry has been hit hard by the pandemic situation since it dramatically changed the shopping patterns and consumer behavior. Interviewees reveal that in an early stage fashion companies have dealt with disorientation but in a later stage they speeded up with the digitalization process.
In this regard, a manger said:

I do not deny that at the beginning there was disorientation, but in the end you are a great company if you accept the challenge and try to overcome it in the best way. Moreover, I believe that this has helped us in a kind of way, both to become increasingly digital and to become increasingly green and sustainable (PR Manager, 4).

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Thus, brands make big investments in digitization to become *phygital*. This leads to another change, if previously brands were mainly product creators now become like media, as broadcasters, they become content producers with real schedules because being online and colonizing the digital world means this. In this context, the storytelling strategies have played a crucial role: they allowed fashion brands to produce more emotional contents than what was the fashion show before, to connect directly with the final audience, and to tune into their languages and needs. Therefore, in the fashion industry, social storytelling becomes contaminated and multidisciplinary thanks also to the collaboration established with digital artists, famous photographers and directors, computer graphics, computer scientists, and musicians.

In my opinion, the fact that the consumer could only see us online made us think out of the box like never before. We had to reach everyone and perhaps we also felt responsible, that is, we were the creators of one of the few beautiful moments that people have been able to experience for a year now. And therefore we had to give our best, and this is also possible thanks to collaborations/partnership with different figures (Marketing Manager, 10).

In sum, the interviews carried out revealed that it is impossible to separate fashion and identity: from the way a person is dressed, firms can deduce many things about his/her life and character. This is one of the main ties that brands create with their consumers to allow them feel closer and emotionally engaged. In this perspective, a good marketing campaign for fashion brands should put consumers and their emotions at the center and should exploit a strong visual aesthetic in their touchpoints' content strategy.

Therefore, the digital storytelling strategy can be effectively considered as a showcase for brands since the ultimate purpose of the narration is to arouse emotions in the target audience, and to obtain this result transparency, authenticity and coherence are necessary. Storytelling can also help customer attraction if the brand is aligned with their core values and concepts conveyed by storytelling. The brand must therefore be the story it tells. Otherwise, the promise of a relationship with one's audience is betrayed. A brand consistent with its narrative triggers the so-called emotional benefit in the public: an advantage that the customer or potential customer perceives beyond any rational consideration. Thus, digital storytelling strategy can be considered a form of powerful customer attraction.

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5. Discussion

Nowadays, consumer experiences are less about products and more about relationships.

Everyone tells stories. Narratives powerful like ancient Greek myths have taught us how to relate to certain values and how the impact of stories shape our lives. When fashion designers and brand use these very same narratives, they become the storyteller, the expert of storytelling and apparel comes alive. The winning formula for consumer engagement is storytelling (Kemp *et al.*, 2021). Fashion designers and brands are honing in on the art of creating compelling content and telling immersive stories that instantly hook people in. Accordingly, this study attempts to shed light on how digital and social storytelling was a good strategy to strengthen the connection between fashion brands and customers.

In telling stories online, there are different levels of participation which are afforded to the audience, from the relatively passive engagement which occurs when reading a web site, to the full-engagement which takes places when the individuals are able to share their own stories on social media platforms.

In this context, this study analyzes storytelling strategies adopted by fashion brands in order to face two big challenges of today's competitive environment, namely digital transformation and Covid-19. More in detail, this study investigates the role played by digital and social storytelling in strengthening the brand-customer relationship, in making people excited, in allowing firms to reach broader targets, and in letting emotions and experiences pass through a digital screen. By combining storytelling strategy with the use of social media, the study sheds light on storytelling as a new tool that organizations today have at their disposal to promote their heritage and products.

Storytelling is a sharing of ideas of experiences, in which the content certainly plays an important role, but attention must also be paid to how the narration takes place (Baker, 2014). The narration must be of quality, attractive, it must involve the consumer, but above all it must remain impressed in his mind in a positive and emotional way.

In the fashion industry, building stories can take several forms: the creation of content on blogs, social media sites, and video hosting platforms; the sharing and forwarding of existing content. Without these elements of audience, or consumer, participation, story worlds fail.

The study's findings confirm the effectiveness of digital and social storytelling in differentiating fashion brands and in facilitating the emotional engagement of customers. In fact, in line with previous studies (Boateng and Okoe, 2015), interviews suggest that storytelling allows firms to build a positive and strong impression by conveying authentic brand messaging. Moreover, storytelling

favors fashion firms in adopting a customer-centric approach by centering around customers their stories and making people involved in brands heritage and values (Yang and Kang, 2021). In this way, fashion brands engage customers and create brand love (Batra *et al.*, 2012).

According also to Herskovitz and Crystal (2010), study's findings reveal that a successful storytelling is able to differentiate brands from their competitors. Thanks to digital storytelling, exciting fashion stories are realized and brands benefit from being everywhere and from amazing and capturing the users' attention with innovative digital textures. To do this, storytelling has to be based on adequate narrative mechanisms, focused on more specific, unique and emotional contents in order to go deeper and capture not only customers' attention but also devotion and love.

Even if digital and social storytelling is an effective tool in differentiating brands, results also reveal that storytelling could represents a double-edged sword, meaning it could lead to either positive or negative effects. This interesting result fits into the current debate about the mixed effects of storytelling on the relationship between fashion brands and customers. In fact, if on the one hand successful and immersive stories can lead fashion firms to gain a competitive advantage, on the other hand they can go wrong and work contradictorily. More in detail, storytelling could have a negative influence on the consumers perceptions and attitude towards the brand (Dessart and Pitardi, 2019). In fact, due to the fact that through social media storytelling, the narratives could reach a broader number of customers, the main risk is that either mistakes or incoherencies in telling stories about the brand tradition and culture can lead to disastrous damage of brand image and customers' perception. This stream of literature is in contrasts with that of other scholars who instead see storytelling as an interactive way to engage customers and widespread brand heritage. In fact, it seems that storytelling tends to be more effective regarding long-term attitude and intention because it works on feelings and beliefs by activating narrative transportation and improving brand awareness (Van Laer *et al.*, 2014).

A brand story also makes consumers feel that the brand resonates with their own personal life to create better engagement (Kim *et al.*, 2016).

The findings of this study also emphasize that, digital and social storytelling represents an innovative communication channel to face the challenge of the pandemic caused by Covid-19 in an omnichannel perspective. With the pandemic, fashion brands and consequently storytelling have had to go digital and to rethink their omnichannel strategies in order to maintain their relationship with customers. As pointed out in literature by Baker (2014) storytelling is the sharing of ideas and experiences through words and actions to communicate and make meaning about our lives and the lives of others. A brand that wishes

to be successful with a certain audience, therefore, must be able to make itself unique even in the midst of a crowd. This means creating campaigns that create an emotional connection with the audience. We must therefore have a story to tell. Whether you do it through a video, through a series of posts on social media, through a photo shoot or through an experiential marketing campaign, the important thing is to have a story that can involve and excite the listener, activating an identification mechanism.

The stories told through a digital screen have become eye-catching and interactive in order to allow consumers to not leave the screen and engage them in an emotional and immersive way. In order to build an immersive story and a seamless experience through all the touchpoints, the results showed that, during the Milano-Fashion Week, brands have established different forms of partnerships with photographers, artists, computer scientists, and digital experience experts. In fact, fashion brands have started to create rich storytelling and memorable experiences in order to make their communication coherent alongside all touchpoints and to conserve the uniqueness of their brand value. In line with previous studies (Lazaris *et al.*, 2018; Aiolfi and Sabbadin, 2019), it has emerged that storytelling is useful to elevate the experience in the omnichannel era by making it more immersive, more sensorial and more emotional and, thus, by allowing customers to feel more engaged and identified with their favorite brands both in the digital and physical environment.

6. Conclusions

This study sheds new light on the relationship between storytelling, social media and fashion brands by adopting a managerial perspective. The study interviews 10 communication experts of the fashion sector and the findings provide useful insights, both theoretically and practically.

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study constitutes an important step forward in understanding the role played by digital and social storytelling in the relationship between fashion companies and consumers.

To the best of authors' knowledge, there is a lack of research analyzing the different storytelling strategies put in action from the fashion brands during the pandemic situation and, more specifically, during the Milano-Fashion Week. In fact, few studies have investigated the power of storytelling as a means of

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transferring not only content but also emotions (Spierling *et al.*, 2002; Blom and Beckhaus, 2005) by adopting a managerial lens. Moreover, in today's environment organizations are struggling to understand how to use storytelling as a strategy to offer a seamless, immersive and valuable customer experience that enables brands to differentiate their value propositions from their competitors (Chan and Yau, 2019). In this regard, the study furthers the knowledge about storytelling in the fashion industry by shedding light on the fact that digital and social storytelling is a right way to differentiate brands, to directly interact with customers and to attract and engage them by establishing an emotional and responsive connection.

Moreover, the study contributes to enrich the body of knowledge in branding and storytelling by emphasizing strengths and weakness of storytelling. In fact, this study contributes to the debate about the mixed effects of storytelling, either positive or negative. Finally, the study's findings also contribute to the extant literature on omnichannel strategies. Given the rise of disruptive technologies and the advent of Covid-19, the study shows the crucial role played by coherent narratives in fashion firms omnichannel strategies. In fact, the ability of these firms to realize immersive and emotional stories across all the touchpoints are fundamental to provide customers with a seamless and valuable experience.

6.2. Managerial implications

In the fashion world, the mechanisms of storytelling are still far from being used effectively and the brands that use them consciously are still few.

In practice, storytelling serves to get in touch with the final consumer directly, and with the advent of digital transformation and of the pandemic situation, it is undergoing an important evolution in its languages. In this context, managers interested in fostering their storytelling strategies have to pay more attention to create engaging story that guides customers in their decision-making process, by influencing their perceptions and attitude and by leveraging the emotional aspect of the brand-customer experience. Managers should also be aware on the fact that storytelling have to be immersive in order to transfer brand value and brand uniqueness and, thus, to improve brand recognition through all the touchpoints. Moreover, firms should enrich their omnichannel strategy by integrating digital and social storytelling to communicate, tell and present brands, products and their universe of imaginaries to the final audience in a more emotional way. Ideally, story-listeners relate to and identify with the story and its author and, therefore, it is essential that the teller (namely the brand) of the story involve and engage its audience, including the listeners in the narrative by arousing

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their emotions, stimulating their sympathies, and causing them to cease being passive listeners and begin being active participants in the narrative. Social media platforms trigger community's emotional involvement through members' narratives. In this context, marketers have to provide experiential interactions to help consumers utilize the necessary resources for compelling self-storytelling.

Fashion brands, never as in this period, must be creative and innovative. They must be the first not only in their own sector, but also in the digital sector, and a world is opening up more and more towards co-branding. Even if storytelling is an activity that must line up all the details into the messages through themes and imaginations of the brands, fashion companies must not lose the focus on products in order to reach their final audience in a direct and correct way. Finally, fashion companies have to interpret the present and help customers to give sense to the future by speaking the languages of society and participating in shaping them.

Giving emotions to customers through a digital screen and in an increasingly integrated omnichannel context will be the challenge of the next few years for luxury professionals. The challenge will not only be to propose innovative, unique and sustainable products but also to convey emotions. In this, digital is playing an essential role in conveying emotions to an increasingly young audience. The notion of experience is no longer enough to satisfy the expectations of luxury consumers. The goal is no longer to dominate the competition but rather to build an identity, a brand personality and a unique relationship with the reference market, which makes comparison with other players impossible. Surprising is no longer enough, you have to create something unexpected that has meaning and conveys the values of the brand.

The certainty remains that fashion loves novelties: the infinite potential of the digital and the collaboration of creative and technical crafts, have provided the perfect boost for unique alternatives of fashion digital storytelling.

6.3. Limits and future research

This research is not without limitations that could provide interesting directions for future research. First, the qualitative nature of the research design and the focus on a specific sector, such as fashion, certainly places some limitations on the generalization of results. Second, the research sample is constituted by only ten communication experts. Future research should enlarge the sample by involving other practitioners directly involved in the fashion industry. Finally, the study is a first attempt to analyze the role of digital and social storytelling during the pandemic situation and by adopting a managerial perspective. Further

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research might empirically explore, also by adopting a quantitative research design, how social storytelling strategies affect also the customer journey by combining managerial and customer perspectives.

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