Beyond the Runway: Embracing Speculative Design in Fashion Films During COVID-19

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BEYOND THE RUNWAY: EMBRACING SPECULATIVE DESIGN IN FASHION FILMS DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how fashion brands utilize speculative design in fashion films to innovate communication and strengthen brand identity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analysis of three films, highlights speculative design's effectiveness in creating culturally resonant, future-oriented narratives that enhance brand positioning and emotional engagement with consumers.

Keywords: Fashion; Social role of fashion; Speculative Design; Fashion Films; Contemporary Fashion Brands

INTRODUCTION

Understanding fashion, a specific way of life that aims at the trend for social equality and at the same time, a trend for individual difference and diversity in a single procedure (Simmel, 2006), fashion, nowadays, the traditional forms of communication and exposure in stores, expands through the most diverse channels and formats. This is not only limited to runway shows or street windows but also takes on innovative and digital forms, such as Fashion Films (Soloaga & Guerrero, 2016). These digital fashion contents are not only vehicles for displaying collections but rather visual narratives that overlap fashion itself, embedding themselves in contemporary culture and reflecting the complexities and variations of modern society (García, 2021). As discussions around fashion broaden beyond the traditional, visual communication assumes a central and fundamental role. Fashion Films emerge as a marketing tool in the dynamic communication strategy of contemporary fashion brands, to tell stories,

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explore identities, and communicate particularities in an engaging and immersive way (Hernández-Herrera et al., 2022). This setting challenges the traditional by providing opportunities for content creation and sharing, encouraging not only aesthetic appreciation but also a deeper understanding of the narratives behind fashion creations (Kim, 2020). Re-evaluating communication strategies in fashion and perfecting effective opportunities for visual transmission, especially through Fashion Films, has the potential to redefine the experience in fashion (Rodriguez & García, 2018). Designers and fashion brands of greater expression are responsible for the exhibition and definition of what is a fashion trend and its diffusion. Patterns of consumer behaviour are defined by how the fashion industry is conducted.

This is and will always be a profitable industry. Increasingly, the appreciation of aesthetic appearance in various aspects of everyday life is valued, contributing to the fact that in modernity there is an aestheticization. In addition to clothing, fashion also influences the aesthetics of spaces, objects, and even bodies, transforming human life into a visual display. With globalization, fashion in modernity has become a worldwide phenomenon, where trends and styles can spread rapidly in various parts of the world. This contributes to a certain homogenization, with dominant international brands and a certain standardization of consumer tastes and preferences. Because it is volatile and constantly changing, fashion in modern society will always be constantly updated (Fontenelle, 2009; Lipovestky, 2010; Cardoso, 2017). Speculative design is a perspective, through design searches futures and contextualizes the current conventions. Through narratives, objects, or scenarios that oppose the existing norms, calls for critical reflections on the possibilities of diverse futures, instead of staying only for the resolution of immediate problems. This action contributes to a creative

vision and the argumentation about directions that technology, culture, and society would have as an option, to explore alternative paths, with a sense to foster debates and critical reflections (Dune & Raby, 2013).

Studying fashion cycles and trends through the interaction between Speculative Design, Fashion Films, and the social role of fashion over time, identifying recurring patterns that make it possible to predict and understand styles and ideas at various times, is fundamental to contemporary fashion, as it facilitates the understanding of the context and evolution of the industry. Contemporary fashion is dynamic and is constantly evolving and the interdisciplinarity between these three areas: fashion, speculative design, and fashion films allows a convergence of knowledge that results in the redefinition of communication strategies of brands in the sector.

Purpose of the Study

This scientific article aims to answer the following scientific questions: **RQ1 -** How do contemporary fashion brands use speculative design in the creation of their fashion films during the COVID-19 pandemic?; **RQ2 -** What role does speculative design play in communicating the identity and values of fashion brands through fashion films?**: RQ3 -** How have fashion brands addressed the principles of speculative design, such as experience, multifaceted concepts, technological innovation, and future-oriented thinking, in their films during this challenging period? We aim to discuss the following propositions:

- P1: Fashion films utilizing speculative design during the COVID-19 pandemic will reflect innovative responses to imposed restrictions through the inclusion of advanced technology, complex narratives, and futuristic visions.

- P2: Speculative design in pandemic-era fashion films enables brands to articulate their core values and distinctiveness effectively, fostering deeper consumer emotional engagement.

- P3: The adept incorporation of speculative design principles—encompassing experiential elements, technological advancements, and anticipation of future trends—in pandemic fashion films enhances audience connection and brand differentiation within their market.

- P4: Employing speculative design elements in fashion films amid the pandemic elevates perceptions of innovation, creativity, and relevance, thereby strengthening brand identity and augmenting consumer loyalty.

Theoretical Review

Fashion Films as a Marketing Tool for Contemporary Fashion Brands

Fashion films emerged as a response to the static nature of fashion photography, infusing the industry with storytelling, identification, and emotion. They provided a fresh avenue for fashion photographers to explore creative possibilities and engage their audiences. These films became a potent tool for connecting with consumers by effectively conveying brand values and DNA. Needham (2013) classified fashion films into distinct categories: boutique, designer, auteur, and artist films, encompassing various forms of moving images. This diverse range allowed fashion films to transcend traditional boundaries, becoming an essential element in the modern fashion landscape. Brands increasingly embraced this innovative format to engage with contemporary consumers who actively seek out fashion content.

Fashion films transformed, redefining contemporary visual culture and contributing significantly to the definition and strengthening of a brand's identity. They evolved into a dynamic means of communication, adept at adapting to the ever-changing market and the digital age (Wang & Kennon, 2017). The digital era, characterized by the pervasive influence of social networks (Vehmas et al., 2018), has revolutionized consumer behavior. Brands have had to pivot toward omnichannel strategies and establish a robust online presence (Barreto et al., 2022). Fashion communication has been forced to continually evolve to keep pace with shifting consumer culture (Lee et al., 2011).

Fashion films have proven to be a creative platform for expressing brand identity, engaging audiences, and effectively conveying a brand's essence (Soloaga & Guerrero, 2016). These films artfully leverage storytelling, cinematography, art direction, and music to create immersive visual experiences that resonate deeply with viewers (Kim, 2020). In response to the rise of digital media, fashion films have gained prominence, distinguishing themselves with their unique narratives and captivating visuals (Serrano & Cachero, 2009). They stand apart from traditional advertising by placing a strong emphasis on artistry and emotional connection, leaving a lasting impact on their audience (Needham, 2013). It is worth noting that fashion films, while a powerful component of brand communication, should be viewed as part of a broader marketing strategy, harmoniously aligned with the brand's core identity (Kim, 2020). These films can be categorized into distinct types, including promotional, editorial, collaborative, and independent fashion films (Buffo, 2017).

In today's fast-paced digital landscape, where consumers seek instant gratification online (Kotler et al., 2017), brands are continually adapting, and leveraging digital platforms and innovative approaches to engage their audiences effectively (Gibson, 2017). Contemporary

fashion brands recognize the importance of maintaining a consistent visual identity, which encapsulates their personality, values, and purpose (Aaker, 2007). This identity should manifest consistently across various elements, encompassing graphic design and branding materials (Oliveira, 2015). Fashion brands also exhibit a remarkable ability to balance current trends with their unique aesthetics, exploring new forms, materials, and creative approaches (Puls et al., 2015). Visual aesthetics play a pivotal role in shaping the consumer's experience across physical and digital touchpoints.

Fashion films, with their ability to transcend traditional boundaries and communicate brand identity in innovative ways, are increasingly intertwined with the realm of speculative design. Speculative design explores the imaginative and often unconventional possibilities of the future, challenging established norms and conventions. In the context of fashion, speculative design allows brands to envision and communicate their forward-thinking visions, pushing the boundaries of creativity and sustainability.

The Emergence of Speculative Design in Fashion

In a definition of fashion as a creation or language that fosters an identity that encourages its artistic development, we have, because of this process, consumer products for the different segments of the various national and international markets. Fashion is in line with the times we live in and sometimes even accelerates them (Moura & Almeida, 2013; Takamitso & Junior, 2019).

All stages of a fashion product, from its production to its communication, are somehow linked to working with textile materials (Santana & Pessoa, 2022). Sustainable consumption and production are key factors in preserving limited natural resources and affecting climate

change. In the textile sector, the increase in consumption is due to fast fashion which results in an increase in the amount of textile waste and much more quickly (Elander et al., 2015; Fletcher & Dilys, 2013). The fashion industry is one of the industries with the greatest impact on the environment and taking a circular economy into account, designed from the ground up, could be part of the solution to this current situation. With this type of approach, a cycle of material waste could be created that is non-existent if it is thought through from the design stage. As a result, we would have greater exclusivity and innovation (Moorhouse & Moorhouse, 2017; Nishimura & Triska, 2021).

The main function of a fashion designer is to make creative thoughts tangible and to add value to those thoughts so that the end consumer sees and identifies with the products they create. Acting from such an early stage, the designer has a highly active role in the complete process of creating a particular product, which, if it has a primary focus on sustainability, can thus contribute to improving the production system in fashion, which still has its main objective focused on profit (Schulte et al., 2013). Clothing ends up being a considerable slice of the products we consume, and the end consumer has already realized that the way they consume will dictate the future of the planet (Lee, 2009). Brands need to reinvent themselves, from design, and creating sustainable solutions when they create and launch products, to their organizational structure. To attract consumer attention and add value to the brand's identity, these products increasingly need to be exclusive and attract attention, because of the speed and way in which competing content is now consumed via social networks (Moorhouse & Moorhouse, 2017). Today, driven by the shift towards sustainability, designers are already working together with agricultural producers, raw material suppliers, artisans, and other

players in the production chain of fashion products, to work towards a more sustainable future (Rocha et al., 2022).

It is essential to invest in research focused on conscious design and consumption, social responsibility, and sustainable social development driven by innovation and technology. Innovation thus is a great ally in creating value for a product and a brand. In this way, companies are seeking to gain a competitive edge in a reality marked by and awakened by sensitivity to novelty. To innovate, we need to be connected to networks in some way, so that we can better understand how to connect effectively (Goldsmith, 2015).

Businesses depend on nature for absolutely everything and if the situation is not reversed, we are compromising future generations with the strategies we use today. Education has the role of stimulating in students a vision that contributes to a better future, with present-day initiatives that can cross the boundaries between theory and practice, thus linking design and production for success. Adding value to fashion involves creating something unique, based on new knowledge about sustainability, supporting biodiversity among design choices, sharing ideas, and sharing curiosities (Goldsmith, 2015).

Speculative Design is a vehicle for questioning, criticizing, and provoking discussion, rather than just presenting solutions (Sterling, 2005). Since ancient times, man has told stories, which are not only one of the oldest art forms but are also a significant tool in evolutionary adaptation (Damásio & Silva, 2022). Fiction in design must be emphasized, as storytelling, building narratives, and fictional scenarios are essential tools for creating imagery and discussing potential differentiating futures. By creating imaginary worlds, designers can explore and communicate more complex ideas about society, technology, and culture, but speculative design aims to challenge society's collective imagination to get involved in

creating alternative futures. Encouraging people in general to participate in imagining and shaping their future, highlighting the role of communities in visualizing, and creating change (Sterling, 2005; Dune & Raby, 2013). In his book "Shaping Things", Starling even talks about objects that are traceable and connected to the Internet throughout their entire life cycle, from production to total disposal, thus introducing the concept of "spimes". He analyzes how the Internet is transforming the nature of objects and our interaction with them. It talks about the function of objects, design, technology, and the influence of these topics on contemporary society. It exposes themes ranging from the transformation of objects themselves to the cultural and environmental changes inherent in these transformations (Sterling, 2005).

Speculative design is seen as a way of counteracting traditional design and its role in the world - a branch of design that can act free of the various restrictions imposed on models that are adapted to the market - restrictions in terms of economics, aesthetics, technology, politics, ethics, and history. Figure 1 shows the intersection between traditional design and speculative design. Without these restrictions, the designer is free to imagine new and alternative possibilities, thus challenging established systems and functions. In the field of teaching, it is essential to instruct students based on tactics that allow them to react in complex and changing environments, in a dynamic world (Mitrović, 2016). Speculative Design, as a methodology to support strategic and proactive thinking, helps to follow a path towards investigating different future scenarios, through immersive and impactful experiences, some more probable and real, and others more dependent on stimuli and fanciful (Attari et al., 2021; O'Brien & Forbes, 2021).

Figure 1. Traditional design vs *Speculative design*.
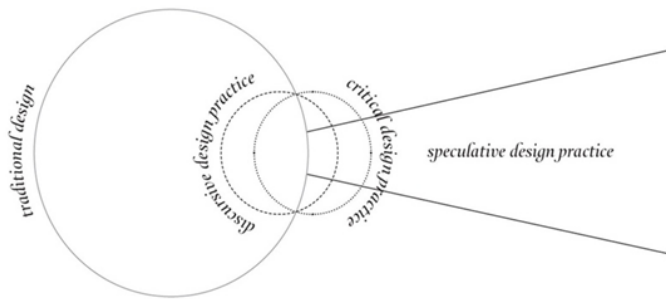
Source: Mitrović, 2016

The main aspects of Speculative Design

Speculative Design revolves around four main aspects: Experimentation, Technological Innovation, Multifaceted Concepts, and Future-Oriented thinking. Experimentation in Speculative Design involves pushing the boundaries of traditional methods and materials, often resulting in unexpected and groundbreaking outcomes. This aspect is particularly significant in fashion films, where creative experimentation with visual styles, narratives, and production techniques can lead to unique storytelling and representation of fashion trends. Smith and Jones (2020) examined the impact of experimental techniques in digital fashion film production, finding a significant correlation between innovative visual storytelling methods and viewer engagement.

Technological Innovation, another key facet, incorporates innovative technologies to create new experiences and possibilities. In fashion films, this could mean integrating augmented reality, virtual reality, or AI-driven effects to offer immersive and interactive viewing experiences that challenge conventional perceptions of fashion. Brown et al. (2021) explored

the use of VR in fashion films, concluding that VR technology not only enhances the viewer's experience but also expands the creative boundaries of fashion storytelling.

Multifaceted Concepts in Speculative Design refer to the integration of diverse ideas and disciplines, which in the context of fashion films, allows for a rich tapestry of cultural, social, and ethical narratives to be woven into the fabric of fashion storytelling. This approach not only makes fashion films more engaging but also more relevant to a broader audience. Liu (2019) discussed the integration of cultural narratives in fashion films and revealed that incorporating diverse cultural elements significantly increases the films' appeal and relevance to international audiences.

The Future-Oriented aspect of Speculative Design is about envisioning and shaping future scenarios. Fashion films adopting this perspective can serve as a platform for exploring future fashion trends, societal changes, and environmental impacts, thus fostering a forward-looking and sustainable approach to fashion. Green and Harris (2022) focused on the use of speculative design in envisioning sustainable fashion futures, demonstrating that future-oriented fashion films can effectively raise awareness about sustainability issues in the fashion industry.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative video analysis to explore the manifestation of the four main aspects of speculative design—Experimentation, Multifaceted Concepts, Technological Innovation, and Future-Oriented thinking—in fashion films. By analyzing three fashion films that were released because of COVID-19 restrictions, this research aims to discuss how

speculative design helped fashion brands to create innovative and forward-thinking narratives and promote their brand's unique characteristics.

Sample Selection

This study examines three fashion films from the COVID-19 pandemic, chosen for their use of speculative design to navigate and overcome pandemic-related challenges, each showcasing a distinct brand feature. The first fashion film is Hanifa - Video Show 2020[4]. Hanifa's innovative virtual presentation used 3D technology to showcase their new collection amid pandemic restrictions. This method bypassed traditional runway show challenges and represented a significant advancement in fashion presentation. Featuring realistic 3D model renderings, it provided a fresh perspective on outfit movement and fit, underscoring Hanifa's adaptability, technological expertise, and commitment to inclusivity and celebrating African cultural diversity.

The second fashion film selected is DIOR's Autumn/Winter 2020/21 video[5]. The film highlights DIOR's focus on craftsmanship and heritage, celebrating dressmaking art during the pandemic. Inspired by female surrealists and exploring female identity, it captures the collection's essence, emphasizing intricate details and exceptional craftsmanship through compelling visuals.

The third fashion film is Moschino's presentation of its Spring/Summer 2021 collection[6] . Moschino creatively adapted to pandemic restrictions with a collection presented through marionette models on a miniature runway, showcasing their commitment to creativity and

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[4] available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ1h0Zj5gAs
[5] available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxBFwqRbI8c
[6] available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQQE9PrcIDo

innovation. This approach provided a whimsical commentary on fashion amid the global crisis, embodying Moschino's blend of humor and innovation, and proving creativity's resilience even in challenging times. Table 1 illustrates the use of speculative design in each film, while Table 2 identifies speculative design principles within the three analyzed fashion films:

Table 1 – The main 4 Aspects of Speculative design comparison in the three Fashion Films

Aspect of Speculative Design	Hanifa - Video Show 2020	DIOR's Autumn/Winter 2020/21 Video	Moschino's Spring/Summer 2021 Collection Presentation
Experimentation	Utilized 3D modeling technology for virtual fashion presentation.	none	Used marionette models and a miniature runway for presentation.
Multifaceted Concepts	none	Incorporated narratives and emotional depth, inspired by female surrealists.	Blended playfulness, fantasy, and commentary.
Technological Innovation	Hanifa showcased their collection virtually using 3D technology, demonstrating innovative design presentations.	DIOR's film celebrates traditional craftsmanship in fashion, valuing heritage and artistry.	Moschino creatively overcame limitations with marionette models, introducing an inventive presentation method.
Future-Oriented Thinking	Embraced digital possibilities for fashion presentation.	none	Imagines future possibilities for less traditional, physically unconstrained fashion presentations.

Source: Authors

Table 2 – Speculative design principles found in the three Fashion Films

Speculative Design Aspect	Principle
Experimentation	Adaptability
Multifaceted Concepts	Inclusivity and Diversity Narrative and Identity Emotional Connection Brand Identity
Technological Innovation	Technological Innovation
Future-Oriented Thinking	Adaptability Immateriality Emotional Connection

Source: Authors

Discussion

These principles demonstrate how brands adapted to pandemic challenges with resilience, creativity, and respect for craft and identity. Using speculative design, each film not only showcased a collection but also communicated values and a perspective on fashion's role in a changing world. Summarized principles from the films include:

Hanifa - Video Show 2020:

- **Technological Innovation**: Leveraged 3D modeling to present their collection virtually, showcasing creative solutions and innovation.

- **Adaptability**: Demonstrated adaptability by turning pandemic constraints into a unique presentation opportunity.

- **Inclusivity and Diversity**: Celebrated African cultural diversity, emphasizing inclusivity in design and presentation.

- **Immateriality**: Focused on garment essence without physical models, highlighting presentation immateriality.

DIOR's Autumn/Winter 2020/21 Video:

- **Craftsmanship and Heritage**: Highlights DIOR's dedication to craftsmanship and dressmaking heritage.

- **Narrative and Identity**: Integrates stories and identities through inspiration from female surrealists, showcasing design as storytelling.

- **Emotional Connection**: Explores female identity complexities, emphasizing the emotional bond between wearer and garment.

Moschino's Spring/Summer 2021 Collection Presentation:

- **Creativity Under Constraint**: Demonstrates creativity with marionette models and a miniature runway, overcoming presentation limitations.

- **Playfulness and Fantasy**: Mixes whimsy with serious design, offering escapism and commentary.

- **Brand Identity**: Maintains Moschino's humor and innovation, showcasing consistent brand identity despite new presentation methods.

The response of Hanifa, DIOR, and Moschino to pandemic challenges has revolutionized traditional fashion presentations. Hanifa's 2020 show embraced 3D technology for a virtual, inclusive showcase. DIOR's 2020/21 video celebrated craftsmanship and narrative, enhancing wearer-garment connections. Moschino's 2021 collection showcased creativity under constraint with a playful, brand-true approach. These strategies mark a transformative era in fashion, where limitations spurred creative and expressive innovations.

Final Remarks

This research, based on a literature review and synthesis of the knowledge found shows a clear interconnection between fashion, speculative design, and the communication of contemporary fashion brands, through fashion films is an ever-changing and developing panorama. Increasingly the central theme evolves towards sustainability in fashion (Campos & Rech, 2015). In this way, designers play a key role in redefining attitudes and practices and creating a much more conscious production cycle. Broader research on contemporary fashion contributes to a deeper understanding of this cultural phenomenon and its influence on modernity. Speculative design appears as a significant method in exploring alternative futures, challenging the constraints of traditional methods. This type of approach, in addition to encouraging innovative creative processes, allows society to participate in the significant changes resulting from a collective imagination, in creating a more promising future. Thus, the interrelationship between fashion and speculative design provides the possibility of researching new communication approaches to differentiate contemporary fashion brands, which use fashion films as a marketing tool in their communication.

Today's fashion brands need to be able to camouflage themselves as best as possible and become virtually imperceptible, in this sense, they resort to online videos with increasingly complex narrative strategies, inspired more in the cinematic world than in classic advertising, using storytelling, where the brand appears discreetly (Berry, 2013; Atarama-Rojas et al., 2022). The films are about stories of people, they are those same stories that thrill and move us, that captivate us with their characters. For a film experience to be successful, film writers, actors, directors, producers, and costume designers must work as a cohesive team (Lunden, 2019).

Fashion films present themselves as a platform to tell stories that can approach a simple idea or more complex narratives, always in an emotionally captivating way. It is in the process of storytelling that contemporary fashion brands can create a deeper bond with their audience, conveying values, concepts, and inspirations behind their collections (Soloaga & Guerrero, 2016). This type of digital content offers the possibility to boost and promote more creative and inclusive practices on alternative futures, encouraging reflection on these themes and at the same time, contributing to the construction of the identity of the contemporary fashion brand through stories. This convergence between fashion, speculative design, and the narrative of fashion films translates, not only an evolution of the industry, but also the constant requirement to investigate and innovate to recreate methodologies, appropriate practices, and approaches to be closer to consumers in a constantly evolving world.

These fashion brands' strategies reveal key insights into fashion marketing and consumer behavior theory. Hanifa's virtual show redefines presence in fashion, contributing to digital interaction and engagement theories. DIOR's narrative focus highlights the importance of storytelling in consumer-brand dynamics. Moschino's imaginative presentation supports experiential marketing theories, showing the appeal of fantasy and escapism. Collectively, they suggest a shift towards immersive, inclusive, and emotionally engaging fashion marketing in the digital era.

From a managerial standpoint, these showcases offer lessons for adapting marketing strategies during crises. Hanifa's digital approach suggests new engagement possibilities and wider presentation reach. DIOR's narrative and authenticity emphasize differentiation in a competitive market. Moschino's creative format demonstrates the potential for innovation to

refresh brand identity. These cases underline the importance of flexibility, creativity, and

narrative in sustaining consumer interest and market presence amidst disruptions.

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