

BUSINESS / TECHNOLOGY

# Digital Innovation Supports the Fashion Industry During Coronavirus Outbreak

Italian companies are relying on digital technology to support their business during the current health crisis.

By [Alessandra Turra](#) on February 27, 2020



📷 Digital innovation becomes crucial to face the recent crisis. MATTEO BAZZI/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

**MILAN** — With the [coronavirus crisis](#) hitting two of fashion's biggest players — China and Italy — the multifaceted potential of the digital world is emerging as a key tool to save the sector from a temporary blackout.

With the health crisis spreading across China in January, the Italian Fashion Chamber promptly reacted by creating the "China, we are with you initiative," which enabled Chinese buyers, journalists and consumers to digitally attend Milan Fashion Week. The week's runway shows and presentations, including behind-the-scenes content and interviews, were live-streamed on both the chamber's web site and Chinese online platforms Tencent and Weibo.

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According to Italian Fashion Chamber president Carlo Capasa, 16 million people watched the shows live on Tencent and an additional 9 million users accessed the content via Weibo.

“This season, about 1,000 people between buyers, journalists and influencers did not attend the fashion week in Milan, but through this initiative we succeeded in reaching a much, much bigger audience interested in fashion,” said Capasa, putting the focus on the fact that the digital fashion week might have an important value not only during health and political crises, which don’t allow people to travel, but also when stability reigns.

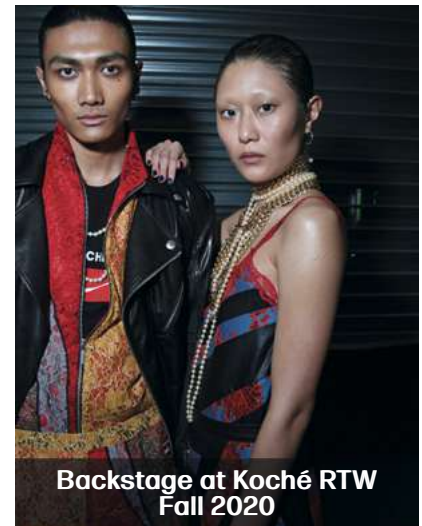
“I think that there is no other fashion week in history [that] reached so many people, enabling major brands to consolidate their role in Asia and at the same time for small and new labels to be noticed by a wide range of potential clients and customers,” Capasa said.

So is the digital fashion week going to replace the physical one in the long term? Capasa doesn’t think so. “It’s a fact that when an initiative is so successful it’s really hard to go back. I think we inaugurated a new phase where the physical and the digital will perfectly coexist,” he said.

One of the first to understand how the digital channel could be useful for the growth of the industry, was [Pitti Uomo](#) organizer [Pitti Immagine](#), which in 2011 launched e-Pitti, a digital portal enabling buyers to have access to the collections showcased at the Florence-based men’s wear show as well as at the Pitti Filati and Pitti Bimbo trade shows. Even though, as planned by the company, e-Pitti never cannibalized the business of the physical trade shows, it did offer new tools to buyers attending the fairs and also exposed exhibitors to retailers that, because of budget cuts and smaller staffs, no longer travel as much.

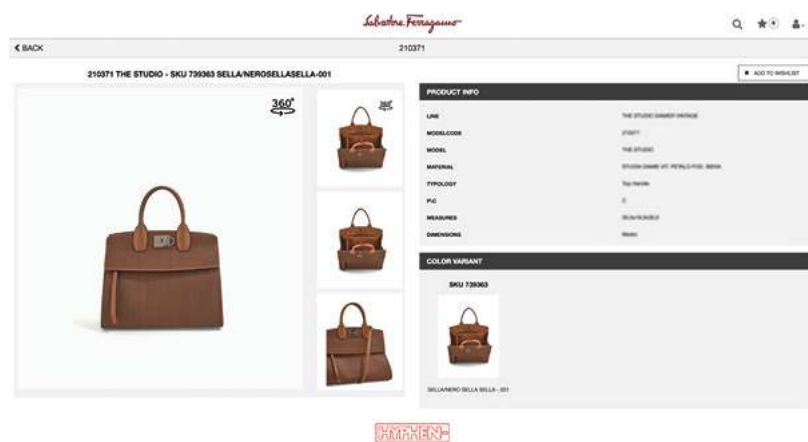
“I think that this unexpected problem [the coronavirus outbreak] made all of us more aware of the fact that when we talk about digital, we don’t only refer to social media and e-commerce,” said Stefano Righetti, founder and chief executive officer of Italian digital transformation specialist Hyphen. “The digital technology and culture can definitely create business opportunities, helping to compensate imposed limits to regular activities.”

Hyphen — which collaborates with a wide range of labels operating in different sectors in Italy, including fashion and luxury but also automotive, interior design and food and beverage — recently developed an innovative business solution



for [Salvatore Ferragamo](#). In order to limit the potential impact of Chinese buyers not being able to travel to Milan and Florence, Hyphen created a digital virtual showroom for the brand earlier this month.

“It’s very important to highlight that since 2015, we have been spreading the message of the importance for brands to develop a consistent digital identity. We have been collaborating for three years with the [Salvatore Ferragamo](#) brand on the company’s digital innovation and thanks to this longtime relationship we managed in only 12 days to respond to their request to create an interactive digital showroom accessible by buyers who couldn’t see the physical collections,” explained Righetti, who defines Hyphen as a “digital content factory.”



Salvatore Ferragamo’s virtual showroom developed by Hyphen. Courtesy Photo

“The impossibility to travel for many buyers and retailers of the Asian fashion industry pushed us to reflect and quickly respond to a concrete need of the sector,” said James Ferragamo, vice president, brand and product director at the fashion house. “We are proud to be among the first brands to have rapidly offered a digital solution enabling us to dialogue and be close to those who, because of the COVID-19 outbreak in the world, couldn’t attend the shows in Milan.”

But how can a physical showroom be transformed into a digital one?

“There are mainly three steps. First of all, we create digital twins of each product through interactive images and animated contents enabling a detailed, 360-degree view of the item. Then, we manage the catalogue adding all the information for product development, sales and logistics, trying to make everything extremely familiar for buyers who are used to the dynamics of the physical world. Third thing, we create the actual window,



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which in this case doesn't need to engage and move, but has to offer proper and detailed information for professionals," Righetti explained.

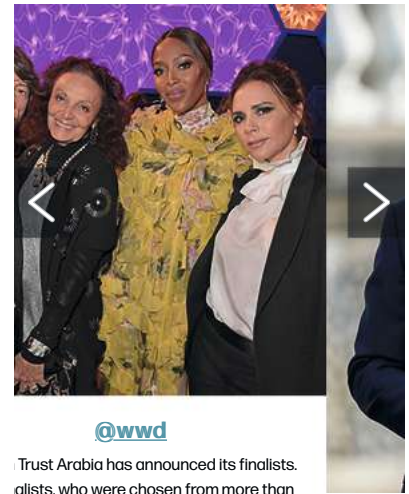
He also pointed to the increased importance the creation of digital identities will have for brands given the ongoing growth of omnichannel retailing. "Companies need to control their virtual image in a world where the digital and the physical are getting closer and closer," he underscored, revealing that Hyphen is collaborating with major labels on the creation of a system that enables fashion and luxury houses to provide retailers with digital twins of the products they order to both control the online presentation of their items and at the same time to measure the actual return on investment of digital content.

Milan-based multibrand showroom Riccardo Grassi has also embraced digital solutions to face the challenges of the moment. According to its founder and ceo Riccardo Grassi, this week the showroom saw 70 percent of its appointments in Milan moved to Paris, postponed after the end of the sales campaign in Paris, or replaced with digital activities.

"When in January we learnt about the coronavirus crisis in Asia, which accounts for 40 percent of our business, we immediately reacted, defining a strategy to support our clients and at the same time sustain our business," Grassi said. In particular, the company, in collaboration with brands, developed content, including videos, that showcased the key looks in each collection.

"This is highly effective, especially for buyers who are already familiar with a brand; it's more difficult for new labels," said Grassi, adding that feedback from international buyers so far has been great.

"I don't think we will ever get to the point when everything is digital, because in particular for certain collections, it's crucial to physically see them. But definitely the digital transformation will have an impact on our sector, as we can already see," Grassi added.



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Trust Arabia has announced its finalists. Finalists, who were chosen from more than 100 applications, work across the jewelry, accessories and ready-to-wear categories and represent 13 countries in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. The finalists were selected by a group of judges that includes both local and major international names. Returning winners include the likes of Olivier Rousteing and Paolo Piccioli, while earlier this year the show also announced a new set of names including Elie Saab, Christian Louboutin, Marc Jacobs, Michèle Lamy and Carine Roitfeld. Tap on bio for more. Report: @natalietheodosi #wwdfashion #fashiontrustarabia

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