

# THE PANDEMIC- TRANSFORMED ECONOMY:

CHANGES IN HOW  
CONSUMERS SHOP

# INTRODUCTION

The post-covid customer landscape has dramatically altered due to ten major buying trends. This brief first examines the accelerated shifts in consumer priorities of localization, sustainability, and casualization resulting from the pandemic. Other key trends detail a new shopping landscape in terms of payment flexibility, in-store environment, omnichannel, e-commerce, and social commerce. In-depth interviews conducted with female shoppers confirm changes in how consumers shop, the role of social platforms, and preferences for content and advertising. This qualitative research shapes the final set of trends, virtual lives and influencers, which establish innovations and motivations for shopping in the future. Marketers should take this research under advisement when developing campaigns and omnichannel strategies for retailing in an increasingly digitally world.

## 1. LOCALIZATION

### SHIFTS IN CONSUMER PRIORITIES

Consumers are shopping in new ways, as the pandemic-shrunk world view will introduce a greater focus on value in 2021 through localization and customization (Rondine 2020). During the pandemic, local, essential shopping locations provided safety and support in a stressful time. Through consolidated bulk trips, customers defined value as affordability, convenience, and quality. The coronavirus pandemic reduced travel, leaving customers focused on neighborhoods and necessities only; priorities shifted towards basics and a scarcity mindset of consumption.

**According to a Mintel survey, over 48% of consumers strongly agree that post-COVID-19, they will ally with the community around them through localism, buying more from local businesses (Young 2020).**

In early 2019 alone, 57% of adults purchased from local firms when possible, growing to a 65% share of respondents by 2020 (Dubina 2020). Consumers not only seek to help small businesses stay open but also want to know whose hands made their products, appreciating made to order, personalized, or bespoke product offerings (Kontas 2020).



Luxury retail consultant Gurki Basra acknowledged the trend in “supporting smaller, more sustainable businesses” to the Business of Fashion stating, “I think there is an awakened consciousness and people want to be able to shop a little bit more special, a little bit more niche” (Nanda 2021). Shoppers will continue to practice heightened awareness of where and how money is spent in the coming years, a trend that is evident in the increasing number of subscription offerings (Rondine 2020). Marketers should strategically engage with local customers to cultivate relationships in key areas of economic recovery, as the future of travel retail and destination shopping remains uncertain.



## 2. SUSTAINABILITY

### SHIFTS IN CONSUMER PRIORITIES

Previously, fast fashion allowed shoppers to forgo cost per wear in their evaluation of clothing, often using a garment only seven times before discarding it (Morlet 2017). Pandemic enlightened values have brands from Aday to Wool & Prince inventing challenges to invite their followers to rethink their relationship with clothes. These firms are paying customers to wear their garments on repeat with a goal of demonstrating the long-term benefits of quality clothing, as these brands “feel that the most important thing that is not being addressed is reducing consumption” (Segran 2021).

**Sustainably minded, modern customers have adopted a “fewer, better things” mantra, considering a reduce, reuse, recycle mindset in which an end-of-life plan for product disposal or reusable opportunity is part of the shopping journey (Amed & Berg 2020a).**

Of the five in-depth interviews conducted, one participant specifically mentioned sustainability. She claims to be striving for “quality over quantity and less fast fashion, even though I still shop Zara. The things I buy will be items that I have for a long time, not just one wear.” Women in particular are increasingly buying slow ethical fashion, avoiding wastefulness, and supporting small businesses (Chen, 2021b).

The rise of the circular economy is transforming the generational understanding of ownership. In examining the impact of COVID-19 on American lifestyles, over 72% of consumers would consider buying secondhand, while 40% would most likely consider renting (Dubina 2020). Flexible ownership has given rise to successful peer-to-peer resale websites such as Poshmark and Depop as well as consignment partnerships between the likes of Gucci and TheRealReal or Nordstrom and ThreadUp (Bauck 2020).

**In September 2020 alone, online shoppers searching with secondhand-related keywords rose 104%, with ‘slow fashion’ earning over seven million social impressions and ‘vintage fashion’ generating an average of 35,000 searches monthly (LYST, 2020).**

Research illustrates that second-hand purchases do not cannibalize full-price sales and instead provide an entry to price points consumers otherwise could not afford. The consumer purchasing mindset is shifting to subtract eventual resale value from the retail price of a product, reducing the perceived overall cost. Likewise, rental offers brand discovery and access to consumers who cannot afford products at full retail value.

**Evidently, “The closet of the future will include a mix of new seasonal fashion, unique customized pieces and wardrobe staples, alongside pre-owned and rented clothing” (Kansara, 2021).**

Firms need innovative and sustainable methodologies to offload excess inventory beyond sample sales, discounting, burning, or otherwise disposing of product (Manoff 2020). Firms stand to benefit from bringing rental and resale in-house by owning the full lifecycle, building loyalty with top shoppers, and increasing revenue, as multiple rentals earn higher revenue per item than a single sale. Nonetheless, brands must optimize merchandising and presentation beyond point of sale to prevent brand dilution to their core customer. '

COVID-19 induced mindsets of conscious consumption, visible through the rise of “homestead hobbyists,” as the lifestyles of farmers and foragers has become aspirational on social media (Bauck 2021). An Affirm survey of US consumers found that 43% of shoppers learned to be intentional about their purchases in 2020 and plan to utilize that awareness in 2021 (BoF & Affirm, 2021).

Shoppers will expect firms to provide traceability through environmental criteria and disclosures throughout the supply chain as well as information on materials, location, and people behind where products are made. Consumers expect brands to care for all stakeholders, and 66% would dramatically decrease their spend upon discovering that a firm is not treating employees or supplier's employees fairly. Fifteen percent of respondents to a McKinsey survey expect to purchase more ecologically, with parallel shifts in purchase priorities in beauty, apparel, food, beverage, and other shopping categories (BoF & McKinsey 2021). Numerous category dominant retailers, including Zalando and Amazon, expect to highlight and label environmental and sustainable products for conscious consumers currently or in the immediate future. According to McKinsey, more than 60 percent of consumers consider the way brands promote sustainability as a factor in purchasing decisions (Kent 2020). Likewise, Vogue Business projects 64% of Gen Z will pay higher prices for these products (McDowell & Vogue 2020). Moreover, brands must present this information through positive branding that will resonate with an authentic and company-wide shift in awareness of sustainability and transparency.

### 3. CASUALIZATION

SHIFTS IN CONSUMER PRIORITIES

Prior to COVID, workplaces were becoming more open to casual attire. At the start of the pandemic renowned designer, Marc Jacobs, aptly described the ostentatious state of the industry, “we [designers]’ve done everything to such excess that there is no consumer for all of it. Everyone is exhausted by it” (Aleksander, 2020). Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders reduced the need for higher-priced, formal, and novelty items, while casual and athletic categories are projected to grow 6.5% percent annually through 2023. Coronavirus has accelerated athletic trends and casual informality.

**As workplace and home life continue to merge, the professional dress will soon go by the wayside and comfy apparel will prevail, as the New York Times states, “America has settled into sweatpants for the foreseeable future” (Aleksander, 2020).**



This was confirmed by interviewees, who shared that they are prioritizing shopping for leggings and tees for lounging. Workwear firms are introducing hybrid items such as the jacket-cardigan, or “jardigan” (Lesavage 2021). Even on zoom video, loungewear has often become office appropriate compared to previous norms of ‘business casual.’ More and more firms are allowing employees the option to work from home indefinitely. Thus, the industry will continue to embrace work from home as a shopping category as it becomes essential to consumers and employees (O'Connor 2020). Marketers should invest in athleisure products and mirror this casual shift in advertisements and campaigns to reflect the current cultural zeitgeist.

### 4. PAYMENT FLEXIBILITY

A NEW SHOPPING LANDSCAPE

Flexibility will be expected to extend beyond ownership, but also into payments due to the uncertainty of the times. Buy now pay later (BNPL) features, such as Klarna or Afterpay, drive consumers to checkouts.

# 50%

**of Mintel survey responses aged eighteen to forty-three who use the internet and have shopped online in the past twelve months would use BNPL services to buy expensive items online (Ornelas 2020).**

This credit purchasing methodology makes products more affordable by offering longer payment timelines. Moreover, the subscription shaped payments are predictable and transparent, as the customer is aware of payment amounts and due dates upfront. A year into the pandemic, BNPL adoption is up 215% for January and February (Lesavage 2021). This business model resonates with shifting customer priorities and economic stressors; as these providers become more and more prevalent, the option will become both a customer expectation and habit.

## 5. IN-STORE ENVIRONMENT

Customers' relationship with stores is changing with a global drop in discretionary spending of 40 to 50% (Amed & Burke 2020a) and 48% of consumers limiting spending on non-essential items (Kontas 2020). Casualization and value are top of mind for consumers, making the consumer relationship with stores one of convenience over communication.

**Anxiety around exposure will move the store to a low-touch environment, as interest in contactless encounters is at an all-time high (Arndt 2020).**

Signage detailing enhanced cleaning practices and social distancing floor markers are branding moments that should not be forgone. Shoppers will limit time in-store and contact, with plexiglass and mask coverings further limiting interactions between customers and staff. This will permit greater self-sufficiency, and consumers will continue to adopt technology in their day-to-day lives including but not limited to automated carts, cashier-less payments, curbside pick-up, home delivery, and online checkout and returns (Rondine 2020).



Customers will look to retailers to provide the curation and content of a magazine, the newness and rotating offering of an art gallery, and the sales of a store. Flexibility of the in-store environment permits changing installations that reinvent the atmosphere and accommodate pop-ups, seminars, and events which are essential to bringing clients back to the world of physical retail.

**Tap-to-pay and contactless options accounted for 41% of in-person transactions via Mastercard in Q3 of 2020, up 30% from the year prior.**

The firm's press release expresses "the demand for faster, more convenient, safe, and now cleaner ways to pay has driven the transition to contactless, and it's a one-way street with touch-free experiences expected to be permanent for consumers and businesses even after the pandemic ends" (Vembar, 2021). The reduced brand exposure means all experiences must exceed expectations, as retail prophet, Doug Stephens, proposes that "one positive in-store customer experience is worth ten times more than a quick Facebook advertising impression" (Danziger 2020).

Despite retail becoming one of quick and convenient transactions, the in-store environment is one of the key marketing channels for customer acquisition, engagement, brand building, and connection. Marketers must continually re-invent the retail environment through immersive collaborations or pop-up venues that encourage people to visit and experience the brand physically and share with their peers digitally.

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## 6. E-COMMERCE

Lockdowns have interfered with in-store visits and traffic, and NYT's essay on 'The Boredom Economy' found "we are wanting to buy more and more and more because a lot of us are bored at home, so we're online shopping" (Ember, 2021). Shoppers have experienced a permanent behavior shift; 52% of online shoppers purchased from a new retailer, and 82% plan to continue purchasing from the new firm. An interview participant shared that she now shops solely online:

**“ I have gotten so accustomed to it, and I don't like to waste time in stores. I'd rather just order another size to try on if needed. ”**

Over 23% of all technology users are “super-users,” spending an average of 14.6 hours daily on technology and media. This customer segment over-indexes in dollar spend across all categories of consumption. This trend is most visible in e-commerce, where super users spend five times more than average and are responsible for 54% of online sales.

Online activity accelerated five years over the pandemic, and eMarketer predicts continued adoption will grow e-commerce to 15% of total retail sales in the U.S. in 2021 (Lesavage 2021). Fashion executives consider digital to be the biggest opportunity for 2021, as 70% of those surveyed anticipate e-commerce growth of at least 20% (Amed & Berg, 2020b). Looking forward, the e-commerce industry is projected to grow by \$2.4 trillion over the next four years (Wolf, 2021).

Given the value-added from custom experiences, personalized recommendations based on consumer shopping patterns and intuitive search can replace in-store discovery.



. Qualitative interview findings indicated that most shoppers “compare competitors’ presentations and try to earn the most bang for my [their] buck while considering both cost, styling options, and size availability.” Three shoppers experience a fear of missing out on a product they might want:

**“ My anxiety thinks that if I miss a page, I will miss out on something cute, so I have to go through every page. ”**

All three expressed examining the entirety of the website as their solution. Additionally, every interviewee expressed that they utilize filters to refine their search and reduce scrolling time.



## 6. E-COMMERCE

A NEW SHOPPING LANDSCAPE



A shopper that particularly struggles to find clothing suitable to her body type shared that she benefits from the wider variety of sizes and styles offered online compared to the physical environment. Moreover, she is **particularly appreciative of size guide features that recall your previous purchases and/or allow the user to enter their measurements and produce a suggested size.** Artificial reality permits these proper size predictions based on photos and for customers to digitally try on products prior to purchase.

**In fact, data from Shopify concluded that products supported by try-on technology try-on technology increased conversion rates by**

# 250%

**(Amed & Berg, 2020b).**

This feature, alongside virtual consultations and fit finders, will be key to **reducing returns and maintaining customer satisfaction.** AR combined with artificial intelligence will result in further implementation of visual search systems, allowing customers to find specific or similar products to those seen in their feed or on the street. As the consumer journey moves online, utilizing behavioral insights to maximize the digital customer experience is of the utmost priority for all marketers.

## 7. OMNICHANNEL

A NEW SHOPPING LANDSCAPE

**Between sales and showrooming, e-commerce impacts more than**

# 41%

**of the total retail sales, and it is critical that prices and experiences are consistent between the two platforms (Radial 2020).**

Therefore, online is critical to driving physical retail traffic and transactions. In-store returns for online orders will also be available, as 15% of these respondents that visited the store to make a return made an additional purchase, and 10% intend for this to happen at a greater frequency (Radial 2020).

E-commerce is expected to be integrated with the brick-and-mortar channel, as users can buy online and pick up in-store, a feature valued by 54% of consumers. Customers utilize websites to browse products, gain inspiration, and experience the world of the brand, digitally impacting 36% of offline retail sales.

**Over**

# 21%

**of shoppers have made another purchase when picking up online orders in-store within the past six months and**

# 18%

**plan to do this again in the future.**

## 7. OMNICHANNEL

Generating a seamless shopping experience for customers requires technologically integrated supply chain, inventory, and logistics systems that offer real-time connections. A 2018 PwC survey found that 40% of participants will pay for same-day shipping, with another 23% expressing a willingness to pay for delivery that arrives in three hours (BoF & McKinsey 2021).

Customers' desire for instant gratification and immediacy will enhance demand for same-day delivery, as shoppers ponder:

“ **Why can't Zara offer two-hour delivery and just charge \$10 using UberX?** (Chen 2021a). ”

This desire was reaffirmed through interviews in which three of five participants mentioned Revolve by name for their free two-day shipping.

“ **“I think the most important thing is free shipping, free returns, and fast shipping. Revolve does a really good job of that.”** ”

Thus, heightened expectations for convenience over the pandemic will permit delivery expectations to be measured in hours, not days. To meet customer demands for speed, marketers and retailers alike must incorporate automated solutions that enable greater flexibility and productivity.

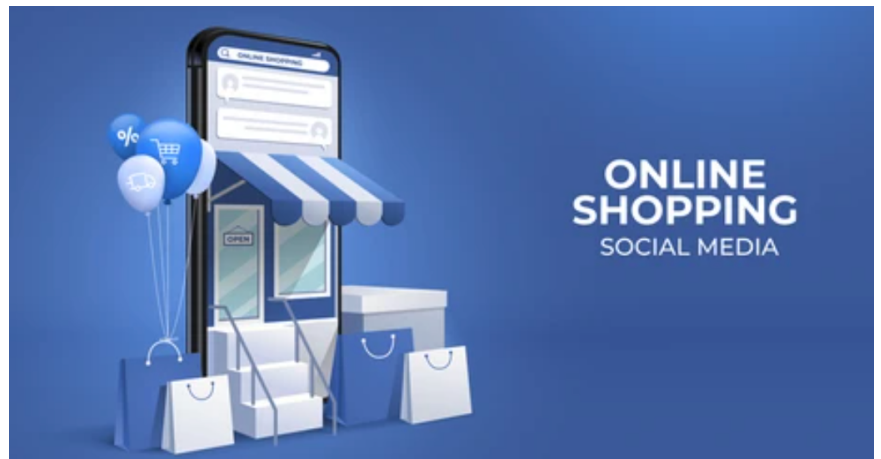


## 8. SOCIAL COMMERCE

A NEW SHOPPING LANDSCAPE

Michael Wolf, founder and chief executive of Activate Consulting, describes 2021 as “a time where the worlds of technology, media, e-commerce, and fashion are all colliding.”

**Brands competing for equity online are meeting customers where they are already spending their time and attention – on social media apps, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.**



All five qualitative interview participants shared that they are driven to shop by social media due to the ease of inspiration. This was exacerbated by COVID, as social media became an “escape from reality - see people in fun places maybe on the beach in a cute outfit in hope that one day I’ll be there.” Social media platforms drive brand awareness and discovery; respondents utilize them to stay in the know on the newest ‘it’ items and styles and to find “something unique everyone else might not have.”

**The average person spent over**

# 13

**hours daily on technology and media in 2020, up an hour from 2019, due to lockdowns and shelter in place (Wolf 2021).**



EMarketer forecasts that social commerce sales will rise to \$36.09 billion in 2021 and projects growth to \$69 billion by 2024.

**This up-and-coming category “also influences e-commerce and brick-and-mortar purchases that happen days and weeks after exposure,” according to eMarketer analyst Andrew Lipsman (Lesavage 2021).**

Bricks and clicks will continue to be integrated as omnichannel businesses use digital marketing to drive community and sales growth across mobile apps and social platforms.

Recent updates enable direct shopping from brand and influencer posts, reducing exposure and the number of pages required to complete a purchase. The digitization of brand interactions and growth of virtual storefronts has introduced “a new era of shoppable content as opposed to advertising” (Chen 2021a). Retailers will build a fully immersive, engaging, and shoppable media ecosystem that provides viewers with an opportunity to purchase during the impressionable moment of inspiration. This intersection of entertainment and commerce means, “We no longer have to drive customers to ‘the store’ when we can now drive the store to the customer” (Danziger 2020). According to McKinsey, over 25% of American and European consumers expect to increase purchases via social media (Amed & Berg 2020a).

## 8. SOCIAL COMMERCE

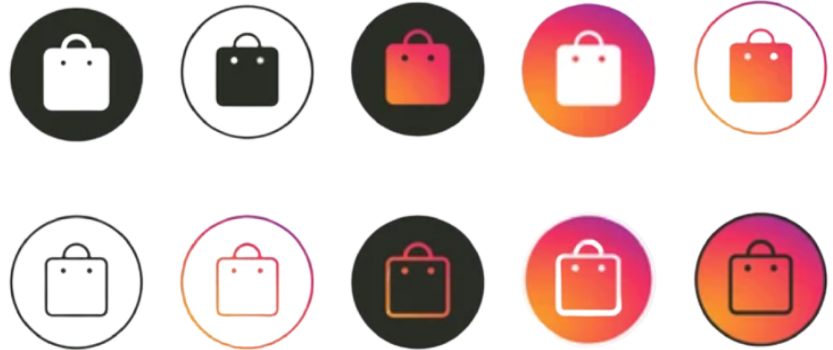
A NEW SHOPPING LANDSCAPE

 **PRODUCT**

**The consumer-facing side of Instagram has changed dramatically as the platform shifted from a visual environment to one for product discovery, pushing transactions and commodifying interactions.**

Instagram replaced the notifications button with a Shop tab and is selling feed space to advertisers. Today, Instagram Shops has over one million storefronts and over 250 monthly users (Lesavage 2021). Nonetheless, only 40% of the qualitative interview participants have used Instagram Shops. Two were downright against the concept calling it ‘stupid’ and expressing:

**“ I’d 100% go to the website I am familiar with rather than checkout on Instagram. ”**

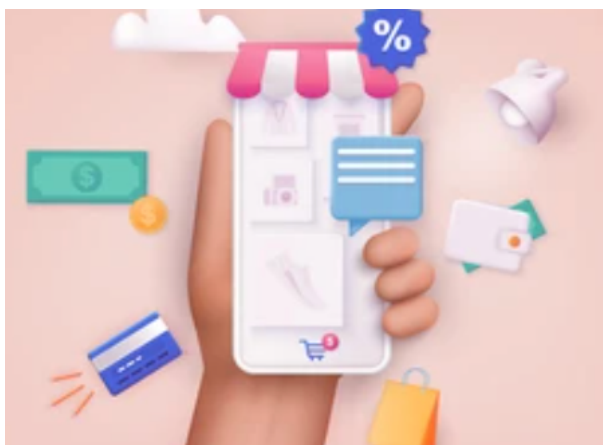


One participant was open to utilizing the feature “potentially down the road if it were easier, I knew I wanted the product, and I don’t have to leave the app.” However, the most avid shopper interviewed adores the Instagram Shops, because of the ease of checkout, which takes place in-app with an Apple Pay option, so she essentially did not have to type in any additional information.

The average Instagram user spends a total of five hours monthly and eleven minutes daily on the platform (Wolf, 2021) and one-third of users have purchased directly from an IG advertisement (Williams, 2019).

**70%** of shopping enthusiasts turn to Instagram for product discovery, while  
**87%** of people say Instagram influencers have inspired them to make a purchase

**(Instagram Business, 2021).**



Half found them to be ‘annoying and distracting spam.’ The other half felt that Instagram is spot on in both personalization and timing with ads appearing when they are inclined to shop. They find the platform is so well-curated to their preferences that they mistake advertisements for organic feed content, even from brands they don’t follow. This group goes as far as opting out of ads by “pressing I don’t want to see this when my feed is oversaturated with things I don’t care about,” to further tailor the feed towards their predilections.

## 8. SOCIAL COMMERCE

A NEW SHOPPING LANDSCAPE

TikTok is the most downloaded app of 2020 with over one billion monthly active users who average 52 minutes daily on the platform (Lo, 2020) and nine hours monthly which is more than the time spent on Instagram, Twitter, Redditt, and LinkedIn combined (Wolf 2021).

**TikTok is offering customers new purchase journeys through shoppable ads, organic shoppable content, affiliate links, in-app brand catalogs, and self-service advertising.**

Affiliate linking will allow influencers to automatically earn sales commissions, strengthening brand partnerships.



Leonie Hanne, who earned \$894K in media impact value on social media during the Autumn/Winter 2020 season, shared, "It will be much more user-friendly to be able to keep all of this information in one place, on one app, in a way that's easily accessible for the consumer, especially if it's a fashion-focused video showing multiple looks" (Maguire, 2021)



Social commerce offers a native shopping experience for all posts, both ad and organic, and across all categories. In the future, customers can expect augmented reality features that allow for try-on, zooming in on details, and visualization of products in the home environment. AR is proven to drive increased browsing and purchase intent among consumers and to reduce returns. Marketers should invest in social commerce and artificial reality to maximize their platform presence by providing immediate product details to interested consumers without leaving the app, ultimately reducing steps to checkout.

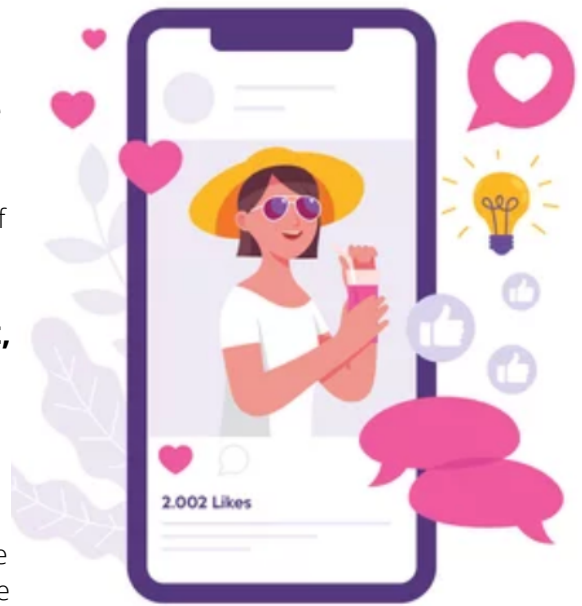
**These social media apps connect best with younger consumers, as 34% of users aged 18 to 43 who use the internet and have shopped online in the past twelve months prefer purchasing items directly through social media sites. (Ornelas 2020).**

## 9. INFLUENCERS

Evidently, influencer marketing is making a demonstrated shift towards real people with real skills, and “just being beautiful is done, it’s over” (Milner, 2021). More than 84% of consumers have greater respect for content creators whose following is built on their job or passion (Colón, 2020). This group deemed ‘genuinfluencers’ spread ideas and honest advice in their areas of expertise, creating a perspective and a platform in one.

**While influencers are motivated by engagement, genuinfluencers promote niche education and actively work to inform their community, earning them cultural capital.**

Brands are turning to these activists and advocates to be the face of their brand, given that consumers are increasingly aware of the firm’s political and cultural stances.



**Posed promotional content feels inauthentic, and social media “in time, [will] feel less like advertising and appear more peer-to-peer driven, with an emphasis on engaging and insightful content” (Milner, 2021).**

Brands have begun experimenting with employees as brand ambassadors or influencers in advertising campaigns and other promotional efforts.

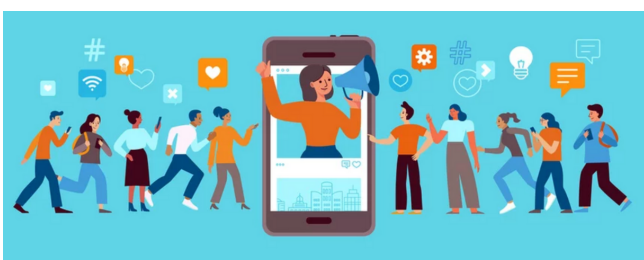
**“Putting people who normally work behind-the-scenes at these brands front-and-center tells a great story.”**  
(Colón, 2020)



Employees are far more relatable to the average shopper than a typical model. Moreover, their participation illustrates that they believe in the product, are committed to the brand, and would purchase it themselves. Highlighting artisans and employees provides greater transparency in people and processes while creating brand value. Young, enlightened consumers appreciate a glimpse into the lives of the artists and employees that are the backbone of their favorite brands.

The strength of this strategy was confirmed through interviews, as all participants positively mentioned behind-the-scenes highlights:

**“I like to feel like I am a part of the action, even when completely not, or to get a sneak peek of what’s to come.”**



All in all, utilizing employees as models has become a concrete promotional practice for marketers that results in images that resonate with consumers, leads to new interpretations of the brand, and generates awareness across all audiences (Colón, 2020).

## 10. VIRTUAL LIVES

INNOVATIONS & MOTIVATIONS TO SHOP

Consumers are becoming familiar with digital environments for relaxing, socializing, learning, and creating as they battle social isolation. Fully virtual stores offer a new technology paradigm, replicating the physical through 360° renderings with inventory displays and mannequins. Vogue Business anticipates a future with multiple shoppers in a virtual environment, or 'co-shopping' where users can offer opinions and feedback as they would in the real world.

**Artificial reality experiences are immersive, realistic, and accessible, allowing for emotive and genuine storytelling.**

The pandemic has induced consumer cravings for 'shoppertainment' via interactive engagement models and media productions such as live-stream shopping events and product launches, playlists, podcasts, games, webinars, and television (Nambias 2020).

Over 70% of European consumers are interested in livestreaming commerce with 35% of that group noting that this desire is driven by the pandemic (Hall 2021). Moreover, a 2020 Twitter report found that 60% of users felt more connected to their peers when watching live-streamed events on social media, and 62% are interested in brand-hosted live-streams (Chitrakorn, 2021). Offering connections in an isolating time gives consumers an experience worth remembering.

**The multiplayer aspect of shared content experiences, such as gaming and livestream, enables community building which brands should both reward and incentivize to further customer loyalty.**

These innovations bridge the physical and digital, bringing excitement and imagination to the shopping experience, as "the idea of buying a luxury handbag and taking a digital representation of this into a video game or another digital environment is not too far away." Desire for online interaction will result in further gamification of the fashion industry, as true aficionados will invest in branded apparel for avatar personalization and to convey cultural literacy (Morency & Director, 2020).

**Evidently, virtual apparel serves as a source of revenue and product discovery, as consumers invest equally in avatar appearances as they would their own.**



Over **34%** of U.K. consumers who use mobile apps find a virtual exhibition through an app to be appealing, and **63%** of Chinese consumers agree that offline activities can be replicated or replaced by online.

(Kontas 2020).



"The future is not going to be putting your best self on social media for your friends to see, but it's going to be putting your best self forward in the virtual world" (Chitrakorn, 2021). Consumers will embrace these virtual universes, as safer and more accessible places for brand introduction, connectivity, and exploration across all senses (Nambias 2020). The future of retail is virtual and online supplemented with physical experiences and successful marketers will offer sophisticated and seamlessly connected digital interactions.

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