The efficacy of digital platforms in the development and relevance of fashion business: Aftermath of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of the study was to assess how well fashion companies were able to sustain themselves throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by leveraging internet platforms. In spite of the numerous disruptions the fashion industry has experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects on the workplace and the shift in consumer behaviour towards digital platforms, industry stakeholders think that digital platforms offer potential for the industry’s revival because many fashion businesses were forced to close during the pandemic. The paper examines and summarises the extent to which digital platforms have been effective in fostering the long-term expansion of fashion companies and their influence on livelihoods in the COVID-19 pandemic, using a narrative literature approach. Based on productive interactions and transactions, digital platforms provide a 21st-century, cost-effective way for businesses to promote themselves. Prior to the pandemic, fashion companies were able to market their goods and services, track live events, keep an eye on trends and projections, and boost their online presence, all of which contributed to increased revenue. Notwithstanding the fact that they continue to face major obstacles that negatively impact the livelihoods of their employees, the study shows how digital platforms have been incredibly effective in helping fashion businesses, especially those in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Asia, to endure and flourish during COVID-19. Although African customers have become accustomed to online shopping and e-commerce, digital platforms have not been especially popular throughout the continent, as fashion designers and businesses have not properly utilised them. In order to promote fashion businesses and designers, governments and policymakers should support the development of digital infrastructure and digital literacy initiatives. Additionally, fashion brands and businesses in the supply chain should improve their knowledge and understanding of how consumers and potential clients communicate and transact in their online networks. Finally, fashion businesses and designers should invest in social media sentiment analysis tools to facilitate effective online visibility, seamless interactions, and transactions with consumers.

Keywords: fashion businesses; digital platforms; sustainability; livelihood; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION
This study theoretically and empirically examines how effectively digital platforms contribute to the long-term growth of the fashion industry. It establishes, through real-world evidence, the diverse impacts of COVID-19 on the fashion sector. The study explores how the use of digital media to promote fashion businesses has transformed as a response and adaptation to the global pandemic. However, it further delves into the ramifications of utilizing digital platforms on the lives of those working in the fashion industry. This would uncover whether fashion companies are substantially developing and profiting from digital platforms in the wake of changes brought about by COVID-19.
Context

The Fashion Business

According to Valerie and Major (2022), the fashion industry is a multibillion-dollar global industry that includes a wide range of companies devoted to the production and sale of apparel and related accessories. In agreement with the aforementioned, Lissaman’s (2021) research revealed that the fashion industry is a very sizable, multi-trillion-dollar industry that spans the entire world. According to Lissaman, there are millions of people working in the global fashion supply chains, which span several continents and use a tremendous number of resources and produce a lot of things. The authors of the aforementioned works note that approximately 430 million people work in the fashion industry, including all garment and textile workers as well as those involved in cotton farming, production, and related services. This statistic illustrates the potential for the fashion industry to have a significant positive impact on the world.

According to a 2022 study by Euromonitor International Apparel and Footwear, the value of the global fashion industry, specifically the apparel industries, is estimated to be around USD 1.5 trillion due to the more than 300 million people it employs along the value chain. The aforementioned data highlight how important fashion enterprises are to the long-term economic development of many nations. According to the facts presented here, it is clear that the global fashion business provides the majority of people with jobs and a means of subsistence.

Some of the biggest fashion enterprises in the world are found in the United States, according to a Fashion United (2023) exposition. It is implied in the exposition that Nike is currently the largest fashion brand worldwide. Nike, a lifestyle and athleisure brand, is predicted to generate 37.9 billion dollars in revenue annually and have a market value of around 195 billion dollars. TJX Companies is the second-largest fashion company in the United States, according to the Fashion United (2023) exhibition. According to the exposition, TJX Companies has a market worth of USD 88.7 billion and has USD 48.6 billion in annual sales in 2022. With its fast-fashion brand T.J. Maxx, TJX has a strong brand recognition in the United States where it runs its mainstream of stores. According to Fashion United, VF Corporation is the third-largest American fashion company (2023). VF’s yearly revenue increased to USD 14.8 billion in 2022, with the Outdoors and Action Sports segment accounting for the majority of the company’s earnings. The North Face, Vans, and Timberland, three brands owned by VF Corporation, reported combined revenues of USD 9.2 billion, or almost 62% of VF’s total revenue. According to current figures, the market value of VF Corporation is $32.5 billion.

The fashion industry is a vibrant sector of many economies since it contributes to increasing employment rates by employing about hundreds of millions of people, so providing considerable incomes and favorably affecting the livelihoods of many people throughout the world. According to a 2023 assessment by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, the fashion industry has become increasingly globalized and apparel has come to be seen as “disposable” since the turn of the 20th century. In this manner, clothing may be created in one nation, produced in another, and swiftly promoted and sold around the world. This suggests that several fashion enterprises are active across the continent.

According to reports from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2023) and Euromonitor International Apparel and Footwear (2022), this trend has resulted in an increase in demand from middle-class consumers with more disposable income around the world over the past 15 years, as well as the emergence of the “fast fashion” concept. The aforementioned elements have historically caused fashion enterprises to increase their production rate during the previous 15 years. According to the Euromonitor International Apparel and Footwear (2022) study, fashion enterprises involved in the manufacture of
clothes reportedly increased by roughly twofold between 2000 and 2022, as illustrated in Figure 1. The continent’s growing middle class and higher per capita sales in advanced economies are to blame for this.

![Image](https://example.com/image1.png)

**Figure 1. Increment in Fashion Patronage and Reduction in Fashion Usage Since 2000**

*Source: McKinsey and Company (2020)*

However, the concept of “fast fashion,” which features quicker turnaround of new trends, a greater number of collections offered per year, as well as occasionally lower pricing, is significantly responsible for the increase in per capita sales in developed nations. According to Research and Markets (2023), the “fast fashion” industry consists of the sale of fashionable clothing, accessories, and related services. According to the claims made by Research and Markets (2023), “fast fashion” refers to apparel or items that are produced more quickly and are meant to keep up with the latest fashions. Thus, it follows from the latter that fast fashion clothing lines are supported by the top current fashion trends displayed during Fashion Week. Many fashion companies are known to function in the fast fashion industry. For instance, Eloquii, one of the online shops focused on fashionable clothes with a fast-fashion component, was purchased by Walmart for $375 million in October 2018, according to Research and Markets (2023).

The aforementioned statements make it abundantly evident that fashion enterprises are a significant pillar around which most economies build and as such, are of top priority to many nations around the world. Regarding the global fashion industry, research by McKinsey and Company (2020) predicted that the industry will grow at a pace of 3% to 4% in 2020, which is considerably less than the 3.5% to 4.5% 2019 growth rate shown in Figure 2. The authors go on to say that the slowdown may be the result of consumers being more cautious due to increased macroeconomic uncertainty, political unrest on various continents, and the ongoing danger of trade wars.

Despite the contributions made thus far that outline the requirements of the fashion industry in fostering livelihood and socioeconomic development, there are concerns about the sector’s sustainability, which puts fashion enterprises vulnerable to ongoing social and environmental threats. Pulse Score (2019) emphasises that fashion enterprises are not implementing sustainable solutions quickly enough to counteract the industry’s escalating negative environmental and social impact. This supports the aforementioned claim. Although the final pulse analysis reveals that the fashion industry has experienced some form of growth, its social and environmental performance since 2018 and at a slower rate than the prior year (Figure 3), fashion businesses are still far from sustainability and thus require innovations and
prompt sustainability policies to withstand social and environmental shocks like the emergence of COVID-19.

Figure 2. Regional Sales Growth of Fashion Businesses, 2019-2020

![Graph showing regional sales growth of fashion businesses between 2019 and 2020.](image)

Figure 3. Pulse Score: 42
Source: Pulse Score (2019)

![Bar chart showing Pulse Score changes from 2017 to 2019.](image)
Fashion Businesses During COVID-19 Era and The Call for Digitalisation

Social and environmental factors, as well as external influences, play a critical role in the existence and continuity of the fashion industry. The researchers Ogundele and Opeifa (2004) indicate that these external factors help in the visualisation of the analysis of business growth. The recent appearance of COVID-19 is a significant external element that threatens the longevity of fashion enterprises. In this regard, the ILO (2020) calls attention to the fact that a global health catastrophe following COVID-19 has crippled the workplace. Similar to this, a research by IPA (2020) emphasises that COVID-19 has a negative impact on the majority of fashion enterprises while employment rates are declining. According to UNICEF (2020), the COVID-19 is an illness brought on by a novel coronavirus, where “CO” stands for corona, “VI” for virus, and “D” for disease. Furthermore, according to their report, COVID-19 symptoms include coughing, fever, and shortness of breath. In addition to the aforementioned effects, UNCTAD (2020) reports that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a 5%–15% fall in global Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), as well as a reduction in the capacity, productivity, and profitability of the fashion industry. This is partly because most manufacturing enterprises have shut down, as shown in a Research and Markets report (2020). Furthermore, according to Barrie (2021), 86% of fashion enterprises have seen a fall in revenues, which has had a severe impact on a variety of livelihoods. Leitheiser et al. (2020) emphasises that fashion enterprises in the Asian region are currently experiencing demand-side issues. In a similar line, a report by BOF and McKinsey & Company (2020) finds that the fashion retail industry is in a state of crisis, implying that the COVID-19 crisis threatens to undermine the viability of most enterprises.

Based on the aforementioned assumptions, empirical studies show that the COVID-19's aftereffects have significantly changed how the fashion industry functions. A significant change is the movement in consumer preferences and behaviours, which requires fashion enterprises to embrace digitalization so that customers can purchase fashion products on websites and social media platforms. This becomes extremely important in the wake of the lockdown era that many countries implemented in an effort to lessen the effects of COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020). Findings by Ahmed et al., (2021) demonstrate that fashion enterprises and stakeholders have turned to strategies that aim at a swift global revitalisation of fashion businesses, further supporting the aforementioned statements. According to the experts’ results, the profitability of the fashion industry could decrease by 93% by the end of 2020. As a result, using social media platforms and online sales channels to increase digitalization in the marketing and selling of fashion products may also be a useful strategy for assuring the long-term viability of the fashion industry in the COVID-19 era. This article examines the usefulness of digital platforms in the sustainable growth of fashion enterprises while evaluating its consequences on livelihood during COVID-19 based on the empirical extrapolations made here.

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

This study examines how digital platforms have impacted the fashion industry’s growth and development, with a particular emphasis on the COVID-19 epidemic. The study synthesises and analyses pertinent empirical findings using a narrative literature review approach (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Tranfield et al., 2003). This study employed the following search terms: “digital platform,” "social media," "online platforms," “growth of fashion businesses,” and "implications on livelihood." The literature review methodology emphasises the evolution of research in a chosen topic, finding and understanding all potentially pertinent studies to analyse them with the use of meta-narratives instead of effect size measurements (Webster & Watson, 2002; Snyder, 2019).

The study classifies digital platforms according to several factors, including ownership structure, style of involvement, commercial model, and mode of governance. Understanding the many roles and
responsibilities of digital platforms in the fashion business is made easier by these categorizations. The study also emphasises how crucial digital platforms are to the fashion industry's ability to innovate, improve coordination, and reduce costs (Amed et al., 2020; Mazzucato, 2018).

Digital platforms are found to be important in the fashion sector since they facilitate effective communication between companies, designers, and consumers (Alford & Page, 2015; Bonetti et al., 2018). Despite a decline in sales, fashion brands are able to maintain consumer relationships thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic's greater use of digital channels for marketing and communication (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Papamichail et al., 2021). The expansion of the global fashion scene has also been facilitated by digital platforms, which have allowed fashion companies to expand their online presence and market themselves more successfully online (Wicker et al., 2021; Laudien & Pesch, 2019).

The study highlights the pivotal function of digital platforms in promoting expansion, facilitating transactions, and tackling obstacles like the COVID-19 epidemic in the fashion sector. The research findings provide essential insights for fashion businesses looking to enhance their operations and successfully traverse the dynamic industrial landscape by making the most of digital platform utilisation (Bogers et al., 2019; Rieple & Pisano, 2015).

Narrative Literature Review

By using a narrative review approach, the researcher was able to examine and synthesise important research areas that could separate out important data for effective analysis and drawing conclusions with workable recommendations toward ensuring the best possible use of digital platforms for the sustainable growth of fashion businesses in light of implications for livelihood in the COVID-19 era. As Wong et al. (2013) explain, this type of methodology is developed for issues that have been examined by numerous researchers within varied disciplines and that hinder a comprehensive systematic review process, the usage of the narrative review strategy became essential for this study. The narrative review approach, as implied in Wong et al. (2013), primarily focuses on how research within a selected field has evolved over time or how a topic has evolved across research traditions, while identifying and comprehending all potentially relevant studies to scrutinise these using meta-narratives rather than measuring effect size.

The study's search was based on a range of terms, including but not limited to "digital platform," "social media," "online platforms," "growth of fashion businesses," and "implications on livelihood," because different studies use different terms to refer to the phenomenon under study for this paper. The author restricted the search to each paper's title, abstract, and keywords in order to focus the review on studies that addressed the paper's primary topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Platforms

The results of the literature review underscore the complex characteristics of digital platforms and their significance for the expansion and adaptability of the fashion sector amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital platforms can be perceived from both a technical and non-technical perspective, according to one important finding. Technically speaking, research by Ghazawneh and Henfridsson (2013), Tiwana et al. (2010), Ceccagnoli et al. (2012), and Spagnoletti et al. (2015) indicates that digital platforms act as a basis for the creation of related technologies, goods, and services. grasp how digital platforms might facilitate the development of supplementary tools, applications, and capabilities relevant to fashion requires a grasp of their technological conceptualization.
Digital platforms are frequently viewed as a way to facilitate trade and transactions across various user groups, according to research published from a non-technical standpoint. In the fashion sector, digital platforms can facilitate interactions and exchanges between businesses and customers (B2C), businesses and clients (B2B), or customers and clients (C2C). Studies by Tan et al. (2015), Koh and Fichman (2014), Pagani (2013), and Ye et al. (2012) provide evidence of this. According to Koh and Fichman (2014), for example, digital platforms are two-sided networks that help different user groups such as suppliers and buyers communicate with one another.

Moreover, the fashion industry can benefit greatly from Pagani’s (2013) view of digital platforms as multifaceted platforms. By bringing together different user groups—fashion businesses, designers, retailers, and consumers, for example—these platforms add value by cutting down on the expenses related to transactions, distribution, and information searches when these groups engage with one another.

The aforementioned results highlight the significance of digital platforms in the fashion sector, as they can function as a basis for the advancement of fashion-associated technologies, goods, and services, in addition to enabling productive and economical exchanges and exchanges among various participants in the fashion chain. This is especially important in light of the COVID-19 epidemic, since digital platforms are now essential for fashion companies to stay in touch with their clientele and modify their business practices in response to changing market conditions.

Ye et al., (2012:211) give their thoughts on the digital service in support of the aforementioned, as quoted below.

“...facilitating contact between two or more frequently co-dependent groups of clients in order to create value”

The literature review offers insightful information about the purpose and significance of digital platforms, emphasising their importance for the expansion and advancement of the fashion sector, especially in light of the COVID-19 epidemic. A significant discovery is that digital platforms facilitate effective communication and cooperation across temporal and spatial dimensions. According to the studies under consideration, companies are using digital platforms to improve their marketing strategies, reach a wider audience, and increase revenue (Tan et al., 2015; Kane et al., 2014). This is especially important for the fashion industry since digital platforms allow fashion businesses to promote their goods and services globally and help them become more globalised.

The literature also highlights how important digital platforms are as tools for organising human activities, such as political, social, and economic communication (Tan et al., 2015; Kane et al., 2014). Particular instances from the software development, hospitality, and transportation sectors demonstrate how the expansion of digital platforms have changed the industrial environment in a number of different businesses. This emphasises how important digital platforms are in the twenty-first century and how they can open up new doors for companies, especially those in the fashion industry.

In addition, the assessment explores digital platforms from both technical and non-technical angles. Technical research suggests that digital platforms act as a basis for related technologies, goods, and services, as indicated by studies conducted by Spagnoletti et al. (2015), Tiwana et al. (2010), Ghazawneh and Henfridsson (2013), and Ceccagnoli et al. (2012). Digital platforms have the potential to facilitate the development of complementary applications, tools, and capabilities related to fashion, making them especially pertinent to the enterprise.

The literature indicates that, from a non-technical standpoint, digital platforms are frequently seen as a way to facilitate transactions and commerce between various user groups, such as clients and customers (B2B), Tan et al., 2015; Koh and Fichman, 2014; Pagani, 2013; Ye et al., 2012). The fashion sector can greatly benefit from this view of digital platforms as multifaceted platforms that unite many
stakeholders and generate value by cutting expenses related to transactions, distribution, and information searches (Pagani, 2013).

The aforementioned results highlight the significance of digital platforms in the fashion sector, as they can function as a basis for the advancement of fashion-associated technologies, goods, and services, in addition to enabling productive and economical exchanges and exchanges among various participants in the fashion chain. This is especially important in light of the COVID-19 epidemic, since digital platforms are now essential for fashion companies to stay in touch with their clientele and modify their business practices in response to changing market conditions.

Table 1. Classification of Digital Platforms

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorisation</th>
<th>Key Types</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Model</td>
<td>Integrator Level</td>
<td>Apple iOS</td>
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<td>InnoCentive.com</td>
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<td>Google Android</td>
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<td>Product Level</td>
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<td>Cloud computing initiatives</td>
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<td>Multisided Level</td>
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<td>eBay</td>
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<td>WhatsApp</td>
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<td>Interaction Mode</td>
<td>Collaborative Level</td>
<td>Threadless.com</td>
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<td>Wikipedia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Competitive Level</td>
<td>TopCoder</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Video games on consoles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Governance Mode</td>
<td>Open Level</td>
<td>Linux</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wikipedia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closed Level</td>
<td>Apple iOS</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Google Android</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure Mode</td>
<td>Property Based</td>
<td>Sony (game consoles)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Microsoft platforms</td>
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<td>Open Source</td>
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From a technological standpoint, it has been noted that digital platforms act as a benchmark for other independent software developers who wish to create their own applications for the use of other contributors and end users. Regardless, it is demonstrated that a common underlying aspect for the numerous definitions studied by different writers has to do with promoting efficient interactions and transactions between individuals or groups because the focal point of this research is based on the non-technical approach. Experiential extrapolations argue that firms are using digital platforms to facilitate transactions and cut expenses since they are accessible and affordable. These exchanges could occur between businesses (B2B), customers (B2C), or customers themselves (C2C) (C2C). In addition to the foregoing, the literature analysis reveals that there are several classifications of digital platforms, each of which serves a certain function and either places limits on contributors or grants them unrestricted access to utilise the platforms. Despite this, the multifaceted level of the business model for digital platforms is a crucial category and component of digital platforms that is relevant to this article. Businesses clearly utilise these platforms effectively for the marketing and promotion of their goods and services. These platforms include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others. According to McKinsey & Company (2020), fashion companies should use digital platforms into their marketing plans. They imply that fashion brands/businesses should reconsider their social media strategy, which is a component of digital
platforms. According to McKinsey and Company (2020), fashion enterprises should reconsider how to use current digital platforms more efficiently, take advantage of the growth of new platforms, and learn how to conduct direct sales on social media platforms. As a result, the next section explores how fashion enterprises use digital platforms to further their operations.

The Application of Digital Platforms in the Fashion Industry

The literature review findings provide valuable insights into how fashion businesses are leveraging digital platforms, particularly social media, to enhance their marketing efforts, engage with customers, and drive growth. Here’s an analysis of the key findings and their relevance:

Fashion firms and designers are increasingly using social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp to connect with consumers, track trends, and gain insights into consumer behavior (Ahmad et al., 2015). This finding highlights the importance of digital platforms in enabling fashion businesses to understand and cater to their target audience's preferences and stay ahead of the curve in a rapidly evolving industry.

The use of social media platforms has become a “new muse” for fashion brands and designers, as they explore innovative ways to leverage these platforms for marketing, customer communication, and promotions (Ahmad et al., 2015). This finding underscores the pivotal role of digital platforms in shaping the fashion industry’s marketing and branding strategies, allowing businesses to reach a wider audience and build stronger connections with customers.

Fashion companies are utilizing social shopping sites, fashion blogs, live streaming of fashion shows, and updates on major fashion weeks through digital platforms (Ahmad et al., 2015). This finding demonstrates the versatility of digital platforms in facilitating various aspects of the fashion industry, from product promotion to event coverage and industry updates, providing businesses with a comprehensive toolset to engage with their audience.

Fashion businesses are employing strategic approaches to increase revenue generated from marketing on social media platforms, such as using compelling visuals, calls to action, and streamlined checkout processes (McKinsey & Company, 2020). This finding underscores the importance of leveraging digital platforms not only for brand awareness but also for driving direct sales and revenue growth.

Figure 4. Gap Online Promotion Sales
Source: Rosa (2020)
Social media platforms are being used by fashion companies as a cost-effective means of engaging and directly interacting with a large customer base, enhancing their visibility in the digital sphere (Shaw & Mittal, 2020). This finding highlights the potential of digital platforms to democratize the fashion industry, enabling businesses of all sizes to reach and connect with their target audience effectively.

Fashion enterprises are employing digital marketing strategies across various digital platforms, including social media accounts, to boost sales, strengthen brand recognition, and maximize profitability (Rosa, 2020). This finding reinforces the broader business implications of leveraging digital platforms, as they can contribute to multiple aspects of a fashion company’s success, from sales to brand equity and profitability.

All things considered, these results highlight the significant influence that digital platforms especially social media have on the marketing, consumer interaction, and commercial expansion strategies of the fashion sector. Through the efficient utilisation of these platforms, fashion enterprises may maintain audience connection, stimulate sales, and adjust to the swiftly changing digital terrain.

**Figure 5. During COVID-19, Customers Use Digital Services for Longer Periods Of time**

Source: McKinsey and Company (2020) as cited in Gonzalo et al., 2020

Gonzalo et al (2020) study on the digitalization of the fashion industry found that enterprises in the sector use a variety of digital networks in their transactions as a means of boosting sales. They also point out that fashion enterprises employ digital platforms to modify cost structures and improve the stages of the value chain, making it faster and less expensive. For instance, the study shows that fashion organisations may use digital platforms to implement new logistics and sales-fulfillment choices, drive creative client acquisition strategies, and help project and coordinate inventory to establish a stronger distribution network. The COVID-19 crisis saw significant increases in the utilisation of email, social media, and other digital platforms, according to research by Gonzalo et al. (2020). (Figure 5). Thus, the
Researchers suggest that even though consumers have cut down on their purchasing during the crisis, fashion businesses are still utilising digital platforms to their full potential by often communicating with customers. From the evidence provided so far, it is clear that digital platforms play a significant role in the fashion industry. As a result, fashion brands, designers, and other businesses in the supply chain are able to communicate with customers in an efficient and convenient manner, which is a key component of growing sales and profitability.

![Figure 6. Theoretical Framework for the Function of Digital Advertising in the Retail Fashion Sector](source: Rathnayaka (2020))

![Figure 7. How Digital Platforms Helps in Fashion Retail Businesses](source: Rathnayaka (2020))
In an analysis of digital advertising in the retail fashion industry, Rathnayaka (2020) found that increased digital platforms and digital marketing have led to an evolution in the global fashion scene. The researcher claims that this has made it possible for fashion enterprises to effectively market themselves online and grow their online presence. Additionally, Rathnayaka (2020) adds that fashion marketers must be able to analyse and predict future trends before customers switch to rivals because the fashion sector is an unusual industry with a short product life cycle depending on shifting trends. The researcher elaborates that, in order for fashion marketers to be successful in this respect, digital platforms have emerged as the greatest channel for gathering and converting customers through measuring and enhancing digital media with the goal of satisfying and retaining customers (Figure 6 and Figure 7). Figure 8 depicts the achievements accomplished by Victoria’s Secret using digital platforms, as seen by Rathnayaka (2020).

According to Stephenson (2009), fashion design houses, designers, and merchants often tweet, blog, and update their profiles in an effort to redefine their brand recognition and personalities in real-time. As a result, fashion designers use social media to broadcast films, ads, behind-the-scenes footage, and footage from fashion shows in order to engage with customers and spread brand recognition. It might be concluded that firms in the fashion industry, such as retailers, use digital platforms (social media) to create genuine, in-person interactions with customers.

As a result, Prabhakar’s (2010) study shows that designers can connect with whole new audiences more successfully by letting the general public inside the world behind the fashion influencer screen. It should be observed that the second claim makes it implicitly clear that social media platforms give designers, brands, and other companies involved in the global fashion supply chain access to the more than 400 million Facebook users and more than 22 million Twitter users in order to profit. As a result, this turns into a highly advantageous situation because it provides outstanding marketing expertise that may not be possible to acquire through advertising expenditure. According to Bourne (2010), who concurs with Prabhakar’s findings, social media and other digital platforms give aspiring stylists, fashion bloggers, and designers a global platform through which to connect with customers all over the world. Bourne (2010) goes on to explain that internet platforms benefit fashion stores because they provide a foundation for researching potential fashion designers. For instance, Borne’s exposition reveals that Daria
Shualy, a former fashion editor, developed a website called “Sense of Fashion” in an effort to support (independent) designers in marketing and selling their goods while also enhancing customer contact.

According to the analysis, the fundamental reason why digital platforms are important for promoting fashion firms is that they improve brand awareness, market share, and customer retention while also enhancing communication with target audiences. In light of the literature review, the use of digital platforms in the sustainable growth of fashion enterprises is summarised below:

i. Encourages accurate trend and prediction observation Stream live events (e.g., catwalks, fashion weeks, etc.)
ii. Promote fashion-related goods and services Increase digital presence of fashion businesses, brands and designers
iii. Makes it possible for fashion companies to have their own social networks
iv. Higher sales
v. Successful online marketing
vi. Effective communication and business interactions
vii. Increased brand recognition
viii. A higher rate of client attraction and retention

Effectiveness of Digital Platforms in the Growth of Fashion Businesses in COVID-19

As mentioned above, fashion companies do use digital platforms in their operations, particularly to improve communication and digital marketing. However, given the circumstances of consumer movements and the emergence of COVID-19, the way fashion businesses should operate has undergone enormous changes, necessitating the digitisation of the sector. In any case, this section looks at how successful the usage of digital platforms has been in fostering the long-term expansion of the fashion industry in the COVID-19 era. During COVID-19, it is critical to determine whether fashion enterprises are using digital platforms effectively and profitably.

Given that COVID-19 has changed consumer tastes, Wang (2020) reports that digital savvy has become important in the revitalization of fashion brands and stores. In this context, the author notes that Allbirds, a New Zealand-American apparel and footwear maker, has been operating with a new retail strategy by incorporating online sales in addition to its offline sales since Alibaba established its B2C e-commerce platform in 2019. According to the researcher, this has shown to be successful. According to Wang’s exhibit, Allbirds used its brick-and-mortar businesses’ inventory to fill online customer purchases made during the pandemic. Because of this, the brand had no trouble satisfying consumer demand. Its revenue, customer happiness, and retention rate all increased as a result. It is clear that Allbirds’ strategy for utilising digital platforms enabled the company come up with creative concepts that are assisting in the brand’s longevity regardless of the effects of COVID-19. Additionally, Wang’s reportage notes that Allbirds introduced a tool that allowed customers to connect with store employees, enabling customers to ask questions and view things as they would be displayed in physical locations through video.

Erick Haskell, President of Allbirds, comments on the effectiveness of digital platforms during COVID-19 as mentioned in Wang (2020);

“In order to continue serving customers throughout this crisis, the technical and operational expertise we developed to perform this in-store fulfilment proved to be very helpful.”

According to Chou (2020), during COVID-19, the American clothing company Michael Kors made use of digital events and live streaming. By doing this, the company announced its new line of customizable handbags through a series of livestream events and quick videos. According to Chou’s explanation, a mobile lifestyle test as well as other digital channels helped these broadcasts succeed. In
Despite the global pandemic’s effects on the fashion sector, this led to the brand’s namesake designer recommending customised handbags, increasing sales and market share. Furthermore, Chou’s research shows that during the COVID-19 cases’ peak, Michael Kors made use of the digital platform offered by Alibaba dubbed “Tmall” to create a virtual pop-up shop for Chinese customers. Due to lockdowns, actual stores had to close, necessitating this. Customers could take a personality test through the pop-up that was centred on a set of lifestyle questions, and afterward, they would receive notifications from the company recommending certain products. This gave customers the choice to hand-paint their own personalizations on the brand’s bags, assuring effective consumer contact and increasing customers’ desire and decision to buy. According to Chou (2020), this was quite successful in keeping the brand in business and stabilising its profit margins during the crisis. From the ongoing, it can be inferred that some businesses in the fashion industry made use of the advantages of digital platforms to maintain their operations.

Figure 9 The Fabricant Clothing Brand ‘Napapijri’
Source: Roberts-Islam (2020)

According to OECD (2020), the global COVID-19 epidemic sparked a significant increase in ecommerce toward new fashion companies, clients, and product categories. The survey claims that consumers may easily access a wide range of products from the comfort and security of their homes thanks to the effectiveness of digital platforms. According to the survey, despite the social isolation and lockdown enforced by many governments throughout the world, the majority of fashion businesses have continued to be relevant and in operation. The Fabricant, a fashion label that specialises in digital apparel, had experienced some form of growth, albeit minimal, but the brand continued to remain in business despite the crisis era, according to Roberts-Islam’s study on the virtual catwalks and digital fashion and how effective it has proven in times of COVID-19. It has been noted that The Fabricant collaborated with a few renowned fashion houses and designers (such as Soorty Enterprises) during the crisis to produce a line of digital denim that was Cradle to Cradle certified. This makes it clear that other fashion companies are already looking for methods to incorporate digital fashion into their business models in order to stay viable. According to Roberts-Islam (2020), the digital platform had proven to be very useful for “The Fabricant” and other brands during the pandemic since it allowed them to launch their newest
outdoor lifestyle brand, "Napapijri" (Figure 9), on Instagram. Instead of tangible clothes samples, The Fabricant created digital ones. This worked well because it reduced textile waste while also producing amazing web content that captured customers' interest and persuaded them to make purchases. The aforementioned suggests that other fashion enterprises have not yet adopted the concept of digital fashion, despite The Fabricant's efforts to remain sustainable through digitisation or digital platforms. This would however, take concerted efforts by fashion businesses and stakeholders to conscientise the consumers into buying into the idea of digital fashion. Regardless, it is realised from Roberts-Islam's research that some fashion brands have remained relevant and sustainable through digitisation during the pandemic.

Additionally, according to Roberts-Islam (2020), "Bottletop," a 2002-founded accessories brand that reuses aluminium ring-pulls to create upscale contemporary bags, made use of digital platforms to enable customers to make continuous purchases through their online platforms (BOTTLETOP and Togetherband) throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Due to the brand continuing to operate and generate large earnings, it was able to stay solvent.

The London-based designer Steven Tai gained significant advantages from digital platforms during the COVID-19 era, according to a different study by Roberts-Islam (2020) on the usefulness of digital platforms for fashion designers. The fashion designer created a virtual look-book that allowed for the use of a lazy "Susan-turntable" to create 360-degree animations of his collections, as was implicit in the study. This gave customers the opportunity to examine the looks in their entirety on multiple platforms, such Instagram. It has been determined that Steven Tai reached around 50% of the consumers with this project supported by digital platforms, encouraging them to buy his products.
Figure 10 shows an illustration of Steven Tai’s idea, as previously mentioned. The aforementioned project, it may be inferred, serves to highlight the strength and usefulness of fundamental digitisation and platforms in assisting fashion enterprises throughout physical distance in the wake of COVID-19. According to a remark from Steven Tai in Roberts’s study,

“Digital adoption is on the rise. In order to provide customers a full view of the clothing, we designed a 360 look-book. We created low-resolution 360 films using the model mounted on a lazy susan instead of the customary 18 cameras on a rig. It occurred so swiftly.”

A different study by Ramualdez (2020) on the effect of online platforms in Asia reveals that Southeast Asians continuously searched for fashion brands via a variety of online platforms during the COVID-19, increasing the likelihood that consumers would buy fashion products and, as a result, boosting sales and profitability of fashion businesses despite the rise in COVID-19 cases. According to the survey, the most expensive luxury and sportswear brands on the iPrice platform saw a rise in Google views (online shopping aggregator based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia). Based on Ramualdez’s study’s statistical data, it was determined that the majority of French luxury retail brands and companies had made the most money when comparing January and February’s impressions to those of June and July in 2020. For instance, as shown in Figure 10, searches for Louis Vuitton increased by a staggering 766%, with their clothing and shoes leading the growth in search interests by 1,557% and 401%, respectively. A 410% increase was also seen at Yves Saint Laurent (YSL). The price of YSL’s perfume and shoes increased by 1,145% and 1,434%, respectively. Chanel nonetheless moved up to third place with a 244% increase in Google search impressions. Nevertheless, according to the study, the majority of consumers expressed greater interest in their bags (up 574%) and skincare goods (up 1,103%). Due to the efficacy of utilising digital platforms and expanding their digital presence, the aforementioned statistics were significantly reflected in their sales and economic margins.

![Figure 11. Shoppers in Southeast Asia Look for Premium Brands](https://ejournal.papanda.org/index.php/ijess)

Source: Cited in Ramualdez (2020)
Additionally, Nike saw a 123% increase in impressions on digital platforms, while Adidas saw a 60% increase, which had an impact on both sales and profitability (Figure 11). Despite the global COVID-19 pandemic, these fashion firms found that their usage of digital platforms was quite successful since customers continued to demonstrate interest in sporty fashion and make purchases as a result. From the latter point, it may be inferred that consumers may have tried to stay physically active throughout the numerous lockdowns to beat the boredom of being at home. This might have affected consumers’ ability to purchase sports apparel, and with the aid of digital platforms, it became simpler for customers to purchase from these fashion companies’ online shops and other digital platforms. It is interesting to note that Ramualdez’s analysis found that luxury firms made more money through internet platforms than fast-fashion sports brands.

![Figure 12. Shoppers in Southeast Asia Look for Sports Brands](image)

Source: Cited in Ramualdez (2020)

Samaha (2020) researched at how top luxury fashion brands are leaning on the use of digital channels to sustain their businesses and make profits. In his research, it was found that some of the top fashion brands entertained their customers on their digital platforms while also showcasing their collections. For instance, it was disclosed that Jimmy Choo, a shoe brand, had started an initiative called Choo Sketch that allowed customers to contribute drawings and videos of shoe ideas. The social media channels for the brand then featured these designers. The fashion company then built a capsule collection out of five of the most creative consumer submissions. As a result, the brand made more sales and

Open Access: https://ejournal.papanda.org/index.php/ijess
money. Additionally, the American fashion company Rebecca Minkoff presents a show on its Instagram platform called Happiest Hour every workday at 5 p.m. in an effort to stay connected with its audience and increase sales and profitability amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, stylists, celebrities, influencers, models, and other business associates get together to talk about how they are handling this difficult moment. Despite the pandemic’s effects on businesses, this strategy supported by its digital platforms allowed the fashion company increase sales and remain relevant throughout COVID-19. Samaha (2020) adds that during the global pandemic, French fashion house Balenciaga requested photographs and videos of their products from customers so that they might be broadcast on the company’s official Instagram account. This measure ensured that the brand remained relevant during the pandemic by increasing sales and profitability and maintaining an effective engagement with its audience. In addition to the aforementioned, Samaha (2020) draws the conclusion that other leading luxury companies also made use of their digital channels to engage with customers by exhibiting creative programmes. Due to the durability of their enterprises, sales and profit margins increased during the COVID-19 period. Samaha (2020) cites Balmain, Moncler, Loewe, Christian Dior, Prada, Chloé, Valentino, Hedi Slimane, Alexander McQueen, Bottega Veneta, Tory Burch, JW Anderson, Chanel, Jonathan Cohen, Missioni, and Miu Miu as examples of such fashion brands/designers.

![Figure 13 Livestream of Hanifa’s 3D virtual show on Instagram](image)

Source: Marie-Celine (2020)

A study on the African fashion sector in the midst of COVID-19 and the efficiency of digital forms during the worldwide pandemic was undertaken by Marie-Celine in 2020. It was revealed that Anifa Mvuemba, a designer from the Congo but residing in New York, used digital channels to assure the longevity of her company, Hanifa. The designer presented their most recent collection, known as the Pink
Label Congo, by hosting the first live 3D virtual presentation via Instagram live (Figure 13). Anifa Mvuemba used invisible 3D models with curved proportions and 3D garment movement technologies to do this while keeping black women at the centre of her brand. Regardless of how COVID-19 affected sales and profitability, this increased it. Marie-Celine (2020) claims that during the global epidemic, Anifa’s collections sold out quickly and her virtual show went viral with huge sales records. It is clear from Marie-Celine’s analysis that virtual fashion shows provide a significant possibility for African fashion firms. It is possible to conclude that regular live shows on social media sites like Instagram and other digital platforms offer a decent chance for fashion companies in Africa to continue operating despite the effects of COVID-19. For instance, the Ghanaian fashion firm Christie Brown conducted a virtual fashion show via Instagram live, as was noted in the study of Marie-Celine (Figure 14). As a result, sales and profitability increased, and the brand was able to exhibit their Spring 2020 collection while still remaining viable despite the effects of the global epidemic. Furthermore, the event featured the same model wearing a variety of the collection’s items and was pre-recorded.

Figure 14. Hanifa’s Nina Corset Skirt Spotted by Virtual Model
Source: Marie-Celine (2020)

Figure 15. Live show by Christie Brown
Source: Marie-Celine (2020)

Businesses in the fashion industry used goods from their physical locations to fill online marketplace requests from customers. Some fashion companies, like Allbirds, used this tactic to increase sales and ensure healthy profit margins.

Additionally, digital platforms were highly successful in that they served as a benchmark for most fashion companies to develop their own digital platforms, which ensured that businesses would continue to run regardless of travel constraints and social isolation.

Additionally, digital platforms were successful because fashion companies used them to host live digital events like catwalks and virtual shows to showcase their collections despite the cancellation of several fashion weeks. (In-text citation: Due to this, some fashion companies are engaging with customers more regularly through digital channels (like social media) in order to better understand their needs and create items that are tailored to them. A prominent example of a fashion company utilising this tactic is Michael Kors, which created bespoke bags for customers through successful client interactions on its social media platforms, as discussed above.

Additionally, several fashion enterprises had great success using digital platforms like Alibaba’s online market, “Tmall,” which they used to boost sales and profit margins. Some fashion companies created an online page with frequently updated content for prospective companies to take cues from (e.g., fashion inspiration, suggestions, and ideas) by utilising the lockdown and digital forms.” (In-text citation:

Additionally, fashion companies like “The Fabricant” used digital media to advertise new collections that were solely focused on digital fashion. Despite the imposed movement limitations, empirical research suggests that buyers in Southeast Asia were consistently looking for fashion products online, particularly from French fashion labels.

Finally, online platforms made it easier for fashion firms and customers to communicate effectively on numerous social media platforms. Through entertainment and live shows held on various social media platforms, digital platforms become extremely effective in the growth of fashion enterprises. However, according to Kazeem (2020), e-commerce has yet to reach its full potential in the African region, and as a result, customers are still adjusting to online fashion shows, catwalks, and fashion product purchases. To support the latter, Kazeem (2020) avows that,

“...despite a billion-dollar IPO for an e-commerce company in Africa and rising smartphone adoption, most regular Africans still find the idea of shopping online to be far-fetched. Jumia has been brought back to earth by the realities of promising but difficult, underdeveloped markets across the continent, despite the fact that it was once valued at about $4 billion by enthusiastic investors soon after its initial public offering (IPO) and was backed by companies like Goldman Sachs and MasterCard.”.

According to Kazeem’s claim above, African fashion companies may not have utilised internet platforms as effectively as other fashion companies worldwide during the global pandemic. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that some fashion companies around the world (namely in America, the UK, Europe, and Asia) are achieving lasting success and growth through the use of digital platforms in the COVID-19 age.

Implications on Livelihood

A number of research studies, including (ILO, 2020; UNCTAD, 2020; Care International, 2020; Fashion Revolution, 2020; Bain, 2020; Sudheshna et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; Aner, 2020; Kish, 2020; The Economic Times, 2020; The Financial Times, 2020), provide sufficient evidence to support the claim that COVID-19 has crippled the global fashion industry, which has led to the loss of jobs for many workers and
impacted their ability. The majority of fashion firms, designers, as well as other retail enterprises are still in operation thanks to the usage of digital platforms, which has helped to mitigate these negative effects in one way or another.

Very well businesses and other designers are generating enduring developments and profit margins via internet platforms. In spite of this, there are still difficulties in the global fashion industry because some fashion companies are still having trouble competing with internet platforms.

For instance, recent research by Preuss (2021) found that the sector appears to be hazy even after a year in the thick of digitalization. According to Preuss' research, while wages for factory workers are decreasing, workers (particularly women) and fashion companies in the supply chain are going hungry, and brands are demanding substantial reductions on new orders. Despite the industry's hopes for a recovery through digitalization, these problems still exist.

Are African fashion firms and designers also suffering these economic margins? This is another worrying problem. Are some other SMEs and retail companies in the fashion sector utilising these digital platforms to their full potential? Extrapolations from Kazeem (2020) show that although e-commerce and smartphone use are growing in the African continent, consumers there have not yet fully embraced the concept of online buying. As a result, this hinders the ability of fashion companies operating in the African region to advance significantly and generate significant profits. This suggests that the livelihood of those employed in the African fashion sector is still in jeopardy. As a result, it becomes imperative for all parties involved to work together to raise awareness among African consumers about the necessity of adjusting to online shopping and digital platforms in order to support the survival of the fashion industry in the continent.

Thus, the global fashion fast retailing industry in Asia is one that is witnessing a major turnaround in performance via digital platforms, improving the socio-economic conditions of many people. The Fast-Retailing Group, as exemplified by Singh (2021), saw a greater increase in profit margins during the first half of fiscal 2021, with total revenues of 1.2028 trillion yen and an increase in operating profit of 167.9 billion yen. The gain, per the study, was brought on by an increase in online sales of 40.2%, which contributed to a total increase in sales of 41.5%. As a result, this offers the benchmark for calling workers back into service, which enhances their social and economic life.

It may be inferred from the responses made so far that there is still much to be done to ensure the sustainability of fashion firms generally. Even while some firms are significantly improving and producing money, the industry is still having problems, which is having an impact on workers’ socio-economic lives and endangering the viability of businesses, particularly in the African region. However, there are additional opportunities for the digital platform-based revitalization of fashion firms at COVID-19.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study made a research contribution by investigating and analysing the function of digital platforms in the fashion sector, with an emphasis on how these platforms can support the long-term expansion of fashion companies in the COVID-19 environment. Rather than quantifying effect size, the study uses a narrative review approach to synthesise and analyse pertinent empirical data, finding and understanding all potentially relevant studies to examine these using meta-narratives. The study's conclusions offer insightful information about the many digital platform classifications and how they affect the fashion industry's growth, sustainability, and standard of living. The study emphasises how crucial digital platforms are to the fashion industry's ability to grow, facilitate transactions, and respond to unforeseen circumstances like the COVID-19 outbreak.
The study's recommendations can affect legislative decisions, industry development strategies, and educational curriculum, thereby offering greater support and promotion to Ghana's fashion design sector. A considerable amount of effort should be put forward by stakeholders and other industry actors to inform African customers about the requirements and uses of digital platforms in the marketing of fashion firms, as per the study paper's results.

In order for African fashion designers and businesses to thrive during and beyond COVID-19, they also need to be taught how to digitise their operations. Online technologies, such as social media, are growing increasingly complicated every day as consumers embrace new channels to share fashion news, images, and recommendations. Fashion brands and other supply chain companies therefore have a duty to improve their understanding and expertise of the ways in which consumers and prospective customers are interacting and conducting business on their online platforms.

Fashion designers and businesses might benefit from brands investing in social media sentiment research tools to help them gather important information that could improve their online presence and customer relations. One way to increase employee productivity, income, and profitability is to invest in social media dashboards that allow a digital interaction manager to monitor and respond to posts and conversations across many platforms.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare no known competing financial or personal relationships that could have appeared to have influenced the work reported in this research.

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