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When fashion companies transform into communication companies: the cases of Benetton, Net-a-Porter and Loewe

Cuando las empresas de moda se transforman en empresas de comunicación: los casos de Benetton, Net-a-Porter y Loewe

Teresa Sádaba

ISEM Fashion Business School. Universidad de Navarra, Spain teresa.sadaba@isem.es https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2441-5724

Carmen Azpurgua

ISEM Fashion Business School. Universidad de Navarra, Spain carmen.azpurgua@isem.es https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6668-9568

Pedro Mir

ISEM Fashion Business School. Universidad de Navarra, Spain pedro.mir@isem.es https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1832-7602

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Abstract

The digital context has caused the transformation of fashion brands into something more than producers and distributors of fashion products. In a context of disintermediation, through their online webpages or social media, brands are broadcasters and direct communication channels for audiences. This transformation implies profound changes for fashion companies. It also poses new challenges for the communication strategies of brands. Using the case method, this work approaches three renowned brands that are significant for their relationship between fashion and communication: Benetton, Net-a-Porter and Loewe. The analysis reveals, on the one hand, the evolution suffered by fashion brands in recent decades and their role as communicators. On the other hand, it delves into the role of communication in the fashion sector, in a context where merely commercial communication gives way to new formats and experiences. The example of fashion films is paradigmatic. The conclusions thus show a strategic change for fashion communication. The connection with the product, the tone and the type of messages emitted are changing. And a mutation of brands is observed as they are also constituted as communication companies, where it is essential to understand the consumer as an informed audience.

Keywords

Digitalizacion, fashion, communication, brands, disintermediation, evolution, content creators, strategy.

Resumen

El contexto digital ha provocado la transformación de las marcas de moda en algo más que meras productoras y distribuidoras de artículos de moda. En un contexto de desintermediación, a través de sus páginas de venta online o de las redes sociales, las marcas son emisoras y canales de comunicación directos para las audiencias. Esta transformación implica cambios profundos de las empresas de moda. Supone también nuevos desafíos para las estrategias de comunicación de las marcas. A través del método del caso, este trabajo realiza una aproximación a tres marcas de renombre y significativas por su relación entre moda y comunicación: Benetton, Net-a-Porter y Loewe. El análisis desvela, por un lado, la evolución sufrida por las marcas de moda en las últimas décadas y su papel comunicación. Por otro, profundiza en el papel de la comunicación en el sector de la moda, en un contexto donde la comunicación meramente comercial da paso a nuevos formatos y experiencias. El ejemplo de los *fashion films* resulta paradigmático. Las conclusiones muestran de este modo un cambio estratégico para la comunicación de la moda. Se modifica la conexión con el producto, el tono y el tipo de mensajes emitidos. Además, se observa una evolución de las marcas, que se constituyen también como empresas de comunicación, donde resulta fundamental entender al consumidor como una audiencia informada.

Palabras clave

Digitalización, moda, comunicación, marcas, desintermediación, evolución, creadores de contenido, estrategia.

1. Introduction

Digitalization has completely transformed the communication and fashion environment. The new context has provoked a crisis of traditional media, the emergence of new actors, new possibilities of connection with the audience, changes in the way of consumption and sale of products, and new communication formats (Noris and Cantoni, 2022; Sádaba, 2015).

As a result, fashion brands have had to adapt to online sales platforms and more direct and non-intermediated ways of communicating. Fashion companies had always worked communication from a commercial point of view, with campaigns around their products, collections and seasons. They sought to inform and persuade consumers about the benefits of their proposals (Kalbaska *et al.*, 2018; Tungate, 2013).

Nowadays, through the brands' own websites or social networks, brands can make this communication for themselves. The so-called disintermediation, usually applied to areas such as finance or sales (Gielens and Steenkamp, 2019; Geva, 2018), in the world of communication also acquires great relevance and poses a challenge for fashion brands, since it adds a communication task to their work in the design, creation and distribution of the fashion product. Today, along with other agents, brands are also content creators. In fact, some websites, experiences and staging of brands show concepts and aesthetic quality comparable to that of the best traditional fashion publications (Iannilli and Linfante, 2022).

This work aims to explain this change for fashion brands in the way of communicating and understanding to what extent the relationship between fashion and communication in a brand is modified.

To understand this transformation, three case studies chosen for their leadership and strong link between fashion and communication are analyzed. The first of them is developed in the years before the appearance of the Internet, precisely to be able to better illuminate the novelty introduced by the digital world. The second is located at the time of the emergence of online sales and the response to its challenges. Finally, the third one takes place at a more current moment, where brands are already comfortably managed in the digital environment and find new communication opportunities with their audiences.

In this way, the evolution of communication by fashion brands as message broadcasters is presented and it is concluded with a scenario where fashion companies become hybridized as communication companies.

2. Disintermediation in fashion communication

Disintermediation means that any actor can create and disseminate content thanks to digitalization (Jenkins, 2006; Katz, 1988), so that media that had monopolized the power of influence meet new competitors (Torregrosa and Sádaba, 2023).

In the case of fashion, traditional communication had needed vehicles that intermediated between brands or fashion companies and audiences. In this way, these media acted as gatekeepers that decided what content to offer and what not to offer about the brand (Shoemaker, 2020).

For brands, it was about working their messages from the marketing department with an advertising and paid content, either with conventional advertising, or with the modalities of product placement, branded entertainment, etc. (Hudson and Hudson, 2006), or from the area of public relations, with a more organic content through events, product presentations, etc.

The most relevant support in the fashion sector to channel these messages were undoubtedly fashion magazines. The magazines reported the latest trends, and were engines of fashion consumption by the diffusion of products and styles in their pages (Kalbaska *et al.*, 2018; Pérez Curiel *et al.*, 2017). In recent years, the arrival first of fashion blogs, and then of so-called influencers (Pedroni, 2023), meant the break of this monopoly of magazines and the entry of a competition in the capture of interest and budget by brands (Perreault and Hanusch, 2024; Sanz *et al.*, 2020). In fact, the latest research questions whether these new digital celebrities are now the ones with the greatest appeal and influence (Sádaba *et al.*, 2024).

The possibility of reaching the consumer directly without this prior intermediation has created a saturated digital landscape where there are very diverse content creators and in competition to attract the attention of audiences.

Within this new scenario, brands are one of the emerging actors that relate directly to consumers, seeking interaction, information about their products and engagement (Godey *et al.*, 2016). In the world of marketing, under the so-called branded content, it has been concluded that the creation of content

that provides valuable information to meet consumer needs favors brand loyalty (Asnawati *et al.*, 2022; Saulīte and Ščeulovs, 2022).

Also, and from the point of view of information consumption, disinter-mediation has had important consequences for brands (Shirky, 2008). Some studies show that fashion consumers prefer communication issued directly by brands on their websites and social networks to that of fashion magazines (Grau *et al.*, 2019). Other works explain that the information on social networks of fashion brands points to four needs of consumers: observation, knowledge, pre-purchase information and inspiration (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). A recent study (Sádaba *et al.*, 2024) confirms that brands are a very relevant source of influence, since consumers also look to their social media profiles for inspiration, information for decision-making, new trends or fashion products.

In short, disintermediation introduces an important novelty for fashion brands: brands cease to be exclusively generators of fashion products and also become producers of content (Schaefer, 2015). As technology expert Tom Foremski (2009) has explained from this point of view, now "every company is now a media company".

This mutation of functions as a brand has great implications for fashion companies, both in their internal and external organization. On the one hand, fashion companies need to have previously existing resources in traditional media, from qualified personnel for the creation of content (creatives, photographers, filmmakers ...) to the infrastructure necessary for its dissemination (photographic studies, radio studies, media, distribution channels ...). On the other hand, communication skills also pose challenges of creative work, budgetary decisions, and control of reputational issues.

Some works suggest that branded content is positively influencing brands' reputation (Castillo-Abdul *et al.*, 2022). It should also be considered that if messages are broadcast in greater numbers and without the filters of the previous gatekeepers, there is the possibility of an increase in the risks of making errors and having credibility problems with the audience (Noris and Cantoni, 2021).

In addition, new formats such as fashion films, audiovisual products of cinematographic quality directly made and issued by the brands, arise as a rival for the quality of the content issued. Torregrosa and Noguera (2015) explain that fashion films have a very broad and vague definition, and the concept designates multiple audiovisual phenomena: from films that address the theme of fashion (such as the famous *The Devil Wears Prada* by Frankel,

in 2006) to audiovisual experiments by designers and renowned artists (such as the 2011-2012 campaign of Lanvin of Alber Elbaz and Steven Meisel). In addition, it has been used by brands for a decade to broadcast their own messages and promote their collections (Gómez and Durán, 2021).

Thus, fashion films appear in 2009, and in 2016 they are generalized (Díaz Soloaga and García Guerrero, 2016) but with the pandemic of 2000 they have a unique moment of communication with consumers. It is at this time, when the absence of live presentations is used to make films that replace the parades and events of the brands, which coincides with the rise of Instagram (Cenizo, 2022; Rees-Roberts, 2020).

In the world of luxury, fashion films have reinforced the narrative of highend brands with narrative values such as "discovery, seduction and love" or "the natural and the playful", building a magical and mythical world (von Wachenfeldt, 2018).

With a length longer than that of a mere commercial advertisement and smaller than that of a film, there are formats that can be distributed through social networks (Rees-Roberts, 2020). In fact, it is this ability to share content from networks, which has led to a fresher and more direct format that seeks to conquer the consumer, especially the young public present in these social networks.

Therefore, the era of the internet causes a disintermediation with which direct communication by brands is generalized, and begins to rival the quality of content, this time within the parameters of the visual industry. Consequently, in this new dimension for fashion brands, communication becomes more relevant in the work that brands do, and a need to better strategically define the contribution of communication in the company.

3. Methodology

After reviewing the literature, this article aims to offer results that explain the strategic role of communication in fashion brands in the context of disintermediation. To do this, the analysis presented responds to the following research questions:

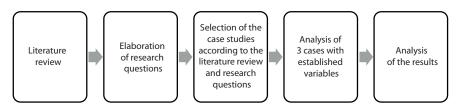
- Q1. How has content creation by fashion brands evolved?
- Q2. What weight do fashion collections and products have in the communication of fashion brands?

Q3. What media and tone of communication support the content broadcast?

This work uses the case method to explore the possibilities of fashion brands as content generators, according to the development seen in the review of the previous literature. The case method is confirmed as a valuable way to examine complex phenomena within specific real-life contexts (Rashid *et al.*, 2019). It is therefore a qualitative research with the capacity to provide evidence of causal claims that may not be achievable through statistical or formal research methods, with a broader understanding of the phenomena studied (Priya, 2020).

In this way, the stages of the research carried out are summarized in figure 1.

Figure 1
Stages of research



As for the selected case studies, they respond to a leadership criterion in their sector when communication strategies are analyzed, as shown in Table 1, since they are brands with this position.

 Table 1

 Selected case studies and communication materials

	Time analyzed	Position of the mark at the time analyzed	Analysis material	
Benetton	Beginning of the 1990s	Leader in retail fast fashion.	Advertising campaigns.	
Net-a-Porter	2000–2015	Main luxury multi-brand online store.	Editorials and Porter magazine.	
Loewe	2023–2024	Leadership luxury segment.	"Decades of Confusion" campaign.	

Note. Own elaboration based on Berta and Onida, 2011; Bueso and Pedroni, 2015; Lyst Index, Q2 2023.

When choosing the case studies, different stages are observed with different communication models, by which fashion brands have evolved as agents that send messages. One could distinguish a first moment in which a classic advertising and commercial model is followed, a second moment that coincides with the arrival of the Internet in which brands begin to experiment with communication formats, and a third in which they already clearly compete in quality and quantity of content with the traditional actors of communication, with a narrative and visual model of their own.

As a paradigm of the first stage, there is the case of Benetton and its advertising model, in the second stage the case of Net-a-Porter and its editorial model, and in the third the case of Loewe and its campaign "Decades of Confusion". The latter, for its novelty (it is a 2024 campaign) responds to a more original analysis and without references from previous studies.

In order to answer the research questions, in addition to the context and explanation of the moment of the brand, the following aspects have been taken into account: 1. The type of media used (media or communication channel) 2. Content type 3. The narrative tone used and 4. The relationship of communication and fashion product obtained.

Thus, the case analysis concludes with a comparative table of the three cases analyzed.

4. Analysis and results

With a famous advertising model, Benetton was the pioneer fashion brand in creating messages through the shock advertising of fashion (Barela, 2003).

In 1965, the Benetton brothers began their business journey by offering an original and colorful knitted product. Its competitive advantage lay in a different method of production that accelerated the processes (dyeing the already finished jumpers, instead of dyeing the yarn, the so-called *red in capo*) added to a distribution network of franchises (Camuffo *et al.*, 2002). In twenty years, the Italian brand was present in about 60 countries through 3200 stores, evolving into an industrial company, with manufacturing operations in Italy and abroad (Berta and Onida, 2011).

A year earlier, a campaign had begun with the Parisian agency Eldorado, entitled "All the Colors of the World" in which photographer Oliverio Toscani put together young black and white models wearing colorful clothes.

He then introduced the "United Colors of Benetton," a slogan that explicitly identified the company's globalization strategy with the ideal of a peaceful, multi-ethnic world, which after the international political changes of the second half of the 1980s seemed to be relevant. Later, this slogan became the company's logo, and Toscani was hired by Benetton after breaking the contract with Eldorado (Muljadi *et al.*, 2022; Sugden, 2012).

In the following campaigns, any reference to the product disappeared, and advertising focused on current social issues (issue advertising or advocate advertising), with highly controversial ads such as that of a dying AIDS (image 1), a priest kissing a nun or a child covered by the placenta and with the umbilical cord (shock advertising) (Muljadi *et al.*, 2022; Hubbard, 1993). They were massive campaigns placed in 92 countries. They were not always well accepted, and many magazines refused to publish the ads on their pages and authorities around the world banned the spread of posters on the streets (France, Germany, USA, United Kingdom...). Some franchisees also complained that the effect on sales was not very positive (Sugden, 2012).

Image 1 S/S 1992 Campaign, "AIDS – David Kirby"



Note. Concept: Oliviero Toscani. Official Archives Benetton Group: historical campaigns.

The company, which had been ascendantly successful since its inception in the 1960s, saw new competitors coming into play (among others, Zara, Gap or H&M). With Toscani's announcements, Benetton once again sought relevance in the sector, without mentioning the product in its images (Hubbard, 1993). However, these campaigns turned out to be as provocative as unforgettable, and the company was more known for its advertisements than for its fashion sold in its stores. That is, somehow, it went from being perceived by its communication power rather than by fashion. Moreover, the company in 1994 founded "Fabrica" as the group's communications research center.

With the emergence of the Internet, fashion brands entered a new communicative dynamic. Initially, it was limited to the creation of the websites themselves for direct sale of the product. In the luxury sector there was some controversy over whether this could be compatible with online commerce (Bueso and Pedroni, 2015). Indeed, the luxury sector entered the online world later (Mosca and Chiaudano, 2020) and it is in this context, in 2000, when businesswoman Natalie Massenet pioneered her Net-a-Porter.com, a portal dedicated to the sale of luxury fashion products. Net-a-Porter consolidated itself in a decade as the world's leading multi-brand luxury online store for women, with 2.5 million unique views each month. In 2010 it became part of the Swiss conglomerate Richemont. Previously, Massenet included in her ecommerce proposal the subsidiaries The Outnet (2008), as an online luxury outlet and Mr. Porter (2011), the main online store of men's luxury fashion.

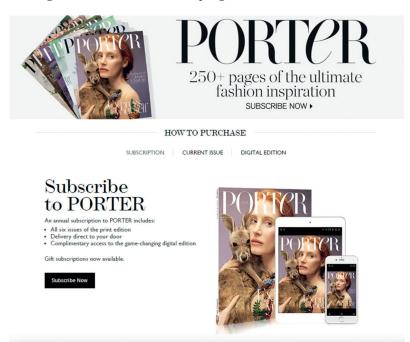
Net-a-Porter's success was soon in the view that, as an alternative to the luxury store experience, the web had to offer something more to the consumer. That something else came soon in the form of content. With a strategy of merging content and commerce, the portal offered added value through new information to its consumer of the products available on the portal, acting at the same time as seller and prescriber (Castillan *et al.*, 2017).

It began by publishing a weekly drop-down that presented the products for sale on the web. In early 2013, this drop-down became a free digital magazine, *The Edit*. Surprisingly, and in a context of questioning paper publications (Siles and Boczkowski, 2012), a year later, the print magazine *Porter* was launched (image 2). *Porter* was in direct competition with headlines such as *Vogue*, *Harper's* Bazaar and *Elle*, although it did so on a bimonthly basis, and priced at \$9.99, much higher than its rivals, which were sold on an average of \$5.5.

The company that emerged from *ecommerce* therefore became a communication company, where the coexistence between the commercial and the content were the key to success (Bueso and Pedroni, 2015). In 2015 Neta-Porter merged with the Yoox portal and shortly before Massenet left the company (Arduini and Paoloni, 2020).

The third moment in the communication of fashion brands analyzed begins in reality in the first years of the millennium, when the Italian Alessandro Michele took charge in 2002 of the creative direction of Gucci. Michele implemented a new and revolutionary leadership transforming the brand into a cultural icon (Fulco, 2019). The artistic experience began to be more important in Gucci than the product; there was even a time when it was difficult to find a product on the Gucci website, full, at that time, of cultural references and nods to pop culture. At that time, the brand started to interest a younger audience.

Image 2 *Porter Magazine and its launch campaign*



In the second decade of the century, the paradigm shift initiated by the Italian brand extends to the rest of the market. At the root of all the transformations that luxury has undergone in recent years is the interest of high-end brands for a segment of the population, Generation Z. In 2025, it will represent approximately 40% of global sales for the sector (D'Arpizio and Levato, 2017). This new emerging public has conditioned and transformed brands and their communication. Classic values such as heritage or exclusivity have been questioned in marketing campaigns of recent times, when brands have entered without fear in the digital stage where the Z live.

Loewe is one of the most successful companies to have embraced this new scenario. The brand communication has gone from a classic approach to an update of its much more disruptive contents. This transformation has been accompanied by an exponential growth of the brand and by a recognition that had not achieved so far, leading recognized luxury rankings (Lyst Index, Q2 2023).

Jonathan Anderson, Loewe's creative director, aware that the success of a contemporary luxury business depends on both content and product, emphasizes branded content, using all kinds of channels. Without disregarding traditional media such as advertising or the paper magazine that he has started publishing and distributing for free in his boutiques, he deploys what Michael Amzalag (of the creative duo M/M) describes as the "Loewe channel": a flow of images for a variety of media from store displays to the Instagram accounts of the brand's followers (King, 2016).

In addition to the multiplicity of channels, the amount of content generated is also remarkable. Traditionally, communication, closely linked to the product, was mainly reserved for launching collections. Now there is a constant flow of small or large pieces of communication, which arise independently of fashion proposals. A rapid content diversification strategy is deployed with an emphasis on social trends, popular culture and entertainment.

This is the case in the brand's *fashion film* entitled "Decades of Confusion", which aims to better publicize the origin of the firm, which has achieved recent international popularity. The first thing that attracts attention is this new potential of fashion film, more used until now to recreate the universe of brands than with a specific communication objective in the line of the reinforcement of the brand pursued (Sanz *et al.*, 2020). It is also new the use of humor as a narrative tone, something at other times unthinkable in luxury communication. It is frequently changed from register combining sophistication and exclusivity (von Wachenfeldt, 2018) with humor, irony,

eccentricity or divertimento. This undefined tone that once would have been confusing is now quite natural.

In the analyzed short film, the parody of a word spelling contest (spelling) is undoubtedly a *vintage* nod to American popular culture. The short is written by actor Dan Levy (Good Grief, Schitt's Creek) who stars alongside Aubrey Plaza (Safety not Guaranteed, Parks and recreations). Both actors are comedians widely known for their involvement in current affairs series and are aligned with the values of the brand. The choice of this type of ambassadors is another significant change, both in this short film and in other content Loewe counts as protagonists of its campaigns with comedians, rappers, youtubers, musicians and celebrities that allow it to connect better with the young public, far removed from the pattern of traditional ambassadors used until very recently by the brand (Sanz et al., 2020). The creative direction of the short is by Jonathan Anderson himself who is also mentioned in a humorous key in one of the scenes. In "Decades of Confusion", in addition to the fashion film, the campaign extends with a photographic collaboration with Hedi Stanton that illustrates the backstage of the making of the short and with another alliance with the illustrator Ignasi Monreal who made a poster. This campaign spreads the short film on social networks, as can be seen in image 3, where can also be seen the change in aesthetics and narrative tone.

Image 3 *Instagram illustration of Loewe's "Decades of Confusion" campaign*



This example of the communication prepared by Loewe shows a substantial change in brand communication, emphasizing the consumer experience; it is no longer just about selling, but about entertaining.

In this way, the comparative table resulting from the cases analyzed (Table 2) exposes the different communication strategies of fashion brands, with the variables studied and responding to the research questions raised.

 Table 2

 Communication strategies in Fashion Companies

	Media	Content	Tone	Relationship fashion/ communication
Benetton	Advertising	Shock ads	Persuasive	Outperforms the product
Net-a-Porter	Magazine	Fashion Information	Informational	Value the Product
Loewe	Fashion Film-Networks	Entertainment	Humor	Experience. Beyond the product

5. Discussion and conclusions

The first research question reveals that the study of the cases shows an evolution in the relationship of fashion companies with communication.

The cases analyzed allow to explain a development of communication for fashion brands as message broadcasters. Benetton uses advertising as its own tool from the 80s and 90s, with messages to make noise and raise public awareness. With the first steps of digitization, cases like Net-a-Porter use the websites that help the public stay informed. And in a context like the current one, much more developed in terms of diversity of actors and communicative possibilities, entertainment is installed as a communicative strategy.

In response to the second research question, we can state that there are three very different communication models, in which the relationship with fashion and product varies markedly. The case of Benetton, which neglects fashion to be memorable on its ads in a quest for notoriety. For its part, Neta-Porter creates a traditional media, such as a magazine, to value its product, taking an unexpected and inverse path to what was happening at the time. Loewe, in a context of greater concurrence of content creators, seeks to entertain, integrating the product with humor and extending this tone to the

campaign in networks. In this sense, it is important to note that it does so in an unexpected way for communication traditionally associated with luxury.

In all cases, however, communication takes a strategic role for the brands analyzed. With a commercial objective and using advertising in the first case with a more informative mode, but also appealing to consumption in the second, and with a third linked to the new branded entertainment, or *advertainment* (mixture of advertising and entertainment), where the decisive point is not so much the information of a product as the associations that the public establishes (Ozturk, 2014). In this way, and completing the answer to the third research question, narrative tones also evolve, and surprisingly especially in the field of luxury, where the communicative licenses of irony and humor are present.

The big difference of the cases is that the digital environment favors a context where any brand is also a direct creator of content. Unlike Benetton that needed to turn to commercial investments, both Net-a-Porter and later Loewe are able to distribute the messages through their own channels and networks, and thus reach the audiences that interest them most (luxury customers for the former and young consumers for the latter).

If, as shown, fashion brands present an evolution towards becoming creators of content and communicative companies, then we can expect an escalation of greater creativity and sophistication, but as Loewe seems to announce, without losing the value of the brand as a fashion proposal.

This disintermediation environment entails some significant challenges. Although disintermediation reduces the role of traditional intermediaries, some research suggests that it may lead to the emergence of powerful new intermediaries, such as major technology platforms (e.g. Google, Amazon, Facebook) (Galloway, 2017). These platforms can control distribution and monetization, with significant supremacy over consumption and information.

Reputational issues have also been pointed out, as risks increase as communication with the audience is done in a constant and direct way. Social networks become the channels of communication and interaction with all users (Zeren and Gökdağlı, 2020) and they are together with the followers of the brands critical voices (Kashif *et al.*, 2021) who go so far as to demand the withdrawal of some campaigns or to request boycotts.

In this context, brands cannot ignore that although the customer approaches them looking for a product, it is necessary to consider that this same person is also a citizen of a hyperinformed and connected world, with a

wide spectrum of possibilities on which he documents himself, often analyzes, and takes advantage. In this sense, for fashion brands to communicate means not sectioning the interlocutor as someone only present in his facet of potential buyer, but connecting with him and his environment. Therefore, communication is increasingly contextual intelligence, with which to know how to listen to the symptoms, sensitivities and concerns with whom a conversation is established.

6. Limitations and future lines of research

Research has certain limitations. The main one is its focus on the communication of fashion companies, so the conclusions cannot be extrapolated to the communication of other sectors. Complementary work by other industries would be needed in this regard. On the other hand, the current fashion film of the last brand chosen for the analysis, Loewe, makes it difficult to refer to secondary sources, used in the case of the first two brands.

The study on the evolution of communication of fashion brands and their conversion into communication companies is the basis for a future quantitative and qualitative work. A quantitative content analysis could be carried out to provide complementary data on, for example, investments and the audience reached with each of the campaigns analyzed. To do this, it would be interesting to complement the study with a qualitative approach, with indepth interviews with brand communication managers.

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