

Parading Fashion Beyond the Model: the Influencer, the Entertainer, and the It Girl

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Fashion promotion has come a long way since design salons and mannequin parades at horse race tracks. To analyse the evolution of the phenomenon throughout the years, the essay looks at theories around actresses, professional models, and exclusive spaces as tools for marketing and promotion through a postmodern lens, considering the three dimensions of space, time and body. New titles, on top of model and actress, have been assigned to contributors promoting fashion not only with their bodies, but with their personality, popularity, and following. Location or space of promotion is as important as the ‘promoter’ to build an image around the garment, thus creating a fashion spectacle where the observer is sold an image of the dream. It is important to note that these roles are not always well perceived and that, in a lot of cases, tend to overlap.

The choice for this particular phenomenon comes from the controversy at this year's Cannes Film Festival sparked by media attention afforded to fashion on the red carpet over the films shown (Dennett, 2023). A spectacle before THE spectacle. As if the red carpet was the main spectacle of the day casting a shadow over the films, which are the subject of the festivities. With media attention gravitating towards the red carpet and its parade of influencers, models, actors, and socialites, fashion has become a spectacle within a spectacle, emphasising its influence and significance within the overall event experience. This raises the following questions: are film festivals the 'modern' race model parade? Are there other iterations of the race model parade? Who are the main contributors or vessels of fashion in these scenarios? And how do space and location contribute to the social impact of the fashion parade? This essay explores ways fashion is communicated and promoted through celebrities and dream destinations.

The Actress, Model, and Parade

Caroline Evans (2005) argues that mannequin parades are the “most significant marketing and promotional tools” of fashion. These would often take place at horse race tracks, considered as the “catwalk-avant-la-lettre”, where designers or couturiers would send out models in their designs to appeal to and attract potential female customers from high society. These women would also look at the models to gain knowledge on the latest trends. Although it is worth noting that, in some cases, the models would be met with disapproval from the upper class. Fashion was also promoted in theatrical production and later film. Designers offered celebrity endorsements to actors, creating their costumes, offering them discounts, or even sending free garments for the actor to wear for events or to simply *parade* around the city.

In his Fashion and Modernity chapter entitled “Ambiguous Role Models”, Christopher Breward (2005) discussed how fashion, within the modern context, created an opportunity for the theatre actress to participate in the shaping and promotion of an overall new fashion image. He argues that

the passing of a largely homosocial and thus compromised conception of fashionable pleasure in the city, for a more inclusive understanding of glamorous leisure which embraced modish dress as signifier of progress towards a slick and democratic modernity, one in which women figured as a new in proactive audience.

Breward also attributes London women's heightened fashion consumption in the beginning of the twentieth century to the manipulative effect of the media, which in that case was the musical comedy. This effect was especially seen in the West End, the same area as the theatre, which emphasises the important role space plays in fashion promotion. The Victorian actress could also be linked to a distinct style that can be identified in other women influenced by her, creating a "cult of celebrity" (Breward, 2005).

The Entertainer

Quoting a 1908 note from Mario Borsa, an Italian journalist:

The cult of the actor and the actress is a new development of the nature of Carlyle's 'hero-worship'. The actor looms large in the public eye; London lies at his feet. His portrait is everywhere - at the photographer's, the bookseller's, on posters, picture postcards, and even on table services and other articles of china (Breward, 2005).

In the age of social media, the effect of celebrity is magnified, and its reach has broadened. Simultaneously, the expiry of the hero-worship effect has accelerated. During the 19th century, Thomas Carlyle introduced the term "hero-worship" to describe the deep admiration that ordinary individuals held for renowned historical figures. Carlyle argued that heroes encompass both exceptional qualities and human flaws, emphasising the importance of recognising their accomplishments rather than seeking perfection. However, during the 21st century, the concept of hero-worship has undergone a transformation influenced by celebrity culture. Celebrities are often regarded as role models, for sometimes insignificant, often shallow reasons. As a result, the boundaries between heroes and celebrities have become blurred, and the general public's ability to distinguish between genuine greatness and mere popularity has declined. (Lindberg, 2012) This puts the observer in a constant need for a new, fresher face and a thirst for originality and authenticity. The public insatiability for content thus commodifies the celebrity.

The It Girl and the Socialite

The exact origin of the term "It girl" is attributed to the British novelist and screenwriter Elinor Glyn. The term originated in the early 20th century and gained prominence during the 1920s with

the rise of celebrity culture and the influence of the media. In 1927, Glyn wrote a novel titled "It", which was later adapted into a silent film featuring actress Clara Bow. In the story, Glyn described "It" as a quality of attraction that some individuals possess, particularly women. (Barber, 2022) The term "It girl" was coined to refer to those women who had that certain captivating and magnetic quality. The "It girl" is a young woman who is considered to be the embodiment of current cultural trends, charisma, and social popularity. She possesses a certain allure and is often admired and emulated by others.

The term "It girl" tends to overlap with "socialite". A socialite is typically an affluent individual who is known for her active participation in social events, often belonging to high society. Socialites are known for their connections, involvement in philanthropy, and frequent appearances at social gatherings. In comparison, an "It girl" is more focused on embodying a particular cultural zeitgeist and being admired for her style, personality, and trendsetting influence. It girls can be socialites, but they can also come from diverse backgrounds and achieve their status through their unique charm and appeal. (Groome, 2019)

Actors, singers, entertainers, and supermodels can be It girls. An It girl is watched wherever she goes, whatever she's doing, turning her life into a fashion spectacle. A prominent example of that would be supermodel Naomi Campbell's court appearance, where she testifies at the highly mediatised Charles Taylor's war crimes trial or the Diamond Trial. Campbell is photographed wearing a silver sequin Dolce & Gabbana gown on her last day of court-ordered community service. This constant observing, among other factors, has negatively impacted a few It girls, like in the case of Britney Spears and Amanda Bynes.

The Influencer or the Impostor

Building on the success of bloggers, influencers have gained popularity as individuals who leverage social media platforms to showcase a certain ideal, essentially branding themselves for an audience. This rise of the influencer can be attributed to social media providing a platform where people curate their lives and present an aspirational image to others. Influencers, with their significant social following on the internet, become influential figures who endorse and promote a specific dream lifestyle. As a result, brands actively seek out these influencers for a feature in their social media accounts. The influencers' prominence stems from the content they share, which is typically centred

around their appearance, appealing lifestyle, celebrity proximity, engaging personality, or a combination of these factors.

In recent years, influencers have been seen in high-profile events such as the MET Gala and the Cannes Film Festival. They are usually endorsed by fashion houses even when they don't necessarily create fashion-related content. For instance, Emma Chamberlain went from a sad, parasocial, ice coffee drinking, scrunchy wearing teen from California sharing her daily life on YouTube to being invited to and hosting interviews in the MET Gala, creating her own fashion line, and attending fashion week in Paris and Copenhagen. She is now a Vogue contributor as well as an ambassador for established fashion houses Louis Vuitton and Miu Miu. (Mau, 2023) This phenomenon has sparked controversy as some people still view influencers as low-level celebrities who should not be invited to exclusive fashion events comparable to the MET ball or the Cannes Film Festival. Although Chamberlain can be credited for her more honest and engaging approach to content creation, which makes her attractive to audiences looking for authenticity on social media.

This was not the first time that 'outsiders' have faced scrutiny and were deemed undeserving of an invite to an exclusive fashion event. Preceding social media, fashion bloggers were looked upon for inspiration and insider informative content. Some of them even gained significant popularity among their audience. As a result, designers started inviting them to shows and providing them with products to review and wear. This trend posed a threat to the carefully crafted and coveted world of high-end fashion publishing, which often features products based on advertisers' preferences rather than accessibility to their readership. Additionally, emerging designers found it challenging to afford features in these magazines (Freeman, 2016). In response, four Vogue fashion editors openly criticised the inclusion of fashion bloggers in the industry, particularly their presence on the front row of fashion shows. One of the harshest comments on the matter, as reported by Hadley Freeman (2016), would go to editor Alessandra Codinha, who said, "soon people will wise up to how particularly gross the whole practice of paid appearances and borrowed outfits looks. Looking for style among a bought-and-paid-for front row is like going to a strip club looking for romance." This controversy goes to show the hypocrisy and entitlement among fashion magazine editors. Would a magazine survive without borrowed clothes/accessories and advertising revenue?

This raises the questions, is there a social standing where celebrities are viewed on the same level, independent of wealth and following? Where actors are maybe more respected than influencers, runway models more than Instagram models, or singers more than reality TV stars? In a world where lines are blurred among celebrity categories; where influencers can act and/or sing, where A list actors can promote products like weight loss teas on social media, and nepo babies can just do anything and everything they want, those questions can be hard to answer from a social aspect without understanding the value of the celebrity status and whether it was “achieved” or “attributed” (Stewart & Giles, 2019).

Drawing from the social dynamics in South Korea, Idols or K-pop bands are positioned at the base of the celebrity hierarchy (Dhan, 2022). They typically begin their training as performers during their early teenage years, indicating the significant effort they invest to attain fame. However, due to their target audience being predominantly younger individuals, the broader public tends to underestimate their education and artistic depth, in comparison to actors, for instance (Dhan, 2022). So this contradicts the theory proposed by Stewart and Giles (2019), which suggests that the value of celebrity status is determined by whether it is achieved or attributed. This lack of respect could be attributed to the perception that idols do not conform to traditional frameworks of celebrity social standing. Similarly, this situation can be observed within the realm of fashion influencers. Their presence in high-profile celebrations of art is met with resistance from certain segments of the public and industry insiders because they do not fit the traditional frames of attributing social value. This aligns with the postmodern cultural shift, rejecting tradition and breaking socio-economic organisation, thus marking the fashion industry (Tseëlon, 2020), where magazines were traditionally seen as the authoritative voice of fashion opinion and bloggers/influencers as ringard impostors.

Fashion Spaces

Efrat Tseëlon (2020) discusses how Baudrillard’s analysis allows for simulation to replace signification, making fashion “a playful spectacle, a carnival of appearance”. Baudrillard further links the postmodern to the concept of hyperreality. In this context, the boundaries between the real and the imaginary constantly collapse into each other, which resonates with celebrity culture and the fantasies perpetuated and embodied by the fashion industry (Rossi-Camus, 2023). This theory is especially important in discussing the significance of created spaces and the strategic placement of celebrities within these spaces in enforcing certain ideals. Thinking of the hyperreal fashion

spectacle, one should mention the similarities people noted between the MET ball and the Hunger Games, saying that humanity is approaching a dystopian state. Putting side by side the daily struggle of regular people, global issues, and the extravagance of the event justifies the thought and leaves one to think that a similar public uproar to the film's is not far-fetched. Aside from that, the event serves as a promotion opportunity to many design houses and up-and-coming designers. Another fashion spectacle would be last summer's most talked-about destination wedding, Kourtney Kardashian and Travis Barker's, in collaboration with Dolce & Gabbana. The festivities had major Christian and Italian references, which is not unusual for the brand. The wedding looked like a promotional opportunity for both the Kardashians and Dolce and Gabbana, mixing business and pleasure.

The modern-day equivalent of designers sending mannequin parades at the horse race tracks would be designers dressing whoever qualifies as famous, socially relevant, and influential enough to be invited to high-profile events. Fashion houses can also create their own events in parallel with those exclusive ones, a lot of the time sports events, where they can endorse even more influential people. An example of that would be the Tag Heuer Formula 1 Grand Prix event, where they invited brand ambassadors, British actor Tom Holland, as well as South Korean actor Wi Ha Jun, to further perpetuate the actor as an icon of fashionability, glamour and luxury. This is not the first time Tag Heuer invited popular figures to the Monaco Grand Prix, as last year, they invited Simone Ashley from *Bridgerton* and Jacob Elordi from *Euphoria*, one of the most-watched shows of 2022. Influencers and celebrities can also be seen at the French Open Tennis, the Royal Ascot, the Polo Classic, front rows at NBA games, and the list goes on.

Another instance of the 20th-century conceptions of fashion built around notions of spectacle and celebrity (Breward, 2005) is the celebrity fashion style photographs as they are spotted outside of exclusive clubs. The birth of the postmodern movement coincides with the rise in popularity of Studio 54. The New York City nightclub attracted an exciting crowd. Regular attendees included celebrities, artists, musicians, fashion professionals, and socialites. Its rejection of a unified style and embracing of flamboyance, excess, and individuality make it one of the icons of the postmodern wave. The exclusivity of the club due to its strict door policy made it even more appealing and somewhat a safe space for creatives. Even standing outside the club guaranteed a spectacle. It was the place to be and be seen at. Its emphasis on freedom of expression, playfulness, and extravaganza

mirrored the postmodern ideals of challenging established norms and rejecting rigid categorisations. (de la Fuente, 2020)

The evolution of fashion promotion has witnessed a significant shift from traditional design salons and mannequin parades to a more complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Through a postmodern lens, this essay has explored the role of actresses, professional models, and exclusive spaces as influential tools in marketing and promoting fashion. The emergence of new titles beyond models and actresses has expanded the scope of fashion promotion, incorporating elements of personality, popularity, and following. The location or space of promotion has gained equal importance as the promoter themselves, as it helps create a captivating fashion spectacle that sells a dream to observers. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these roles can often overlap and are not always universally embraced. Ultimately, this essay has delved into the ways fashion is communicated and promoted through the association with celebrity status and dream lifestyles and spaces. While postmodernity encourages individualism and excess, seeing the same popular faces all over media coverage can harm their careers as well as the public's experience. In some way, this conflicts with those same principles. Designers and media agencies choose from the same pool of people who are popular during a certain time period and scatter them all over events. This also encourages a toxic cult following where fans feel entitled to a celebrity, but also idolise them. Fashion houses and magazines take advantage of that following to create campaigns featuring that celebrity and sell as many products as possible. For some, this is taken further to lead to connections to postmodernity and fashion as the epitome of a consumer-oriented, image-driven society where meanings are increasingly less fixed and more chaotic (Barnard, 2020).

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