



The New Orchestration of Style: Digital Platforms and the Fashion Innovation Ecosystems

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Abstract

The fashion industry has reached a definitive tipping point in 2026, transitioning from a linear “push” model to a complex digital innovation ecosystem. This paper argues that the traditional brand-consumer duality is no longer the primary unit of market analysis. Instead, focus must shift to platforms as orchestrators, and as the central nervous system of global style. In this paper, we analyze how these orchestrators govern through algorithmic curation and data-driven infrastructure. Through case studies of TikTok’s virality, and Farfetch’s curation, it is demonstrated that brand resilience in 2026 is determined by Ecosystem Fluency: the ability to engage in real-time with decentralized actors, including creators, and AI driven agents. The findings suggest that the most successful brands have ceased acting as mere sellers, instead becoming active participants in a value web that prioritizes algorithmic relevance and co-creative agility. This study concludes that in an era of algorithmic governance; the orchestration of collective intelligence is the only sustainable path to market leadership.

Keywords: Brand Resilience; Digital Content Creation; Algorithmic Governance; Data Driven; Market Leadership

1 Introduction

For many years, the fashion industry operated through a hierarchical, linear supply - chain system where designers, fashion houses, and editorial institutions exercised concentrated control over trend creation and marketing (Moeran, 2006). This traditional model emphasized creative authority from designers, seasonal garment production cycles, and a passive audience willing to shop what’s on the retailers’ windows. However, digital transformation has disrupted this traditional structure, replacing it with decentralized innovative ecosystems. By 2026, the global fashion industry has undergone a profound structural transformation driven by digital and engaging media environments, combined with data - driven systems. The fashion industry now operates mostly as a dynamic and decentralized digital innovation ecosystem where platforms act as key orchestrators of consumption, cultural influence, and relevance.

This paper presents a structured literature review addressing three guiding questions:

- (1) How the transition from a linear system to a digital platform ecosystems reshaped fashion consumerism?
- (2) What theoretical frameworks best relate to the new orchestration in Fashion, marketing, and digital platforms?
- (3) What do the contrasting digital trajectories of TikTok and Farfetch reveal about the proper conditions for brand resilience in ecosystems governed by algorithms?

This study demonstrates that brand resilience in 2026 depends on Ecosystem fluency. This proposed concept can refer to a brand's ability to operate effectively within decentralized digital networks involving creators, consumers, data infrastructure, and AI - driven agents. Ultimately, the study proposes that brands can no longer operate as mere product sellers, but as co-creative participants within interconnected information ecosystems. In an era defined by algorithmic governance, the mastery of Ecosystem Fluency is the strategic roadmap for a sustainable market leadership and continuity.

1.1 The Decline of the Linear Fashion System

The global fashion industry has historically operated through a linear and vertical model system. As described by Kaner (2013) "it proceeds through production, distribution, diffusion, reception, adoption and consumption". Fashion as a business needed to operate through intermediaries to market its products for profitability. The importance of fashion magazines derives from their role as a link between producers and consumers. In consequence, fashion editorials became a powerful institution that provided and dictated the legitimacy of fashion trends (Moeran, 2006). This statement only fed the urgency to admit that "the fashion industry has been described as a most powerful, almost dictatorial control over fashion trends" (Sproles, 1981).

Its structure then aligned with industrial manufacturing processes at high scale, prioritized inventory efficiency, and production timelines, all related to globalization, and improvements in the supply chain system that has made - at some point- garments accessible and affordable to a wider audience (Buchanan, 2023), especially with the rise of fast fashion brands such as Zara and Mango that adapted this quick production system to introduce new fashion proposals to their stores (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). In 2005, Yahoo launched "Shoposhere", an online platform for consumers to sell, rate, and comment on users' catalogues. What began as a rudimentary idea of how online shopping could function actually created the foundation of contemporary e-commerce: consumers' search for inspiration, exchange of ideas and recommendations from other users across platforms, and direct purchase (Arula, 2021). Even though Shoposhere never achieved the prominent success of subsequent platforms, many may have drawn inspiration from this model or incorporated similar features into their social media ecosystems as seen in TikTok (Glasheen, 2026).

The COVID - 19 pandemic represented a decisive point of growth for e-commerce business, accelerating consumers migration to digital channels. Social media platforms became a digital tool to influence consumers' purchase through social proof, user- generated content, influencer marketing, and visually appealing advertising (Singh & Raghuvanshi, 2025). McKinsey & Company (2024) documented that consumers' retails purchases have been influenced digitally up to 70 percent. As social media algorithms monitor online users in real time, they can predict consumer preferences and demand, making the shopping experience more appealing than visiting a retail store. For instance, TikTok Shop presented an increase of up to 40% of users in the US in 2023. Social media thereby disrupted the conventional dynamics of fashion

discovery, displacing the traditional fashion editorials' authority in the linear fashion system. The arrival of generative AI to the masses has also impacted the fashion traditional model. This technological development currently analyses "extensive datasets from sources such as social media, fashion shows, and consumers' behavior to predict upcoming trends, enabling brands to anticipate and respond with appropriate design and marketing" (O'Connell, 2024). By these means, the fashion industry moved from a high - scale production model driven by human intermediaries toward automated systems with continuous feedback between consumers, brands, and digital creators, all in real time making it a very complex adaptive system that relies on data, and on - demand production, rendering the lineal fashion system obsolete.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Digital Platforms

In this framework, digital platforms can be described as a technological system, a business model to a new economic system operating simultaneously in a form of an ecosystem (Casas-Cortés et al., 2023). First, digital platforms provide technological systems that generate value through data information collected by algorithms (Gibson, 2024). Second, they connect business stakeholders such as brands, and consumers. Third, market dynamics are shaped and dictated by its algorithm rule of governance. This structure aligns with Jacobides et al. (2018) definition of ecosystems as non-hierarchical networks where they are held together by the deep mutual dependency of their participants. As digital platforms gather consumers' online information, companies and their curated algorithms can access accurate data on social behaviors, and trends that can be translated into strategies to promote constant consumption, personalize shopping experience, increase online engagement with brands, and reduce sampling investments.

2.2 Consumer Culture Theory

Established by Arnould and Thompson (2005), Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) examines how consumers construct identities, build meaningful roles in consumers' purchase consideration, are strongly influenced by media and social circumstances, and create cultural meaning through their engagements with brands. Rather than treating consumers as passive receptive of marketing and promotional messages, CCT interprets participatory marketing practices as having an effect on how cultural value is created through brand identities and their relation to people's core value. Applied to fashion, a powerful cultural asset, it's possible to correlate CCT with the modern digital platforms such as social networks that enable content creation, community engagement, and identity expression to generate brand engagement, therefore creating scenarios of economical transactions.

The virality of TikTok is a direct expression of this logic: users do not simply consume content but actively participate by creating cultural meaning through commentaries, replies, likes and replicating trends. McCracken (1986) provides a supplementary technical foundation to this perspective, stating the agents responsible for gathering and transferring cultural meaning must be equally dynamic. In this modern era, those agents are now digitally based: content creators, digital platforms, algorithms and brands. Singh and Raghuvanshi (2025) provide important empirical support documenting that interactions within social networks enhance purchase influence surpassing the traditional advertising channels precisely because it carries cultural relevance, positioning consumers as active makers of identity and belonging rather than passive recipients of advertising.

2.3 Algorithmic Governance

Seaver (2017) argues that algorithms hold a cultural position in society, functioning as shapers of societal interactions rather than neutral computer-based inventions. This position is justified because algorithms respond to human collectivity behavior which encompasses consumers, institutions, brands, and digital platforms on a daily basis. As society changes, algorithms capture users' practices that later become data that companies will use to promote consumption. While social engagement shapes algorithms, they do not act as neutral systems but as governance mechanisms that create legitimacy and visibility of cultural content. They act as gatekeepers that decide what gets seen and what stays hidden. In fashion, brands and consumers interact through digital platforms and their curated algorithms by promoting engagement, exercising a strong impact on consumption preferences.

Content creators, especially influencers, act as algorithm technicians as they possess marketing knowledge to decode algorithm normative in order to keep digital authority and influence (Geyik & Weijo, 2025). They aren't just posting pretty photos; they are strategically decoding the system's rules to keep their seat at the table. This role is a perfect example of what Bucher (2018) calls "algorithmic power", a back-and-forth relationship built on a simple logic: if an influencer plays by the platform's hidden rules, then the algorithm rewards them with a stage. This means the fame of a fashion brand isn't just a lucky viral moment, it's a carefully manufactured reality. It's a world where our personal style and human emotions are sorted and ranked by software, turning culture into something computable and ultimately, profitable.

2.4 Ecosystem Fluency

While the literature provides a comprehensive understanding of digital platforms, CCT, and algorithms, none fully accounts for the adaptable competence required for fashion brands to achieve a sustainable position within algorithmically governed ecosystems. Digital platforms explain network dynamics but not brand-level adaption. CCT describes how consumers build meaning, yet never offers a perspective that amplifies that process for practitioners. Algorithms shape economic power dynamics but offer limited guidance for brands. Therefore, there is a gap in branding theory: existing research treats these as forces acting on the brand, rather than as an environment a fashion brand must integrate in order to be financially sustainable. This gap motivates the proposal of Ecosystem Fluency: the skill of fashion brands to adapt and engage with different actors in a platform governed by algorithm logic with culturally embedded engagement.

The proposed framework (Figure 1) maps the current ecosystem fashion brands must navigate to achieve financial sustainability. At the top, the technological chain runs sequentially: platforms provide the infrastructure, algorithms govern by their logic and generate data, and AI agents translate that data into direct experiences for consumers, often without brand intervention. At the bottom, the human layer — Creators, Communities, and Consumers — is where cultural meaning is actively produced and circulated. Both layers interact bidirectionally with the brand. Brands sit at the center as the only actor required to maneuver both layers simultaneously. That integrative competence is what Ecosystem Fluency addresses. Culture surrounds everything, functioning not as an actor but as the medium in which the entire system operates – the dimension that provides meaning to every interaction within it. The feedback loop captures a part of the reality of the ecosystem: consumer behavior continuously produces feedback to the algorithm independently from brand goals.

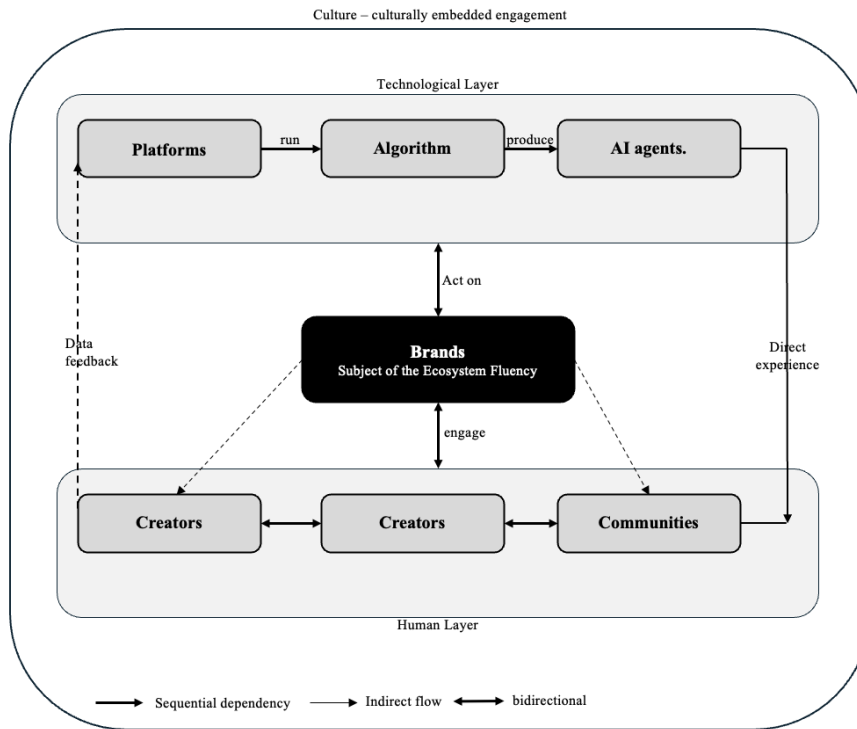


Figure 1. Ecosystem Fluency Framework mapping the technological, human, and cultural layers.
 Source: Elaborated by the author.

3 Method

This paper embraces a structured narrative review approach, reported following PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Haddaway et al., 2022), as illustrated in Figure 2. Literature was gathered through three parallel streams: systematic searches across Scopus, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect using keyword combinations such as “digital platform” AND “fashion”, “consumer culture theory”, “TikTok” AND “fashion”, and “algorithmic governance”, bounded to 2000-2026, additional foundational works through the reference lists of retrieved articles; and grey literature from sources including McKinsey & Company, SAMY Alliance, Forbes, and BBC News, where peer-reviewed evidence was limited given the recency of the phenomena examined.

The search yielded 455 records in total. After removing 28 duplicates, 427 records were screened by title and abstract, of which 337 were excluded for being off-topic, outside the review period, or lacking sufficient academic quality. The remaining 90 were reviewed in full context, and 54 were further excluded for insufficient relevance to the research questions, yielding a final corpus of 36 sources.

TikTok and Farfetch were selected as comparative cases on the basis of their contrasting trajectories within the same digital fashion ecosystems with case evidence triangulated across academic analyses, verified financial reports, and industry assessments.

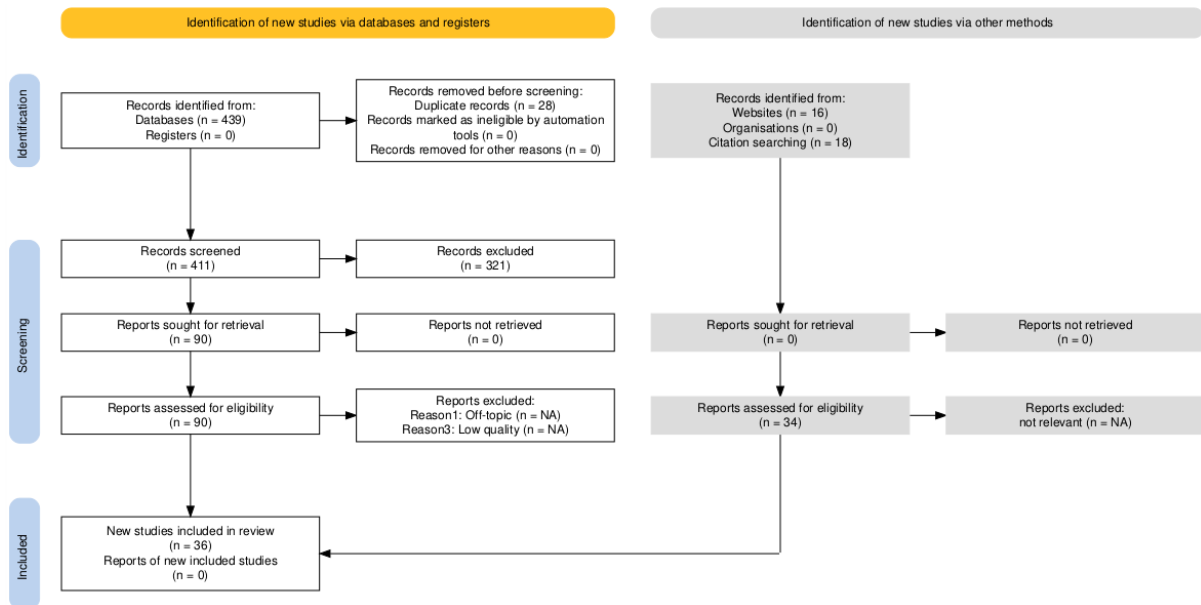


Figure 2. PRISMA-style flow diagram of the literature search and selection process. Elaborated by the author using the PRISMA Flow Diagram tool (Haddaway et al., 2022).

4 Literature Review

4.1 TikTok: The New Trendsetter

In 2016, ByteDance launched the platform in China under the name of Douyin, built around a personalized algorithmic feed that delivered content according to individual user preferences. Its rapid ascent to the most downloaded application in China signaled something unprecedented (Wade and Shan, 2019). In 2018, ByteDance launched it globally as TikTok, achieving exponential growth. What distinguishes TikTok from its predecessors is, in essence, its algorithm. Unlike traditional social media platforms where content is largely user-curated, TikTok relies heavily on its "For You" page to feed users a continuous stream of personalized content designed to maximize engagement (Loupeppis & Intahchomphoo, 2025).

A video posted by an account with minimal followers could get millions of views within hours, crossing borders and cultures without institutional endorsement. However, Pilati et al. (2025) warn against an uncritical democratization narrative: the platform operates under a fundamental broadcasting logic, where a small elite of users dominates while the majority remains passive, reinforcing rather than dismantling existing hierarchies of influence. Therefore, sustained cultural authority on TikTok requires algorithmic literacy: the organizational capacity to decode platform logic and deploy it strategically over time. This algorithmic particularity did not go unnoticed; fashion content creators were among the first to grasp its potential, recognizing that virality was no longer the exclusive privilege of established brands or media gatekeepers. Tashjian (2024) documents the parallel rise of ultra-fast fashion operators such as Shein and Temu, combined with TikTok trends around unboxing hauls and the search for "dupe" garments, began to dismantle the cultivated scarcity and desire that had long defined fashion's appeal specially from the big fashion brands that cultivated this narrative.

This exponential reach, however, simultaneously attracted regulatory scrutiny, particularly in the United States, where concerns over data privacy and national security culminated in a highly publicized congressional hearing with CEO Shou Zi Chew (Brady and Honderich, 2023). Hodijah et al. (2025) confirm that brand awareness, influencer impact, and user engagement significantly affect Generation Z's purchase decision through TikTok Shop, which

demonstrates how cultural engagement in an algorithmically driven environment converts into commercial transactions. Brands and creators who develop algorithmic literacy and cultivate culturally embedded engagement with Gen Z communities are precisely those who transform TikTok's cultural capital into sustained commercial performance, a dynamic that illustrates the dimensions of Ecosystem Fluency.

4.2 Farfetch: A New Fashion Victim

Founded in 2007 by José Neves - described at the height of its success as “the Jeff Bezos of fashion” (Rashed, 2021) - Farfetch was conceived as an e-commerce platform targeting a specific segment: luxury. As the platform expanded, its potential attracted major institutional interest including from the Kering Group (Muret, 2018). Farfetch's business model was distinctive in its asset-light architecture: holding no inventory, it functioned as a curated marketplace connecting consumers with niche luxury boutiques worldwide (Sun, 2022). In the absence of serious competitors within the luxury e-commerce segment, Farfetch's revenue climbed rapidly, reaching approximately six billion dollars in gross merchandise value by 2018 (Rashed, 2021).

Yet the business model carried a structural vulnerability present from its origins. Farfetch's revenue depended heavily on the continued participation of major fashion houses that, as the platform grew, had every incentive to reclaim their margin rather than share it. As Dion and Borraz (2017) demonstrate, luxury brands manage their equity through carefully controlled distribution and service, a logic structurally incompatible with the open marketplace architecture Farfetch offered. Competitors emerged and luxury conglomerates developed proprietary digital channels, most notably, LVMH's launch of 24S (LVMH, 2017). The competitive dynamics shifted dramatically, resembling a David and Goliath confrontation that Farfetch was increasingly ill-equipped to win. Attempts to compensate through community building proved equally superficial. In 2019, Farfetch launched “Farfetch Communities” positioning it as a space where cultural figures curate content and shopping edits for its users (Wightman-Stone, 2019). Farfetch confused curation with co-creation, and in doing so, missed the fundamental shift in how digital communities were forming in platforms like TikTok, where cultural participation was open, bottom-up, and algorithmically amplified.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these tensions rather than relieving them. Social media platforms had transformed into marketplaces in their own right, TikTok's rise proved the viability of social commerce at scale, and Gen Z consumers were turning away from luxury aspiration toward dupe culture and omnichannel experience preferences (Drenik, 2024). By 2024, Farfetch's valuation had collapsed from its peak to approximately 100 million dollars, requiring acquisition by South Korean e-commerce operator Coupang to avoid bankruptcy (Guarda, 2024). Farfetch is not an isolated case; McKinsey (2024) documents a broader existential crisis across e-commerce platform business models globally, marked by severe valuation declines and collapsing growth projections. What Farfetch's trajectory reveals is not a failure of execution, but a failure of cultural embeddedness: a platform that scaled commercially while remaining structurally detached from the communities it claimed to serve. As SAMY (2025) confirms, the best performing channels today are those where culture, community, and commerce converge; it is precisely this convergence that TikTok has achieved where Farfetch could not.

5 Discussions

The contrasting trajectories of TikTok and Farfetch provide compelling support for the Ecosystem fluency framework. TikTok's success reflects its capacity to harness the

participatory energies of a decentralized community of users and creators, generating cultural relevance through identity expression and community engagement, precisely the dynamics that CCT identifies as central to consumer engagement (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Its algorithmic architecture actively governs which cultural expressions achieve visibility and which are unnoticed (Loupeisis & Intahchomphoo, 2025), making algorithmic literacy an organizational imperative rather than an optional competency. Critically, this sort of democratization is not unconditional: Pilati et al. (2025) caution that TikTok operates under a broadcasting logic where a small elite dominates visibility, meaning sustained cultural authority demands strategic fluency, not mere presence.

Farfetch's decline reflects the consequences of a governance model predicated on commercial intermediation without appropriate cultural integration, leaving it unable to generate the community identity and participatory engagement that increasingly determine platform equity in the digital age. Its 2019 "Farfetch Communities" initiative revealed a fundamental misunderstanding: by populating a curated space with celebrity tastemakers (Wightman-Stone, 2019), it confused curation with co-creation, leaving users as passive consumers rather than active cultural participants; the structural opposite of what Ecosystem Fluency requires.

At the theoretical level, this analysis supports a redefinition of fashion marketing beyond brand-consumer models. Ecosystem Fluency situates consumer meaning-making within the algorithmic governance structures that now shape which cultural expressions achieve visibility and which are suppressed, bridging a gap that neither digital platform theory, CCT, nor algorithmic governance studies address alone, therefore; it suggests three strategic ideas. First, algorithmic literacy (the organizational capacity to read, anticipate, and respond to platform logic in real time) is measured through indicators such as posting frequency and engagement ratios. Second, culturally embedded engagement (the ability to participate in meaning-making alongside creators, communities, and consumers) is evaluated through community growth rates, and brand mention sentiment, and long-term creative partnerships rather than transactional endorsements. Third, cross-platform agility (the ability to maintain coherent brand identity across distinct algorithmic environments) assessed through brand consistency scores and multi-platform audience metrics while navigating the tension between TikTok's democratizing pressures and the exclusivity logic sustaining luxury brand equity.

6 Conclusions

The paper has proposed Ecosystem Fluency as a unifying framework capturing the adaptive competencies: algorithmic literacy, culturally embedded engagement, and cross-platform agility that determine brand resilience in an era defined by platform orchestration. By integrating digital platform theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and algorithmic governance into a single operational concept, it addresses a gap that existing research has not resolved: the absence of a brand-level framework for navigating algorithmically governed ecosystems in fashion. The cases examined demonstrate that participation in digital ecosystems is no longer optional for fashion brands, but the terms of that participation are far from neutral: those who master the cultural, algorithmic, and community dimensions simultaneously will define the next era of fashion. On the opposite side, fashion brands' participation in static platforms will risk structural displacement in this new fluid ecosystem governed by speed, virality, social conversations, and cultural events that are shared non-stop. Future scholarship should also examine the ethical dimensions of algorithmic governance in fashion such as sustainability, creative autonomy, and cultural diversity as the industry navigates the complex consequences of platform-mediated value creation.

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