

Milan lags behind in fashion's Internet revolution

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Models display creations as part of Gucci Fall-winter 2012-2013 collection during the Women's fashion week in Milan. With social network sites and smartphone apps making rapid inroads into the fashion world, observers say Italy risks falling behind even as its luxury brands feel the pain from the economic crisis.

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"Milan is always really ahead of everyone in [fashion](#) but behind everyone in technology," fashion blogger Olga Rink said outside the Gucci show during Milan Fashion Week, as she took pictures of leggy models in goth-style outfits.

"I'm sure they will catch up eventually, but this isn't New York. Milan is slow, graceful. People here take their time," she said.

One of the must-have [iPhone](#) applications at the New York and London shows -- Fashion GPS Radar -- is only just starting up in Milan.

The app allows users to register for events and check in with a personal barcode and already has around 6,500 members.

"In Italy, they all prefer paper invitations," said Jennifer Jann, director of global marketing at the New York-based firm.

Salvo Testa, a professor in fashion management at Milan's Bocconi University, said Italy's top brands were catching up.

"They may have been slow to realise it, but social networks and blogs are now the biggest area of investment," Testa told AFP.



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"Videos are being increasingly used to create a strong emotional link with the brand in a more viral and cheaper way than standard advertising."

In a nod to progressively high-tech generations, Prada this month released a clip called "Folding In Love" simulating a videogame in which a pair of sunglasses races through different galaxies before finding its soulmate.

And in a bizarre homage to the passion Miuccia Prada's creations can evoke in women, Miu Miu released a short film entitled "The Woman Dress", in which an unnerving Sapphic ritual transforms a drowned woman into a blood-red dress.

The high-fashion world has embraced the Internet and hundreds of thousands of fans of the biggest names in the business can now book front-row seats for catwalks online and order the latest outfits long before they reach the shops.

"The revolution has made it to the heart of the industry, brands now see the Internet as a powerful way to reach millions and build a loyal 'one-to-one' following," said Testa.

Online videos take viewers into the backstage world of the catwalks, while celebrities are captured wearing the latest creations and fans on Facebook are offered exclusive deals on designer perfumes or the soundtracks from shows.

"The models are in fittings. The invites sent. There's just one last thing to do. Take your virtual seat," Gucci told its 300,000 Twitter followers and six million Facebook fans before its show on Wednesday.

As brands increase their profile on social networks and chat forums,

exploiting the "Internet word of mouth" phenomenon in expanding markets such as China, fashion fiends post photographs of their favourite pieces on blogs.

On up-and-coming websites such as Pinterest, bloggers build up dedicated followers of the latest fads, seeking to decide what to purchase where.

In a report on digital luxury last November, Italy's trade association Altgamma said blogs and social media are now setting trends more than fashion critics, with 50 percent of consumers using them for advice before buying.

Those wanting to get their hands on cutting-edge designs head to luxury fashion websites such as Net-a-Porter, mywardrobe.com and Gilt, which has flash sales offering 50 to 70 percent off high-end brands exclusively for members.

"Sales for luxury are growing through businesses like Net-a-Porter which offer luxury services. But to succeed in e-commerce they have to offer a little bit more," said Isabel Cavill, luxury expert with Planet Retail research group.

Moda Operandi, an online service founded by a former Gilt executive and a Vogue editor, allows members to purchase pieces from catwalk collections before they hit the shops and a year after its launch is now opening up to the public.

Testa said: "Fashion and luxury have finally left the 'Hall of Fame' of catwalks, celebrities and top journalists to build up relationships with real consumers."

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