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Parra, Matias R. y Ferreyra, Carlos J.J.

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CANCEL “COUTURE”

Free Speech or Cyberbullying? Fashion’s High-Stakes Battle in the Court of Social Media

Joaquín Ferreyra & Matías Parra

Introduction and Context

The fashion industry today finds itself navigating a complex labyrinth. Creative directors at the helm of the most prestigious houses must constantly walk a tightrope, balancing the historical legacy of legendary brands—such as Balenciaga, Chanel, or Gucci—with the aggressive profit margins and revenue demands imposed by luxury conglomerates. This friction leaves visionary talents caught in the crossfire and, above all, exposes them to an industry heavily driven by digital culture and mass consumption on social media.

In the era of "Cancel Culture," those leading these historic houses must not only face the scrutiny of fashion insiders, but also stand before the implacable tribunal of social networks. In this environment, where immediacy reigns supreme and the democratization of fashion is an accomplished fact, the benchmarks for evaluating whether a creative director is fit for the job have shifted dramatically. Today, it seems that ungrounded commentary can seal the fate of a designer long before they have time to establish a vision.

Consequently, this essay seeks to dissect the concepts framing this phenomenon, analyzing how online presence, a new breed of consumers, and a virtual crowd eager to critique everything influence the boardroom decisions of major luxury conglomerates. We also examine the broader challenges this poses for an industry that historically projected an aura of untouchable exclusivity, as well as for the very craft of creative direction—highlighting our most recent case study: the "announced" departure of Seán McGirr from Alexander McQueen on October 15, 2026.

The New Consumer and Digital Lynching

Luxury fashion represents an industry that, since its inception, has wielded immense economic and cultural influence in an age of hyperconnectivity. Generation Z stands as the primary demographic targeted by contemporary brands: an audience with preferences, perceptions, and consumption habits vastly different from traditional buyers. Within this landscape, social media has become the main arena for engagement, while marketing with

influencers has emerged as a cornerstone strategy—its effectiveness relying heavily on the illusion of authenticity and accessibility.

This younger generation tends to gauge the value of luxury goods not merely by their material exclusivity, but by their capacity to spark conversation, validate identity, and align with the contemporary discourses thriving in the digital sphere.

However, when these platforms operate under the mechanics of automated "*hate*" and the binary logic of immediate approval ("*likes*" and "*dislikes*"), cancel culture degrades into a punitive weapon. Far from fostering deep aesthetic debate, digital lynching tends to decontextualize creative work, imposing an anonymous courtroom that penalizes artistic risk and experimentation in the name of an idealized, unattainable standard of brand purity.

Cancel culture can be defined as a set of practices through which individuals or groups voice disapproval, withdraw support, or orchestrate social and economic repercussions against behaviors, statements, or choices deemed unacceptable. While these dynamics manifest in both physical and digital spaces, social networks exponentially amplify their reach, velocity, and visibility.

On the positive side, these platforms provide a vital mechanism for exposing abuse, discrimination, violence, or systemic inequality that once remained silenced. Yet, the phenomenon turns toxic when collective outrage ceases to target genuine harm and is instead weaponized to delegitimize ideas, artistic expressions, or creative decisions simply because they clash with the tastes of specific online factions.

In her analysis "la cultura de la cancelación, la posverdad y la desmentida", Rosa Mirta Goldstein de Vainstoc offers a critical lens on the dynamics of censorship and power relations in modern exchanges. From this viewpoint, it becomes crucial to examine how digital platforms can warp approval and rejection mechanisms into an informal system of social policing.

In this environment, anonymity emboldens voices that would never speak out so aggressively in the physical world, stripping away individual accountability and breeding hostility. The core issue is not the existence of criticism itself, but the toxic conditions under which it is unleashed and the destructive consequences it triggers. We must learn to differentiate between questioning a design choice, denouncing genuine misconduct, and fueling an indiscriminate pile-on that shuts down debate entirely.

The Democratization of Fashion and the Contradictions of Luxury

Historically, luxury was synonymous with exclusivity, scarcity, artisanal craftsmanship, prestige, and a deliberate distance from mass consumption. High barriers to entry—both financial and symbolic—helped cultivate desire and set these products apart from the rest of the market.

The rise of social networks fundamentally disrupted this dynamic. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok pull back the curtain, allowing users worldwide to consume collections, campaigns, and runway shows that once circulated exclusively within elite, specialized circles. Consequently, people who may never purchase a luxury item now actively participate in these conversations, shape public opinion, and help define a brand's cultural relevance.

This shift introduces a striking paradox: luxury still clings to its aspiration of material exclusivity, yet its public image has become hyper-accessible and transparent. Democratization does not mean everyone can afford to buy the garments; rather, it means a vastly wider audience can interpret and evaluate the brand.

For fashion houses, the ultimate challenge lies in connecting with these new audiences without diluting their core identity into a reactive, trend-chasing echo chamber. While visibility strengthens consumer bonds, it also lays creative decisions bare to immediate, public judgment. In today's digital ecosystem, a brand's reputation is co-created by multiple players: the company itself, specialized media, consumers, influencers, and virtual communities. Official brand accounts are no longer one-way broadcasting channels, but vibrant forums where users voice approval, dissent, or outrage. In this context, social listening has become indispensable for brands trying to navigate trends, consumer anxieties, and reputational threats.

At the same time, heritage houses face a unique dilemma when appointing new creative leadership: they must deliver a fresh, contemporary vision while fiercely protecting the DNA that defines the brand. Nostalgia acts as a powerful undercurrent here. Consumers do not judge a new collection in a vacuum; they evaluate it against their emotional attachment to past eras of the house.

At Alexander McQueen, the formidable legacy of Lee Alexander McQueen and Sarah Burton's thirteen-year tenure serve as inescapable benchmarks. The founder forged an

aesthetic universe of profound narrative intensity, while Burton successfully carved out her own poetic interpretation of that legacy. Consequently, any successor must not only design a strong collection, but also negotiate with the expectations of an audience that views specific silhouettes, cuts, and visual tropes as sacred, untouchable pillars of the house.

Nostalgia helps preserve cultural memory. However, when it becomes the sole yardstick for measuring a new collection, it stifles the acceptance of fresh design languages. Innovation is instantly condemned as a "betrayal" of the past rather than an evolution of its experimental spirit. A brand that merely recycles its history loses its ability to innovate; yet a brand that strips away all recognizable codes shatters its identity. The sweet spot lies in striking a delicate balance between continuity and transformation.

Seán McGirr's Tenure at Alexander McQueen

During Paris Fashion Week in September 2023, Alexander McQueen staged its final runway show under Sarah Burton's creative direction, closing a chapter defined by deep emotional resonance and stylistic mastery. The following month, Kering officially announced Irish designer Seán McGirr as her successor, following impressive stints at Burberry, Uniqlo (alongside Christophe Lemaire), Dries van Noten, and J.W. Anderson.

McGirr's appointment was heralded as a bridge between contemporary edge and the house's heritage. At the time, Gianfilippo Testa, CEO of the brand, declared: *"With his experience, personality, and creative energy, he will bring a powerful creative language to Alexander McQueen while building on its unique heritage."*

However, McGirr's debut and subsequent collections were thrust into an unprecedented storm of digital scrutiny, stoked by toxic fan culture and online polarization.

McGirr's arrival tested the patience of a notoriously protective fanbase driven by selective memory. Purists and longtime devotees cling nostalgically to Lee McQueen's iconic shock-factor shows and Burton's poetic poise, viewing any radical reinterpretation of the house's codes (such as exaggerated silhouettes, tartan, or dark, gothic references) through a fiercely rejectionist lens.

When McGirr unveiled his initial proposals, this aesthetic shift was branded by massive digital cohorts as an outright "betrayal." Social media channels transformed into digital firing squads, where constructive critique was buried beneath personal insults and targeted

cancellation campaigns designed to undermine his legitimacy at the helm: *“This is not McQueen; it feels like a completely different house, devoid of the tension, intelligence, and distinctive language that made the brand extraordinary.” “This was seriously disappointing. It’s disrespectful to Lee..”*

While digital marketing thrives on diverse perspectives, relentless online harassment directed at a creative director can trigger a catastrophic reputational and commercial freefall. Demanding that McQueen remain an eternal, carbon-copy homage to its founder—while forbidding adaptation to modern realities—effectively sealed McGirr’s premature exit. Traditionalist factions demanded an unyielding commitment to Lee McQueen’s theatrical extravagance, ignoring the fact that those iconic shows were born out of a vastly different social and cultural era.

Despite marketing runway exclusivity, luxury conglomerates now demand commercial accessibility and mass reach to hit aggressive financial goals. Designers are pressured to make their collections more accessible without sacrificing brand DNA. Yet, neither internet critics nor casual observers seem to grasp that achieving this balance means theatrical flair and political commentary cannot be expressed using the exact same playbook from decades past.

For Alexander McQueen, bringing in Seán McGirr was envisioned by Kering as a marriage between historical heritage and hyperconnected market dynamics. Although McGirr sought to reinterpret the brand’s archives through a modern, accessible lens, this vision clashed violently with those guarding the founder’s memory like a shrine. While critical reviews from fashion editors were lukewarm, Instagram comment sections devolved into cyberbullying disguised as fashion commentary, with users proclaiming:

“It’s not Alexander McQueen anymore.”

“What’s most disappointing is that Kering continues to present this as acceptable for a house with such a rich, beloved and incredibly valuable heritage.”

“Wonder if anyone bought the last collection. Nothing in here screams McQueen.”

“At this point I only follow McQueen to read them getting dragged in the comments”

“I can feel the community in the comments...Because we all collectively hate it!”

This fueled public mockery of the designer, culminating in online campaigns advocating for his termination—such as the viral post **“Mr. McGirr You’re fired”** (@boringnotcom, June 2026). The fallout went far beyond internal instability: the brand suffered a staggering drop in sales exceeding 60% compared to 2023, triggering global store closures and workforce layoffs.

Faced with such grim numbers, critics might argue that executive intervention was purely a response to poor financial performance. Yet, one must ask: were these losses the direct result of McGirr’s creative missteps, or were they engineered by a systematic smear campaign punishing him for daring not to endlessly replicate Lee Alexander McQueen?

Concluding Remarks

It is imperative to recognize that the fashion industry has evolved, and brands must adapt to contemporary realities without evaporating their core essence. Strict exclusivity has inevitably yielded to the mass reach of the digital age. Preserving McQueen's identity is essential: honoring those disruptive shows, iconic garments, and dramatic silhouettes remains a vital anchor. Nevertheless, those historical symbols must be allowed to transition into an archive where they can be reinterpreted through a modern lens. Otherwise, a brand's heritage is reduced to a static museum piece, incapable of breathing in the modern world.

Seán McGirr’s tenure and departure must serve as a critical turning point for the industry. This was not another *fashion musical chairs* of creative directors by corporate conglomerates; it was a wake-up call highlighting how freedom of expression online so frequently crosses the line into digital harassment.

Ultimately, the democratization of fashion should never be mistaken for a mandate that every collection instantly please the masses, nor should it become an excuse to invalidate consumer feedback. The true ethical and aesthetic challenge lies in building an ecosystem where criticism remains free, reasoned, and diverse—without devolving into a blunt instrument of online censorship and bullying. Rather than ending the conversation, we must separate the right to critique a designer's vision from the collective urge to decide what they can or cannot create.

Some important questions for future study are...

- Is luxury fashion truly striving for democratization, or is mass engagement merely a commercial illusion?
- How heavily does digital cancel culture weigh on the tenure of creative directors?

- Can historic couture houses adapt their nostalgic archives to fit modern industry standards?
- Will brand loyalists ever embrace this evolution without viewing it as a erosion of the house's identity?

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