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10 THE ROLE OF THE PITTI UOMO TRADE FAIR IN THE MENSWEAR FASHION INDUSTRY

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Menswear no longer lives in the shadow of women's wear. According to a recent article from the Business of Fashion website, the growth of menswear has outpaced that of women's wear since at last 2011.¹ Until the 1970s, male fashion in Europe mainly focused on tailoring and smaller-scale production of ready-to-wear, or confection, producing shirts, and underwear. One exception was the famous menswear tailoring industry in Leeds, England, which clothed British working-class and middle-class men in stylish suits for a century until its demise in the late twentieth century. London's Savile Row traditionally set the trends for the high end of the industry. After the 1970s, men's ready-to-wear and men's haute couture start to grow elsewhere in Europe.

Trends and styles in menswear change much more slowly than in women's fashion; however, the pace of those changes is increasing. One of the world's most important players for menswear is the international fashion trade fair Pitti Uomo in Florence, Italy. Pitti Uomo was established in 1972 under the umbrella of the non-profit organization Centro di Firenze per la Moda Italiana (CFMI-Florentine Centre for the Italian Fashion), which today is the holding of Pitti Immagine (officially born in 1988).

This chapter investigates the rise of Pitti Uomo and its role in the menswear industry. Instead of focusing on fashion fairs in large established global fashion capitals, such as Milan, Paris, or New York, this study is centered on Florence, Italy, a second-tier fashion city that is home to one of the most important international fashion fair organizations. It looks at the strategies of Pitti Immagine and Pitti Uomo, and the perspectives of the fashion designers and brands that exhibited at this menswear trade show in order to explain how this important fair stayed competitive and affirmed its role as one of the key intermediaries in the globalized and highly segmented fashion industry. In doing so, this chapter unravels the strategies of the trade fair as an intermediary adapting to the global and digital marketplace. It shows how the trade fair remains an important intermediary in the process of trend development. As noted by fashion business scholar Tim Jackson, "buyers and fashion designers are able to predict what is likely to be 'in fashion' through a combination of influences, including reviewing important textile and style magazines, the specialist services of forecasting trend agencies, and visits to textile and garment fashion shows."²

The chapter uses a qualitative methodology; besides the analysis of published materials within the fashion industry and the documentation from Pitti events (e.g., documents, websites, magazines, press releases), it draws data collected from interviews with

independent fashion designers who focus on menswear, and with buyers, other experts, and key informants in the European fashion industry.³ It situates the case of Pitti Uomo within the framework of cultural economics and economic geography. The analysis is informed by studies on the economic exchange of cultural goods,⁴ studies on temporary clusters,⁵ and the recent exhibition and book, *The Glamour of Italian Fashion Since 1945*, edited by Sonnet Stanfill for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.⁶ This chapter contributes to debates on the role of trend forecasting and cultural intermediaries in the digital age.

Intermediaries in the cultural and creative industries

In his seminal work on creativity, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues, “creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context. It is a systemic rather than individual phenomenon.”⁷ Artistic production is a collective action, wherein the artist is at the center of a wide network of cooperative interrelations among players in the field, including the so-called cultural intermediaries or gatekeepers.

The term “cultural intermediary” is one of the most confusing in the literature of cultural industries.⁸ The term has found a wide range of uses, from Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of the new *petite bourgeoisie* to debates on the relationship between culture and society,¹⁰ studies on cultural policy,¹¹ and research on the cultural and creative industries.¹² What unifies the different definitions is the reference to the process of intermediation between the production and consumption of symbolic goods and services. The rise of the cultural industries and their complex divisions of labor, together with the segmentation and globalization of markets and the influence of new media, have led to the growth in the number and the significance of functions involving mediations between cultural production and consumption. Evolving new roles have emerged in order to fulfill the gatekeeping practice of maintaining boundaries of access and inclusion, as musicologist Keith Negus argued in his study about the enduring distance between cultural production and consumption.¹³ The range of actors that today fall under the term “cultural intermediary” has expanded well beyond the two categories of old and new intermediaries developed by Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁴ Bourdieu referred to old cultural intermediaries as critics and experts on high culture in the pre-mass media age, while new cultural intermediaries are critics and experts in the mass-media age, for example, producers of TV and radio shows, critics of quality newspapers and magazines, and journalists.

In recent years, there have been several attempts to create a bridge across the different definitions and improve the conceptualization and operationalization of the term “cultural intermediary.” It is clear that cultural intermediaries are selectors and tastemakers. They influence consumption as well as production, and they curate products and services as well as artists and brands. Cultural sociologists Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews have recently provided a comprehensive overview to the field of cultural intermediaries’ research, from conceptual and theoretical foundations to empirical research.¹⁵ They highlight two main characteristics to identify cultural intermediaries. The first one,

necessary but not sufficient, focuses on value formation through mediation and the power relationship present in any intermediation or interaction process. The second characteristic relates cultural intermediaries to their role as experts and to the context of particular markets. Cultural intermediaries are defined as such by their claim to be professional experts in taste and value within a specific cultural field. They are the experts that validate a cultural good or service and they include it in the specific domain—in other words, they are the appropriating experts discussed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.¹⁶ In addition, they are defined by their locations within the value chain (in relation to actors, stages of production, and products or services that they mediate) and furthermore by their autonomy, authority, and set of tools and resources they use in their intermediation processes.

The question that remains is why we still need cultural intermediaries in the digital age. In theory, digitalization and globalization would allow for the elimination of intermediaries and permit the producers to interact directly with the consumers, even though the extent of such dis-intermediation remains unclear. Some scholars argue in favor of re-intermediation processes with evolving and new roles for (traditional) intermediaries.¹⁷ This is especially true in the case of cultural goods and services that are highly differentiated and multidimensional, to a certain extent “uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular,” as highlighted by the economic sociologist Lucien Karpik in *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*.¹⁸ Cultural economists such as Richard Caves and Ruth Towse consider cultural goods as “experience goods” in the sense that complete information about their quality is difficult to assess before the purchase or even after. Information asymmetry exists; one party (e.g., designer) has more or better information about the characteristics of the products than the other (e.g., buyer, consumer). Information asymmetry makes the market for cultural goods opaque and their demand uncertain, with extreme variance on sales.¹⁹ The market of “singularities” requires coordination devices to reduce quality uncertainty and to help the buyer and consumer to make decisions. The effectiveness of these devices depends on the credibility of the information provided, “which in turn depends on the trust placed in the judgment devices” as mentioned by Karpik.²⁰ In the fashion industry, the level of coordination is very high. Compared to other cultural industries, the fashion industry has probably the highest number of intermediaries. We will now turn to the major fashion intermediaries and focus on the role of fashion trade fairs.

Intermediaries in the fashion industry

Each cultural industry has its own set of intermediaries that select and recognize work as creative, promote the creators, and bring their products to the market. As other creative industries, fashion is a “collective process” whereby the designer is surrounded by many different actors and institutions.²¹ These intermediaries are all essential to the production, distribution, and consumption of fashion products. They determine what the consumer will see, read, or hear. In *Imagining Consumers*, Regina Lee Blaszczyk coined the term “fashion intermediary” to describe the agents who work behind the scenes, connecting designers, manufacturers, retailers, and consumers.²² Various intermediaries shaping the development of the designer-fashion industries can be identified, ranging from traditional

intermediaries—such as magazine editors and journalists, sales agents, buyers, fashion forecasters, PR agents, stylists, models, photographers, fashion weeks and fairs, fashion-related educational institutions—to a range of new intermediaries such as marketing and consumption websites, social networking websites, fashion bloggers.

This chapter zooms in on one specific intermediary, the international fashion trade fair in the downstream part of the fashion value-chain, that is, fashion designers and brands exhibiting their sample collections to buyers. Those shows are defined as garment or product trade shows, different from the yarn trade shows and fabric trade shows that concern the upstream part of the fashion value-chain, thus earlier in the sequence of trade shows organized over the years. Despite the globalization and digitization of the fashion world, we argue that there is a need for temporary physical settings where all the most important actors of the global fashion world can meet and share knowledge and information, where fashion goods are exhibited to a large numbers of designers, manufacturers, buyers, and a wide range of intermediaries, and where quality uncertainty can be reduced. As explained by fashion business scholar Tim Jackson, “The final ‘fashion look’ for a season is therefore the result of a process of development that combines the evolved views of forecasters, textile and product trade shows, designers, buyers and RTW [ready-to-wear] shows. Like a collage, the final picture emerges after the various layers have come together.”²³ In this picture, the fashion garment or product trade fair acts as an important player in the trend development process through the number of knowledge creation and dissemination mechanisms: for example, the selection and promotion of innovative cutting-edge designers and the organization of space in a diverse range of areas (luxury, avant-garde, and so on). The trade fair becomes the thermometer of the general and specific trends in the highly segmented fashion industry and helps fashion designers and brands to better understand their position in the (global) fashion market. By promoting key innovators and innovations in the fashion industry, the trade fair has an influence in spreading those innovations and thus developing trends and predicting the future of fashion.

The international fashion trade fair as an intermediary and a temporary cluster

Contemporary fashion trade shows are temporary and cyclical business-to-business events usually not open to the public. Until the 1990s, they were mostly local trading places where regional products were exhibited and traded. In the last two decades, they have become “intermediary fairs,” as discussed by the cultural sociologist Lise Skov.²⁴ They are not meant to only display and sell products. Originally, there were only two production seasons (autumn/winter and spring/summer). In January, the collection for autumn/winter of the same year was presented, then two or three months of sales and in August the production started. At that time, fairs were the only place where buyers could see new clothes and make their orders. Today, this is no longer the case; fairs are no longer simple promotional and commercial spaces. They have to develop new roles and services, and they have to deal

with different overlapping purposes. Fairs have become nodal points in the territorially dispersed fashion industry, or, in Skov's words, "a social setting in which different types of encounters take place, including encounters for trade, networks and knowledge [creation and dissemination]."²⁵ In their longitudinal study of the European fabric industry trade shows, Diego Rinaldo and Federica Golfetto discovered that international fashion trade fairs act as loci for "trend concertation" or "trend orchestration."²⁶ The most-cited example is *Première Vision* in Paris, the world's most important textile trade fair. The fair has developed an influential view on future trends; it sends trend information to potential exhibitors well in advance; exhibitors tend to comply with those trends at least partially if they want to exhibit during the trade fair. The displayed trends obtain worldwide recognition and visibility as visitors to the fair come from different industries and different countries. The fair acts as a key intermediary not only for the fashion industry but also for many other creative sectors of the world economy.

Today's fashion trade fairs are places for knowledge exchange and distribution, for networking, for studying sellers and their products, and for mapping out the diversity of the buyers. They can provide exhibitors (fashion brands), buyers, and other intermediaries with access to knowledge and opportunities for interactions similar to those provided by permanent geographic locations, such as the production-distribution clusters in the East End of London or the textile-clothing district in Prato, Italy, or the Seventh Avenue fashion district in New York in the second half of the twentieth century. Trade fairs create and provide access to local, global, and virtual buzz.²⁷ Economic geographers Peter Maskell, Harald Bathelt, and Anders Malmberg have analyzed them as "temporary clusters" or "temporary organized proximity."²⁸ At the same time, they are also cyclical events. In their analysis of the furniture trade fairs, Dominic Power and Johan Jansson argue in favor of cyclical clusters in global circuits for economic activities, whereby "global trade-fair circuits are central components of the architecture within which different industrial and market relations are mediated and connected."²⁹ Multiple overlapping spaces for different business purposes are present not only in the same fair but also across fairs worldwide and across time. In the fashion global annual calendar, fashion fairs are mostly held when catwalks are in town. In that week, showrooms experience the busiest week of the year, large sales orders and contracts are negotiated, and the city becomes a key center for defining new trends and styles in the industry.³⁰

The origins of Pitti Immagine in Florence, Italy

Pitti Immagine is one of the most important institutions in the world to organize fashion-related fairs and events. The origins of Pitti Immagine can be found in the fashion-related activities organized by Giovanni Battista Giorgini in Florence in the 1950s. Giorgini first organized a special fashion show for a selected number of American buyers and journalists in Florence on February 12, 1951. The show was scheduled for after the Paris spring shows so that the buyers and journalists who traveled to Europe from around the world could easily reach the city of Florence.³¹ As discussed by Stanfill in *The Glamour of Italian Fashion*

Since 1945, five American buyers witnessed the catwalks of nine high-fashion tailors and three boutique tailors, among them Emilio Pucci and Sorelle Fontana.³² In order to enter in Palazzo Strozzi, where the shows took place, buyers needed to guarantee purchases of at least 500 Lire (almost 8,000 Euro in 2016 money). This was the first time that a high-end fashion show with Italian fashion garments was exclusively organized for American buyers. The next fashion show, organized in July of the same year, saw the participation of 300 buyers. These events signaled the birth of Italian fashion, in the sense that they provided unity, international cultural legitimacy, and identity to a diverse number of individual tailors and designers.³³ The carefully selected buyers and journalists who attended the shows by invitation were the key gatekeepers at that time. Therefore, their positive reactions laid the foundation for the development of the Italian fashion system. The *Moda Italiana* or “Made in Italy” label started to compete with the French *haute couture*, eroding its monopoly.

The success was not accidental. Giorgini strategically planned everything: the type of collections, the way they were presented, and the venue steeped in Italian heritage.³⁴ The fashion houses invited to participate were selected according to their originality and their stylistic distance from the French *haute couture*, and they were allowed to show only a limited number of pieces. Instead of presenting the garments according to the name of designers, Giorgini decided to group them according to the type of clothing presented in order to highlight their shared and distinctive characteristics. The show was organized in Giorgini’s home, the historical Villa Torrigiani, in order to strongly link fashion and art, exploiting the so-called Renaissance effect. From 1952 to 1982, the fashion shows were organized in the beautiful Sala Bianca in Palazzo Pitti, while the sales contracts were dealt with in the Palazzo Strozzi. These shows were the precursor to later fashion trade fairs.

Besides the fashion shows, Giorgini organized grand balls, performances, and suppers where the international fashion press, buyers from all over the world, and Italian aristocrats could mingle in the beautiful Sala Bianca in Pitti Palace. By entertaining buyers and journalists, he secured important press coverage in newspapers and magazines in the United States, which was targeted as the key export market for Italian fashion. As Stanfill explained, Fay Hammond, fashion critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote on August 4, 1952, “No royal entertainment had surpassed this unforgettable scene.”³⁵ Giorgini was interested in the potential of fashion as image and identity creator and promoter. We can argue that fashion was used as a tool for marketing the city of Florence, or, even better, for marketing of the whole of Italy as a modern and creative country. Florence soon became a new fashion capital. In 1954, the fashion shows were organized by the newly created non-profit organization CFMI, which today is the holding company of Pitti Immagine (officially born in 1988). By 1955, 500 buyers and 200 journalists attended the fashion show. Until 1965, Florence was the most important center for *haute couture* and boutique (deluxe ready-to-wear) fashion shows in Italy.

Thanks to Giorgini’s initiative, the support of the national government, and of the United States through the Marshall Plan, Italian exports in fashion clothing increased over 150 percent between 1950 and 1957. The large communist population in Italy and the rising communist threat after the Second World War led the American government to seal privileged relationships with the Italian government, supporting its economic and industrial recovery, the emergence of a capitalist market, and, in particular, the relaunch of its textile and clothing industry. Under the Marshall Plan, the United States loaned

money and raw materials, especially cotton. The US Secretary “Stettinius mandated that 2/3 of all imports and contributions would directly aid Italian industry . . . the Marshall Plan allotted Italy a \$25 million loan to pay for 150,000 bales of American cotton, a number that constituted ¼ of the total American cotton loans to Europe. Italy was expected to repay the loans from America in exports of finished cotton fabric.”³⁶ Italy became the major exporter of fashion clothing and textiles to North America, overtaking France and England. An export-oriented textile and fashion industry was created that would play a significant role in Italy’s postwar economic reconstruction.³⁷

The geography of Italian fashion was gradually changing. In the 1960s, high fashion houses slowly moved their fashion presentations from Florence to Rome, where the majority of their ateliers were located and where the rising movie industry was getting international attention. In 1959, Valentino opened his atelier in Rome; in 1968, he would dress Jacqueline Kennedy for her wedding with Aristotle Onassis. Segre Reinach mentions that Americans loved Rome and started to shoot movies there at affordable costs; she highlights that “Roman fashion was spectacular and linked to the cinema.”³⁸ In 1967, Florence hosted its last high fashion show, while Rome became the new Italian capital for haute couture. The CFMI could continue organizing boutique fashion (deluxe ready-to-wear) shows. For the first time in 1968, it organized MAIT—Mostra Campionaria della Maglieria, a trade fair for high-fashion knitwear. In 1969, men’s ready-to-wear was added to boutique fashion and knitwear. In 1972, Pitti Uomo was created, as a trade fair for men’s clothing and accessories. While conceived as a trade fair for the national market, it became soon one of the most important in the world. In 1973, fashion shows and cultural events were organized in parallel to the trade fair. Following the success of Pitti Uomo, the CFMI organized new fairs, predicting the segmentation of the fashion market: Pitti Bimbo (Child) in 1975, Pitti Filati (Knitting Yarns) in 1977, Pitti Casa (Home) in 1978.

In the 1970s, some of the designers left Florence for Milan, among them Albini, Missoni, Krizia, and Ken Scott. They felt the Florence trade fairs were too rigid and limited the number of the collections exhibited. Milan was more innovative, and its fashion fairs and shows allowed a combination of clothing and accessories for a total look and style. Milan was driving the Italian economic boom; it was the center of media, publishing, and design, with an industrial system ready for mass production and distribution. Milan emerged soon as the center for the women’s ready-to-wear and designer collections, whereas Florence managed to retain its lead as the center for men’s fashion and the rest of the textile-clothing industry. In the 1980s and 1990s, the CFMI went through a radical transformation in its management and strategy that saw the involvement of key fashion entrepreneurs and the creation of Pitti Immagine in charge of the Pitti trade fairs in 1988. Since 2000, the diversification and specialization of Pitti Immagine became even stronger with a whole range of new fairs, projects, and events; from *Fragranze* (Fragrances) in 2003 to *Taste* in 2006, to *ModaPrima* (women’s, men’s and children’s ready-to-wear and accessories for large-scale retailers) and *Super* (women’s accessories and ready-to-wear, with particular attention to emerging designers) held in Milan in collaboration with *Fiera Milano* (Milan Trade Fair organization).

Pitti Immagine was involved in the establishment of one of the most prestigious fashion schools in the world in 1986, *Polimoda* in Florence, and it was also the initiator of important fashion-related events such as the *Biennale di Firenze* (Florence Biennale)

in 1996, the exhibitions *Il Guardaroba di D'Annunzio* (D'Annunzio's Wardrobe) in 1988 and "The London Cut: Savile Row Bespoke Tailoring" in 2007, as well the organizer of research projects, conferences, seminars, and publishing activities. Though the project Pitti Discovery, established in 1999, several artists were invited every year in order to study the relationship between fashion, art, architecture, and communication; among them, Pipilotti Rist, Inez and Vinoodh, Vanessa Beecroft, Raf Simons, and Gareth Pugh. As part of Pitti Discovery, Pitti Italics has been recently launched to promote and support the next generation of Italian or Italy-based designers already showing bright international potential,³⁹ such as the Italian designer Fausto Puglisi who launched his first menswear capsule collection at Pitti Italics Special Event during Pitti Uomo in June 2016. Pitti Uomo, in particular, fosters and promotes the development of (new) innovative fashion designers and new trends; it provides a stage for the future of the menswear fashion industry; it nurtures a culture for high-quality products; it attracts the world to Florence and thus it facilitates the distribution of those products and trends worldwide. The next section will explore the role of Pitti Uomo in the menswear fashion industry.

Pitti Uomo as one of the key intermediaries in the menswear fashion industry

Modern menswear is on the rise, likely driven by streetwear, hipsterism, and a rising number of jobs that do not require men to wear a traditional suit. In *The Trendmakers*, Jenny Lanz interviewed several trend forecasters and buyers across the globe. When discussing menswear, her interviewees mention that men pay more attention to details than women in their sartorial choices; they are now spending more on fashion; they have a growing appeal for building a wardrobe; they are loyal customers; they buy more designer clothing compared to women; and they want to be fashionable. As Euromonitor International reported, "The global market for men's designer apparel is projected to reach nearly \$33 billion in 2020, up 14 percent from \$29 billion in 2015."⁴⁰

Before the Second World War, Italy already had an international reputation for high-quality tailor-made men shirts and accessories, but it was after the war that Italian menswear transformed itself into an export industry, rising to a position of world leadership from the 1970s onwards. From Brioni's "Continental Look" in the late 1950s to Giorgio Armani's unstructured jackets in the 1970s and Gianni Versace's voluptuous style in the 1980s, Italian tailoring and menswear fashion distinguished itself from the traditional styles of London's Savile Row. The rise of Italian menswear brands was supported and documented by *L'Uomo Vogue* (Men's Vogue), the most important menswear magazine in the world. Created in 1967, it was the first *Vogue* for men published by Condé Nast.

The city of Florence is linked to the development of Italian menswear. In his second 1951 fashion show, Giorgini decided to use men to accompany models for the eveningwear catwalk. In *The Glamour of Italian Fashion Since 1945*, cultural historian Alistair O'Neill wrote, "This was the first sighting of Italian fashion for men, promoted as a regional craft

and, in part, an exportable product.”⁴¹ After more than sixty years, Italian menswear has grown into a significant industry; in this respect, the role of Pitti Uomo is not to be forgotten. A Pitti Uomo fair has been held in January and June of each year in Florence since 1972. It is the largest menswear trade show of its kind; according to O’Neill, “it is now recognized as much for the sartorial appearance of its audience as by the product ranges displayed on its stands”⁴² (Figure 10.1). It is at Pitti Uomo that Armani showed his first collection; the same holds true for many other designers such as Vivienne Westwood of Britain, Dries van Noten of Belgium, and Victor&Rolf of the Netherlands.

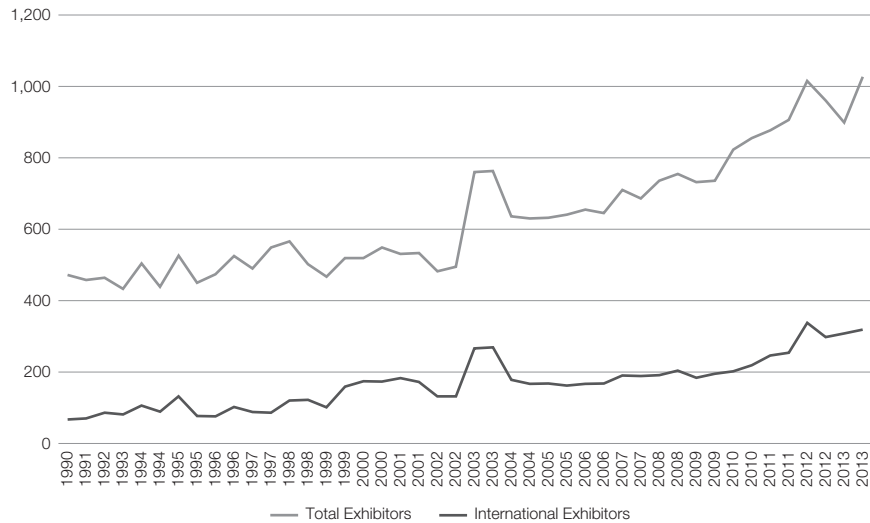
The first edition of Pitti Uomo, held in 1972, was a much smaller version of the present trade fair. It was an export-oriented fair mainly promoting Italian manufacturers, and was focused on formal wear, mostly suits, shirts, ties, and trousers. There was a clear separation between day and evening activities. During the day, buyers were placing orders; while in the evening, informal social events were dominating the scene. As stated by one expert and former buyer interviewed, “When I was a buyer for my shop in Antwerp, I was going to numerous fairs. Fairs were commercial events, to buy, to see your competitors but they were also social events; we were all going together for dinner.”⁴³

Pitti Uomo grew from exhibiting around forty-five brands in 1972 to over 1,200 in 2016. CEO Raffaello Napoleone remembers that Pitti Uomo began as 90 percent Italian, and developed into a fair that hosts around 60 percent Italian brands, 40 percent international ones (see Table 10.1). Until the 1980s, 90 percent of the Italian fairs were controlled by a system of associations represented through *Confindustria* (General Confederation of Italian Industry); these fairs were export-oriented, extremely linked to the regional production. CFMI adopted a different strategy: internationalization and fashion culture. Firstly, Pitti



FIGURE 10.1 Pitti People—Stylish men at Pitti Uomo 87, December 13, 2015. Courtesy Pitti Immagine website (www.pittimmagine.com), Pitti Uomo; photographer AKA Studio Collective.

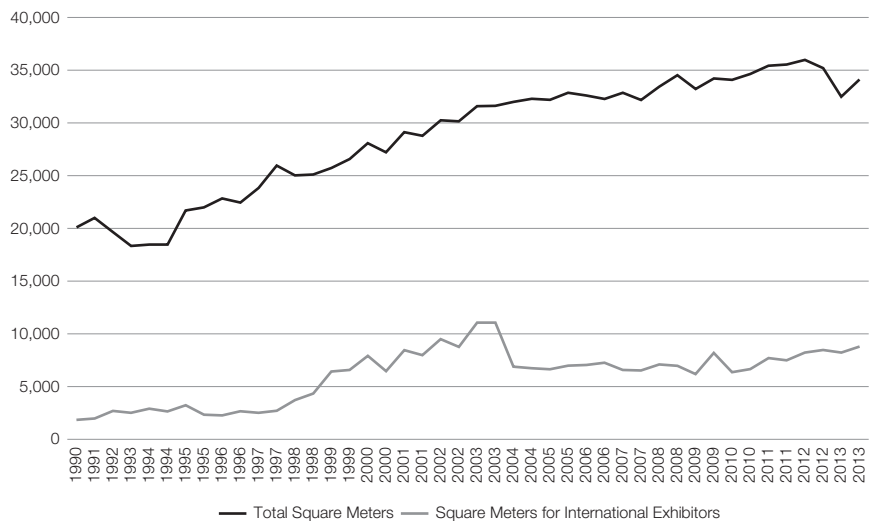
TABLE 10.1 Pitti-UOMO exhibitors 1990–2013



Source: own elaboration, data from Osservatorio Fiere Italia-Europa, CERMES, Bocconi University

Uomo was one of first fairs to invite foreign designers, despite high resistance from different Italian institutions. From displaying Italian tailoring and style to the foreign markets, it became a fair more open to international brands. This is reflected both in the increase of international brands (see Table 10.1) together with an increase in square meters of exhibiting space (see Table 10.2). Pitti Uomo began to scout and invite the best menswear designers from all over the world. Secondly, it started to dedicate a considerable amount of its resources to the creation of cultural events, fashion shows, and projects that fostered the

TABLE 10.2 Pitti-UOMO square meterage 1990–2013



Source: own elaboration, data from Osservatorio Fiere Italia-Europa, CERMES, Bocconi University

growth of a fashion culture. The idea was not to compete or overlap with the fashion runway shows in Milan or Paris, but to show innovative designers who were rarely seen in Italy and Europe and to debut new talent, while making a strong connection with the cultural and artistic heritage of Florence.

Pitti Uomo has retained its leadership role among menswear fairs because of its attention to innovative approaches to fashion and experimentation, a strong selection of high-quality designers and brands, an ability to review and revise fairs, and cultural events being ahead of the changes in the fashion industry. Both stars designers and established brands exhibit at the fair along with emerging fashion designers. The role of Pitti in launching the career of innovative new designers is remarkable. Pitti Uomo has helped emerging designers reach important buyers of multi-brand stores and department stores or be hired by important fashion brands. As one expert and former buyer stated, “The fair is the beginning for a new designer. It gives him or her international visibility and it is a commercial platform. Just think to Umit Benan, winner of Who is on Next/Uomo in 2009. He made his debut in Pitti Uomo in 2010 and now he is in [the Italian fashion house] Trussardi.”⁴⁴ This is explained also by Raffaello Napoleone, the CEO of Pitti Immagine, who mentioned that “The destiny of a good fair is to help designers to grow” (Figure 10.2).⁴⁵

The selective approach is one of the strong points of Pitti Uomo. As one designer put it: “It is not easy to be selected for Pitti Uomo. You have to go through a technical committee which checks who you are, the market position and strategy of your brand—where and how—and most importantly your collection should be in line with the image of the fair.”⁴⁶ As with the *Première Vision* textile fair in Paris, the selection by jury makes Pitti Uomo a true gatekeeper and tastemaker for the entire menswear industry. The fair provides a signal to fashion buyers that the exhibitors are successful and trusted. As one designer explained,



FIGURE 10.2 The latest fashion buzz at Pitti Uomo 90, June 16, 2016. Courtesy Pitti Immagine website (www.pittimmagine.com); photographer AKA Studio Collective.

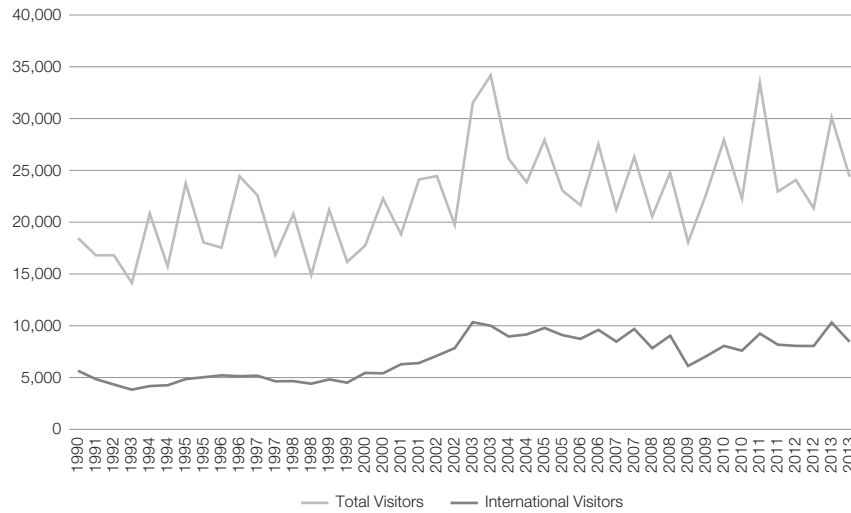
“The fair gives you an ontological position: it tells that you are a brand, you exist.”⁴⁷ The high selection process allows Pitti Uomo to become a place where buyers, designers, and key players of the fashion industry can underpin not only short-term trends linked to the next fashion season, such as a particular style of shoes, but also long-term trends. The trade fair has become a highly curated space for presenting experimental and new designs, thus acting as a trend forecaster for the menswear industry both in the short and long term. In this respect, Pitti Uomo stands out among the Men’s Fashion Weeks and other fairs. Fewer and fewer menswear brands are presenting in Milan or Paris; more and more choose Pitti Uomo. Belgian designer Raf Simons showed his twentieth-anniversary collection at Pitti Uomo in June 2016, instead of Paris Menswear Week (Figure 10.3). At the same time, more and more international buyers visit Pitti Uomo because they can find the best selection of menswear in the same place. Differences in attendance exist between the editions of the fairs in January and June of every year, as the data in Table 10.3 shows.

Both the experts and designers that I interviewed for this chapter highlighted that the Paris fashion trade fairs are the most important in the world now, but that Pitti Uomo is definitely the most relevant for menswear. One designer stated, “My dream is to go to ... Pitti Uomo.”⁴⁸ After having exhibited in fashion fairs in the Netherlands and in the Nordic countries, and having a solid base of shops selling his collections there, he sees Pitti Uomo as the next best place to position and promote his work internationally. Pitti Uomo will make him part of the future of menswear and it will open its doors to a more international market, as buyers and key intermediaries flock to the show from all over the world. Exhibiting at Pitti Uomo is seen as a signal of achievement and success for the designer. In this sense, a cycle is created where the reputation of the fair as a gatekeeper,



FIGURE 10.3 Raf Simons at Pitti Uomo 90, June 16, 2016. Courtesy Pitti Immagine website (www.pittimmagine.com); photographer Vanni Bassetti.

TABLE 10.3 *Pitti-UOMO visitor numbers 1990–2013*



Source: own elaboration, data from Osservatorio Fiere Italia-Europa, CERMES, Bocconi University

tastemaker, and trend developer increases the reputation of the designers and the brands, and vice versa. High selection criteria allow high-quality and innovative designers to exhibit at the fair, which in turn allows the fair to disentangle global fashion trends and to attract international buyers, thus increasing its reputation as well those of the designers exhibiting there (Figure 10.4).



FIGURE 10.4 Fashion buyers at Pitti Uomo 90, June 16, 2016. Courtesy Pitti Immagine website (www.pittimmagine.com); photographer AKA Studio Collective.

In addition to the physical fair, Pitti Immagine has recently introduced a digital fair, ePitti, in 2011. By using the Web, ePitti prolongs the exhibition experience after the physical fair ends. In this way, it is not a substitute for the physical fair, but serves to amplify and multiply opportunities for business development. Fashion buyers can go back to their offices and still be able to browse among the brands. In turn, brands can see which buyers are actually visiting their virtual booth. For each brand, buyers have access to a selected number of items whose pictures have been taken by a team of professional photographers during the physical fair. Brands have the possibility to decide which items will be photographed and posted in a highly curated virtual space. In this way, an effective and efficient interaction continues online. As one designer put it, “In the past, buyers were actually writing orders during the fairs; they would sit and write down everything, there was a queue of them. Today the main reason to attend the fair is to see the different collections.”⁴⁹ However, no buyer can ever see the entire fair while on site; the digital fair allows them to revisit the fair in their home office and provides them with more time to browse the collections. In addition, ePitti together with Nextatlas offers an innovative trend-forecasting service based on big data analysis; it taps into data generated from social media and discovers emerging trends. Both buyers and exhibitors can consult the evolution of trends and their real-time development.

Apart from the selection of international designers and the extension of the fair online, the success of Pitti Uomo also depends on exclusive and high-quality cultural events that are organized during the fair. As Raffaello Napoleone, the CEO Pitti Immagine, explained, “The fair is not a typical fair but it is a festival of creativity. Its success lies in the quality of ideas, quality of the project, quality of the realization, quality of the communication, quality of the selection of participants.”⁵⁰

Conclusions

The changes in the fashion production and distribution system have strongly affected the role of intermediaries and, in particular, the role of fashion fairs. Today fairs are not meant exclusively for direct sales, but they serve more as a platform for trend development, visibility, and communication. Promotion reaches not only the buyer but also the ultimate consumer, thanks to old and new media and a series of related events. Fashion fairs are an important source of networking, information and knowledge creation, and dissemination. They are special events in time and space that group together all the most relevant actors in a particular segment of the geographically dispersed fashion industry. Participants are there not only for trading but also for studying the competitors, and having a general overview of the activities and strategies of their segment of the fashion industry, to move to new markets and extend their product range.

As the history of Pitti Immagine and Pitti Uomo has highlighted, new fairs, new fashion capitals, and changes in the way fashion is created, promoted, and distributed challenged the pioneer fairs of late twentieth century, forcing them to reinvent themselves to preserve their position, reputation, brand, and competitive advantage. This makes it even more difficult for fairs to select the right designers, for designers to select the right fair, and for buyers to get *ex ante* trustful information regarding trade fairs and designers, especially the emerging ones. The case of Pitti Uomo underlines the importance of selecting the right

designers, buyers, and press. The evolving role of Pitti Immagine can serve to illustrate how fashion trade fairs are changing and adapting to the complexity of the fashion industry. For the fashion designers who exhibited there, the fair serves as a commercial platform for visibility, communication, and networking as well for information and knowledge sharing and for reputation building. Buyers visit the fair to reduce uncertainty in their buying process; they benefit from the role of the fair as a gatekeeper, curator, and trend developer.

Reputation is a strong signal about the competence and expertise of the gatekeepers. It takes time to build a strong reputation and time to keep it, trying to be ahead of new developments in the fashion world. The reputation of the fairs is guaranteed by the quality of the ideas, the communication, and the juried selection of exhibitors. At the same time, being present in one important fair can be a sign of prestige for the designer.

Pitti Uomo has different functions: from commercial activities to communication, networking and knowledge creation and diffusion. Pitti Uomo managed to keep and create not only new places for trade but also to promote a fashion culture, through innovative events, projects, and publications. The development of ePitti as a digital companion to the physical fair has allowed accessibility anytime, from anywhere around the world. The digital fair can lengthen the duration of the event, but it will probably never substitute the physical one. Pitti Immagine is well aware of that; the festival character of the trade fair is a clear contribution to strengthen the experience and environment where the buyers, brands, designers, and press interact.

Certainly, in recent years other intermediaries have emerged, such as bloggers and online retail platforms, but face-to-face interaction is far from being dead. There is a complex interconnectedness of roles among intermediaries reflecting the fragmentation and segmentation of the fashion industry. However, the visibility and reputation that a credible fair can give is still a valuable asset. With the current overload of information, we need even more credible and trustful intermediaries. The expertise of the traditional intermediaries is certainly not obsolete. Their expertise is still valuable now, as a filter to help consumers to make sense of the flood of available fashion information that was once so highly restricted.

In conclusion, adopting the terminology by Lucien Karpik, the fashion trade fair can be seen as a “judgment device,” as a social device that helps actors in the market to gather information and ascertain trends, to get to know the sellers and the buyers, and to develop opinion on the quality of the goods exhibited.⁵¹ Digitalization allows the fair to reach buyers and consumers from all over the world. However, the larger the number of choices, the greater our cognitive limitations will be, the more we will buy items from the same restricted number of well-known designers and brands. We may select the unknown and new designers only if there exists trustworthy judgment devices, filters, or intermediaries that can help us to find the right ones. As Jenny Lanz stated, trends still provide a significant organizing principle for the fashion industry as much as a source of legitimacy.⁵²



Notes

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 - 46 Anonymous designer for an Italian footwear brand, Milan, interview by the author, Milan, Italy, April 13, 2012.
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- 49** Linda Loppa interview by the author.
- 50** Raffaello Napoleone interview by the author.
- 51** Karpik, *Valuing the Unique*.
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