



Style

The next Coco Chanel will be a coder



Federico Marchetti

Fashion

Ever eager to know what the next big thing in luxury will be? I am utterly convinced that digital talent will be as important to fashion and luxury as design talent. As digital collides with the fashion and luxury world, we must look ahead and drive a shift in education and training to meet demand for these digital skills. I don't think it is a stretch to say that coding will soon be as important as reading and writing.

In the future, I expect that the game-changers in fashion and luxury will be tech-driven entrepreneurs, much as Elon Musk has become a pioneer in the automotive world. Just look at social media pioneers such as Eva Chen, who leads fashion partnerships at Instagram. Her expertise at the convergence of social commerce and fashion has harnessed the power of Instagram and created a personal brand that resonates across all corners of the fashion community.

We need to move beyond the idea that the creatives can fill their digital gaps simply by occasionally pulling in the tech experts. That's not going to build a solid future. What's needed are tech-savvy fashionistas and digital luxury artisans who are uniquely able to meld the two distinct worlds. In our world, creative collaboration is natural; we need

the same easy collaboration that can cross over to the digital innovators.

I have always believed this was possible. And our experience at the Yoox Net-a-Porter Group (YNAP) is proof that the two elements can tilt the industry. When I invented the online fashion and lifestyle store Yoox in 1999, e-commerce was in its infancy and I had very few contacts within the fashion industry. I had an MBA from Columbia University and was determined to be the first to construct a digital fashion industry. Designers from Giorgio Armani to Valentino opened their doors and listened to my pitch. These visionaries understood their future was online.

Today, YNAP (Yoox merged with Net-a-Porter in 2015) employs 1,000 digital innovators in the UK and Italy, making it possible to adapt to a fast-changing fashion market and tap into trends. We will add hundreds more tech jobs in the near future. We just inaugurated our new Tech Hub in London's White City area, which is now home to a team pushing the boundaries of mobile technology and artificial intelligence in the luxury space.

We also recently teamed up with Imperial College London to teach children in west London the basics of coding, with particular emphasis on training girls aged eight to 14. It's the

latest in our education initiatives for primary and secondary schools as well as universities, both in the UK and Italy.

Over 700 children will have the opportunity to attend free weekly classes taught by students from Imperial's Department of Computing, who will be remunerated for their teaching time, using a curriculum that has been carefully designed alongside our developers. We've worked directly with local schools and each student will be able to follow a course for up to three terms. The children will learn JavaScript, build their own games and apps, and gain problem-solving skills in a creative environment.

This initiative is part of a project, CodeLab, that aims to tackle the lack of gender equality within the technology industry. As a company committed to equal opportunities, with women making up half of our 200 top managers and executive leaders — and being paid approximately 14 per cent more than the company's senior executive average in 2016 — we want to help create a pipeline of future female tech talent.

The fact is, there simply aren't enough women working in tech today. It's a problem that Silicon Valley has been slow to address seriously. Industry data suggests that women make up an average of just 17 per cent

What's needed are tech-savvy fashionistas and digital luxury artisans who are able to meld the two distinct worlds

of the tech workforce in big technology companies. A lack of diversity is never good and tech is missing out.

So where do we look for inspiration as to how digital and design flair can benefit each other? Italy's heritage in fashion and luxury provides an important lesson for the future. Over the centuries, we have developed a symbiotic system that combines creativity with a skilled manufacturing base — it's this pairing that can make magic. Now, that perfect mix of dreaming and doing must include the digital artists of the future.

This possibility should fire the imagination of anyone looking at a creative career in luxury. Digital has added an entirely new dimension to the creative process. It enables unlimited and unimagined means of expression. It can combine the material with the immaterial. Just as important, it brings us closer to the customer than was possible before.

So let's make sure we provide our next Coco Chanel with plenty of digital talent. She'll be trend-spotting on the street and on the web. Big data, artificial intelligence and virtual reality will be as important to her as design, materials and craftsmanship. She'll expect no less of her team.

Federico Marchetti is chief executive of Yoox Net-a-Porter Group

