

Refashioning Collaborations: Crossing Borders During the Pandemic

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Responding to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, when news of quarantines, shutdowns, and sheltering-in-place mandates abounded, the organizers of the tenth fashion congress of Ixel Moda in Cartagena, Colombia, decided collectively to develop the content for an unprecedented five-day, 3-dimensional virtual gathering that brought together artisans, designers, chefs, scholars, and other creators from throughout the globe. The event would provide the scenario for exchanges on many facets of Latin American culture—food, music, film, fashion, politics, museum exhibits, performance, decorative arts, sustainability, tourism, and advertising—in the midst of a difficult period. This essay explores Ixel Online 2020 as a showcasing of the creative arts, includes the voices of the cultural organizers, and proposes this event as a model for increased international dialog during a global crisis.

Keywords: pandemic, fashion, creative industries, border crossing, avatars, cultural digital platforms

Como respuesta a la pandemia de COVID-19 de 2020, cuando abundaron las noticias de cuarentenas, cierres y mandatos de refugiarse en casa, los organizadores del décimo congreso de Ixel Moda en Cartagena, Colombia, decidieron colectivamente desarrollar el programa de un encuentro virtual sin precedentes de cinco días y a 3 dimensiones que reunió a artesanos, diseñadores, chefs, académicos y otros creadores de todo el mundo. El evento proporcionaría el escenario para intercambios sobre muchas facetas de la cultura latinoamericana —comida, música, cine, moda, política, exposiciones de museos, performance, artes decorativas, turismo y publicidad— en medio de un período difícil. Este ensayo explora Ixel Online 2020 como una muestra de las artes creativas, incluye las voces de los organizadores culturales y propone este evento como un modelo para un mayor diálogo internacional durante una crisis global.

Palabras clave: pandemia, moda, industrias creativas, cruce de fronteras, avatares, plataformas digitales culturales

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a frenzy of quarantines, shutdowns, and sheltering-in-place mandates materialized in global communities to varying degrees. People began to address their new realities with an increased focus on flexibility and resistance, in some ways highlighting the importance of humanity in the most physically alienating of times. While unemployment levels surged, an intrinsic language emerged regarding, for example, “social distancing,” “masks,” “exposure,” “essential and non-essential.” New technology platforms made hybrid and remote working arrangements more accessible and necessary than ever for a fraction of the world’s population, albeit not without a steep learning curve for even the most agile of users. “We’re in this together,” became a proverbial rallying cry. Increased access to these platforms in the majority of cases would appear to have facilitated interactions, although it would be remiss not to mention the socioeconomic and health disparities that became more pronounced. Not all participants had access to Wi-Fi, and many were not allowed to leave their homes. As the domino effect of lockdowns and closing borders loomed over plans to travel, new virtual opportunities provided unique, real-time cultural interactions and manifestations.

The organizers of the tenth fashion congress of Ixel Moda,¹ located in Cartagena, Colombia, and also the site of the Latin American encounter for the creative industries in its second year, wondered if their endeavor could forge ahead in light of a severe public health emergency and economic realities that seemed to leave the future of fashion and all creative industries in doubt. While it is too soon to understand fully the impact of this congress on the creative industries at large, this essay brings together voices of some of the event’s main organizers who acted quickly to design an online global congress that we believe is without precedent. First, this was an online creative industries congress that attempted to represent comprehensively Latin America. Second, Ixel Online facilitated productive dialog—both scripted and spontaneous—by transcending traditional technological boundaries and providing the personalized medium of avatars. The massive reimagination of what a congress represents led to new conversations and collaborations across disciplinary and physical borders and may very well have created a model from which to grow and learn about the culture of design.

As the pandemic continues to wax and wane, this noteworthy event raises hopes and challenges that scholars may wish to detail in the future. In the event of a crisis—whether a global health emergency or the real impacts of climate change—the virtual 3D congress with personalized avatars in conversation models a new form of viable attendance and participation. A number of questions arise. For example, does this medium provide forms of human connection to information and knowledge that is needed to sustain the livelihoods of entire regions that would otherwise be placed on hold indefinitely? What kinds of organizational and financial resources might be necessary to enact such events in the future in order to ensure genuine connections?

Ixel Online 2020 had the advantage of being the first virtual 3D format of its kind for the fashion world, an interconnected set of industries steeped in visual codes and dependence on cutting-edge technology. Reflection and time are still necessary to assess whether or not the novelty of a virtual 3D

¹ See the Ixel Moda website: <http://www.ixelmoda.com>.

experiences will wear off quickly, a direct parallel to the fast-paced, trend-based field of fashion itself. In the case of Ixel Online, personalized avatars who met other personalized avatars to share ideas and innovations in real time at the virtual venues of their choice were among the immersive elements that distinguished this experience from the traditional Zoom square conference. Its enactment was not technologically perfect but the organizers embraced the experiment.

As the world continues its unknown directions, whether addressing a global health emergency, political instability, or systemic inequalities that the pandemic has magnified, the ability for people to cross borders, convene, and immerse themselves in a global conversation offers great promise. We acknowledge the digital divide and privilege that allowed participants to work with tools like cell phones and laptops, yet this noteworthy event may have the potential to offer in future iterations a model for a more global and personalized level of participation in congresses. If this digital option is viable in the future, the next experiment in October 2021 is already unfolding as “phygital,” a word representing the “in-person component” alongside the artificial intelligence that one day might mean that congress participants no longer experience distance between human activity and avatar proxy.

Like most scholarly encounters, Ixel Moda had always met face-to-face in Cartagena, attracting thousands of participants from throughout Latin America and the rest of the world. In 2020, its meetings almost did not happen, because the organizers could not imagine how to organize this type of virtual congress from scratch in just a few months. Danilo Cañizares (2021), its academic director, details the challenges of turning an entire congress around so quickly while preserving Ixel Moda’s identity as a collaborative forum focused on innovation and sustainability:

Entender el nuevo mundo digital, afrontar la virtualidad, pensar y diseñar desde el escenario del confinamiento, tener equipos de trabajo que desde sus casas aprendieran sobre nuevos métodos, manteniendo la seriedad de los contenidos y la formalidad de los procesos, que nos ha permitido a lo largo de los años garantizar un escenario responsable de transmisión de cultura y conocimiento, fueron los grandes retos que como equipo tuvimos que afrontar. Lo hicimos desde la perspectiva de la innovación y de la sostenibilidad, entendiendo que no era solo un discurso, sino que debía ser una realidad y una oportunidad de demostrar la coherencia de nuestra línea de pensamiento.

Against all odds, several cultural practitioners worked day and night for months to develop the content for this unprecedented five-day, 3-dimensional virtual congress that brought together artisans, designers, chefs, scholars, and other creators for exchanges on the many facets of culture—food, music, film, fashion, politics, museum exhibits, performances, decorative arts, tourism, and advertising—in the midst of a difficult period. Ixel Online, as it was ultimately advertised, showcased the creative arts and creatively showcased the arts.

Congress organizers could easily have cancelled Ixel Moda, especially because they had little to nothing lined up virtually. Fashion weeks around the globe had already cancelled their events. Newspapers and

other media, even fashion magazines themselves, dropped coverage of fashion-as-usual. With travel limitations, fashion events became more difficult than ever to hold and report, and at the same time, such attention was questioned as possibly inappropriate. The main organizers, including Ixel Moda's Executive President Erika Rohenes Weber and Danilo Cañizares, moved quickly to assemble celebrities and other professionals who could push this congress into a new collective realm that was even more global in scope.² According to Rohenes Weber, “Cada año se organiza en y desde Cartagena de Indias, Colombia (sede oficial), convocando más de 1.200 personas de todo el continente; aunque en el 2020, gracias a la magia de la digitalidad, la edición especial online logró registrar más de 4.500 participantes y cerca de 11.000 visitas” (2021). Ixel Online's success in the virtual realm resulted in a springboard for the 2021 edition that involves, according to Rohenes Weber, 3D experiences alongside hybrid spaces, allowing for in-person guests to follow biosecurity measures and view live streaming across social media and on screens in urban spaces, thus facilitating even more connections.

In 2020 the message was clear: the show would go on and the work would get done if everybody assumed a small role. Support videos viewed throughout the Americas created a rich tapestry of voices in favor of the indestructible textile of creativity, industry, and academia that would surpass the pandemic with its sheer strength of human will and spirit. Zoom webinars, which connected different stakeholders across various time zones prior to the congress, pondered the future of fashion brands and design markets, the centrality of sustainability, and the simple “how to reimagine” all that people could do to collaborate during the lockdowns. Topics included the future of professional design education, craft, and luxury. This time, however, the conversation was not happening in Milan, or New York, or Paris.

A collective willingness to encourage comradery infiltrated the virtual sphere as the congress went from eight in the morning to eleven at night, with upbeat music and virtual coffee that kept even the most tired of souls awake. Celebrating the cultural heritage of many regions, but especially that of Cartagena, Colombia, Ixel Online garnered the backing of governmental agencies, museums and cultural institutions, and sponsors who flooded this event and its creative professionals with much needed support. For the show to happen, and to give design students alongside designers the venues to which they had long been accustomed at prior events, fashion films replaced the runways, artisans spoke within virtual exhibition booths about their crafts instead of offering in-person workshops, chefs opened up conversations about their ancestral inspirations and shared once secret recipes, and interior designers pondered a new way of being now that they were, well, at home and not at the office.³

Acknowledging that the world was experiencing great grief, trauma, and uncertainty, Ixel Online also gave space for authorities to talk about, educate, and provide resources for issues that would ordinarily

² See, for example, the media coverage by Camila Villamil Navarro for *El Tiempo*, 2020a, 2020b.

³ See Laura Anaya Garrido's “Judy Hazbún: ‘Tenemos la valentía de transformarnos’” (2020) involving Ixel Moda's inclusion of fashion films.

go unaddressed but needed this venue to be heard, including domestic violence, inequity, and social unrest. There were memories shared of people who had been lost the previous year, such as design professor Alex Blanch. Academics found themselves cast into a less marginal role at the congress, for everyone was now interested in topics they had analyzed for well over a decade. Some underscored how the fashion industry's research had focused excessively on the bottom line and added value, remaining essentially unaligned with the sustainable futures now imagined by all. Ixel Online had the feel of a global laboratory seeking new knowledge and collaborations.

The virtual format, which was created by the Belgium-based Hyperfair, allowed major design programs and universities to cross the borders that had separated them like never before. By the second day, computers were crashing because attendance had skyrocketed, and Ixel Online decided to take some of its sessions live to its YouTube channel. People who had traded information in advance or during the congress connected to each other via text or on WhatsApp to connect differently, continue attending sessions, and not miss anything.

Coverage leading up to Ixel Online heralded a new experience, and some politicians seized the moment to support their individual country's creative industries in crisis. Colombian President Iván Duque Duque addressed the possibilities of reopening what he called the "franja naranja," or so-called Orange Zones, that had already become a mainstay of the Colombian economy, which congress advertisements showed as empty plazas, boutiques, hotels, and restaurants that had once welcomed tourists and foreign cruise ships.⁴ The need for candid discussion on the role of women and pressing social issues magnified during crisis was addressed by Vice President Marta Lucía Ramírez and Minister of Culture Carmen Vásquez Camacho.

Despite Colombia's role as host for Ixel Moda Online, through the international participation of designers, artisans, and guest speakers, the conference celebrates the rich diversity of Latin America, as showcased in the visual medium of fashion. As Carol Garcia, a member of the scientific committee, recognizes:

Geographically speaking, Latin America is a wide territory. . . . Clothes provide a fundamental means of documentation of everyday life through handcrafted techniques such as weaving, embroidery, printing and a vast array of natural materials collected from the different biomes that coexist. An event such as Ixel Moda makes it possible for this legacy to be not only studied and documented, but shared so that the local journey of clothes and adornments can provide a unique point of view for everyone who wants to understand in depth the various layers that contribute to a way of living expressed through fashion. (2021)

⁴ See Marcela Aguiar Salcedo (2020) and Loraine Obregón Donado (2020) for more information on the president's participation.

Using a multidisciplinary lens, Ixel Online provided its participants with a revelatory looking glass through which to understand more fully current and historical sociopolitical shifts. Celebrations of cultural heritage provided designers and researchers an extensive archive of local cuisine, music, architecture, textiles and the decorative arts, and everything else that is fashion.

Each participant engaged a learning curve to dress their avatar (and with so much to wear in the virtual hotel closet, this took time), find their way through museum spaces, hallways and exhibits, thus creating a new order outside of one's personal real time. Text messages went out to participants that another avatar would knock at their virtual hotel door when it was time to escort them to the congress site. Tour guides and diversity and inclusion officers greeted avatars arriving at their booths. If someone needed a different outfit to match an event, a quick fashion change between sessions was possible. Participants could make new contacts and catch up with old friends at almost every venue of the congress because the digital platform allowed avatars this kind of identification. Adriana Betancur Betancur elaborates on these networking experiences: "Estas relaciones sinérgicas tuvieron una especial relevancia durante Ixel 2020, que fiel a su postulado vanguardista, asumió el momento histórico único de la humanidad, y logró reunir, en una agenda diversa y en un escenario virtual, las visiones más cualificadas sobre temáticas de valor para la industria y la academia" (2021). The opportunities for connections depended on the level of engagement with this virtual world. Each participating institution received a free series of tickets for interested faculty, students, and administrators, and otherwise the congress cost participants around ten dollars.

The experience seemed highly personalized, with the backdrop of serious discussions about the politics of reopening economies during a global crisis, the plight of internally displaced refugees, rising unemployment, and new ways of imagining scholarship and career tracks, the ongoing peace process and truth and reconciliation movements, questions about the role of craft and innovation in design and museum education, the significance of recent social movements..., all in virtual spaces. Laura Novik president of the scientific committee, explains:

En el contexto de las profundas y aceleradas transformaciones sociales, políticas, económicas, ambientales y biológicas que sacuden al mundo y a Latinoamérica en particular, las instituciones educativas de moda en nuestra región tienen la responsabilidad de preparar a los futuros actores del sector con las habilidades y competencias que les permitan descubrir problemas y crear futuros posibles para una industria en plena transición. En este sentido, las tareas de investigación y de formación comprometidas con el pensamiento creativo y crítico, abordadas desde diversos contextos geográficos, con variedad de temas y enfoques disciplinarios y desde una perspectiva intercultural y decolonial, emergen como un imperativo. (2021)

Novik identifies an overdue call-to-action within the fashion industry, including its academic sectors, as related to political discourse, and especially the role of Ixel Moda as a dialectic platform involved in that refashioning. Within the framework of the pandemic, the art of connecting people across

divides, in the critical mission of transforming creative industries in doubt, take on new meaning. The terms of unemployment and the ways to meet future employment became a pressing issue that an international academic council considered within newly consolidated programs and university frameworks. While the online format may have represented a necessary precondition, the sustained technological connection that has followed has the potential to bring collaboration closer even amidst emergencies.

Offering amplified contact among new collaborators, Ixel Moda has become an event with the most purposeful position to select and represent a more diverse encounter for the creative industries while centering the host country, Colombia. During the current global pandemic, many personal and professional factors have limited the ability and desire to travel. This novel platform, however, has continued to facilitate engagement. The 2021 iteration promises new opportunities for conference participants to meet virtually at more exhibits and panels or explore multi-floor shopping centers, museum hallways, and reserved meeting rooms.

For Latin Americanists, Ixel Online would appear to offer an unprecedented experience for its virtual participants, with a host of activities like nightly installments live on YouTube. Prominent were cooking shows, fashion videos from throughout Latin America, concerts, and dance performances sponsored by the Colombian Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Commerce's national tourism office, Fontur. Such connections facilitated access for multiple viewings of performances from throughout the country and in this way provided a flexibility that also seemed novel, as well as the opportunity to share these experiences with colleagues, students, friends, and family who might not have traveled alongside participants to a physical conference. At the same time, these offered a welcoming advertisement for Cartagena, Colombia, and future tourism.

The question must be asked: would sites with less attention to cultural heritage attract as much participant involvement? With 4,500 registered participants and 11,000 visits, Cartagena was uniquely situated to facilitate a visually and virtually striking experience. As Danilo Cañizares explains, there is likely no substitute for in-personal experiences, however thoughtful the applications of the virtual. There are, however, advantages that did not go unrecognized such as diminishing the carbon footprint while increasing proposal submissions. Ixel Online has extended its reach and offers a kind of contestatory response to the global futuring that posits wealthier nations as models others must emulate and proposes an reimagining of the potential of a world that is more universal in participation—"un mundo viable para todos." The reality was perhaps more complex, as all innovation emerges out of tension and sustained practice. Like any meaningful event, Ixel Moda Online continues its commitment to dialog and has forged the path of its next virtual congress, reminding us that in the face of global tragedy, a connective, creative space is still possible.

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