

**REFASHIONING COLLABORATIONS:  
CROSSING BORDERS DURING THE PANDEMIC<sup>1</sup>**

**Remodelando colaborações:  
Cruzando fronteiras durante a pandemia**

**Remodelando colaboraciones:  
Cruzando fronteras en la pandemia**

Regina A. Root  
Stephanie N. Saunders

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1 Originally this article was published in the Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies (MARLAS): Root, Regina A., and Stephanie N. Saunders. 2021. **Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies** (MARLAS) 5 (1), pp. 88-96. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23870/marlas.361>. Due to the importance of this contribution for the discussion on Education, Popular Wisdom and Circular Economy in Latin America, an extended abstract or shorter version is translated and presented in Portuguese, so that it may be more accessible to native Portuguese speakers. The editors want to thank both the authors and MARLAS publishers for their generosity, strongly recommending that readers reach the original publication and also check **Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies** website at <https://www.marlasjournal.com/> for more articles on Latin American Studies.

## **Abstract**

*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 would bring together artisans, designers, chefs, scholars, and other creators. The event would provide the scenario for exchanges on many facets of 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 dialogue in the face of global crisis.*

**Key Words:** *pandemic, fashion, creative industries, border crossing, avatars.*

## **Resumo**

Em resposta à pandemia de COVID-19 em 2020, quando notícias de quarentenas, fechamentos e isolamento social mandatórios explodiram, os organizadores da décima edição do congresso Ixel Moda, em Cartagena, Colômbia, decidiram coletivamente desenvolver conteúdo para um encontro virtual 3D sem precedentes, de cinco dias de duração, que juntaria artesãos, designers, chefs, acadêmicos e outros criadores. O evento proveria o cenário de trocas em muitos âmbitos da cultura – comida, música, cinema, moda, política, mostras de museus, performance, artes decorativas, sustentabilidade, turismo e publicidade – no meio de um período difícil. Este artigo explora como Ixel Online 2020 tornou-se uma vitrina para as artes criativas, incluindo as vozes de organizadores culturais, e propõe o evento como modelo para um diálogo internacional crescente diante de uma crise global.

**Palavras-chave:** *pandemia, moda, indústrias criativas, cruzamento de fronteiras, avatares.*

## **Resumen**

*En respuesta a la pandemia de COVID-19 en 2020, cuando el noticiero de cuarentenas, cierres y aislamiento social compulsorios fueron abundantes, los organizadores de la décima edición del congreso Ixel Moda en Cartagena, Colombia decidieron colectivamente desarrollar contenido para cinco días sin precedentes de un encuentro virtual tridimensional que juntaría artesanos, diseñadores, chefs, académicos, y otros creadores. El evento presentaría el escenario para intercambios en muchas faces de la cultura – comida, música, filme, moda, política, exhibiciones de museos, performance, artes decorativas, sostenibilidad, turismo y publicidad – en medio a un momento duro. Ese artículo explora Ixel Online 2020 como vidriera para las artes creativas, incluyendo la voz de organizadores culturales, y propone un modelo para dialogo internacional creciente delante de la crisis global.*

**Palabras-clave:** *pandemia, industrias creativas, cruce de fronteras, avatares.*

During the onset on the COVID-19 pandemic, a frenzy of quarantines, shut-downs, and sheltering-in-place materialized over global communities in varying degrees. People worldwide began to address 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 “social distancing,” “masks,” “exposure,” “essential and non-essential,” for example. New technology platforms made hybrid and remote working conditions 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 rally cry of sorts. Increased access to technological platforms in the majority of cases would appear to have facilitated interactions, though not without a number of socioeconomic and health concerns. Not all participants had access to wifi and many couldn’t 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 other creative industries in doubt. This essay explores what prior to the pandemic was already a notable event. While it is too soon to understand fully its impact on the creative industries at large, this preliminary description brings together voices of some of the event’s main organizers who acted quickly to design an online global congress we believe is without precedent. First, this was an online congress of the creative industries. Second, Ixel Online went beyond what a normal congress would do in terms of the conversations, both spontaneous and scripted carefully. It would appear that the massive reimagination of what a congress represents led to new conversations and collaborations, some perhaps unintentional. This essay details some of these, fully recognizing that to discuss any of them in great depth is beyond the scope of this description.

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 create 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 protecting Ixel Moda’s integrity:

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 for-

<sup>2</sup> See the Ixel Moda website: <http://www.ixelmoda.com>.

malidad 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. (Danilo Cañizares, 2021)

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

Congress organizers could easily have caved and 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 Cañizares, moved quickly to assemble celebrities and other professionals who would push this congress into a new collective realm that was even more global in scope.<sup>3</sup> 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 will involve, 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, thus facilitating connections previously unimagined.

In the case of the Ixel Moda Online 2020, the message was clear: the show would go on and the work would get done if everybody assumed a small role. Support videos created a rich tapestry of international 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, 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 connect during the lockdowns.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the media coverage by Camila Villamil Navarro for *El Tiempo*, 2020a, 2020b.

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.

Unlike anything that had happened before and, as a collective endeavor that embraced any form of support that would ultimately make a contribution, this was all in. 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 support of governmental agencies, museums and cultural institutions, and sponsors who would flood creative professionals with much needed support. For the show to go on, and to give design students alongside designers the venues to which they had long been accustomed, 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 inspirations and shared recipes, and interior designers pondered a new way of being now that they were, well, at home and not at the office.<sup>4</sup>

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 go unaddressed: 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 interested now in things they had been saying for well over a decade as they underscored how the fashion industry's research, which can focus on the bottom line and added value, had never quite aligned with the sustainable futures imagined by scholars because in all likelihood the creative industries had simply never wanted to fund it. The scholars continued to converse for free despite this renewed interest, but they probably could have charged admission. 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 physical borders like never before. By the second day, computers were crashing because attendance 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 figure out how to continue attending sessions, connect differently, and not miss anything.

Coverage leading up to Ixel Online heralded a new experience, and politicians seized the moment to inaugurate and 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

<sup>4</sup> See Laura Anaya Garrido's "Judy Hazbún: 'Tenemos la valentía de transformarnos'" (2020) involving Ixel Moda's inclusion of fashion films.

of the world heritage site economy, which congress advertisements showed as empty plazas, boutiques, hotels, and restaurants that had once welcomed tourists and foreign cruise ships.<sup>5</sup> Candid conversations on the role of women and pressing social issues that had been magnified by the crisis were addressed by Vice President Marta Lucía Ramírez and Minister of Culture Carmen Vásquez Camacho. In a more global conversation, the upcoming United States presidential elections were a topic of detailed conversation that pondered who had dressed the candidates.

In short, one could hardly fail to notice what a big deal this all was, and perhaps the first of the magisterial speakers chosen could not have made this clearer: Nina García, Editor in Chief of *Elle* magazine and of Project Runway fame, opened the fashion congress from her New York City apartment. The first moments of Ixel Online were fashionably late, as always, but perhaps this concept was not as easily transferred to a new technological platform. As guests and participants waited, just like at any conference, there was upbeat music interspersed with organizing voices and whispers before the event began. Once in session, there were lots of questions for guests placed in the chat box and read by a host. Someone asked Nina García who her favorite Colombian designer was. She paused. It was a fair question given the new platform.

In many ways, Ixel Moda Online amplified the need to consider the rich diversity of Latin America, as showcased through the visual medium of fashion. As Carol Garcia, a member of the scientific committee, recognizes:

Geographically speaking, Latin America is a wide territory. Nevertheless, if one adds imagination to the images of luxurious jungles and crowded cities, there is much more to pay attention to. The impressive culture that lies underneath stereotypes is still unknown, mostly due to the fact that the continent still holds strongly to a mix of ethnic origins, including ancestral indigenous roots and African influences whose presence is rarely documented apart from visual culture. Besides the commonly known areas that share Spanish and Portuguese languages inherited from European conquerors, most documentation on the territory has been passing on over the years through oral traditions, without written testimonies. Consequently, it is not difficult to envision that visual culture fulfills an important role to preserve the continent's legacy. Among other items closely linked to original people's lifestyles, 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. (Carol Gracia, 2021)

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

In this way, this new platform assisted global conversations on challenges, lifestyle and wellbeing. Additionally, celebrations of cultural heritage provided designers and researchers what is undoubtedly a lasting archive of local cuisine, music, architecture, textile arts and everything fashion.

As a three-dimensional virtual experience, each participant engaged a learning curve to dress their avatar (and with so much to wear from the virtual hotel closet, this took time), to use this same representation to roam hallways and exhibits, thus creating a new order outside of one's personal order in real time. Text messages went out to participants that another avatar would knock at their virtual hotel door when it was time to escort the avatar to the congress site. Tour guides and diversity and inclusion officers greeted avatars arriving at their booths. If you grew tired of an outfit, a quick fashion change between sessions was possible. Participants could meet other avatars and meet friends at specific venues within the congress. 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 calificadas sobre temáticas de valor para la industria y la academia" (2021). The opportunities for connections seemed both awkward and spontaneous, depending on the level of engagement with this virtual world. Each 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 conversations about the politics of reopening economies during a global crisis, the plight of internally displaced refugees, those seeking employment or 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, 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. Son algunas razones por las que considero que el Congreso Académico de Instituciones de Moda (CAIM) puede convertirse en una plataforma de carácter político, para el desarrollo de marcos teóricos alternativos e inclusivos, capaces de analizar y comprender la moda desde una perspectiva regional, que aporte nuevos enfoques en el actual contexto de deconstrucción del sistema tradicional de la moda a escala global. (2021)

In this way, Novik identifies the overdue call-to-action of the fashion industry as related to political discourse, and especially the role of Ixel Moda as a dialectic platform. The art of connecting people across the divides, in the critical mission of appreciating and saving the creative industries, their traditions, and advances, took on new meaning. The pandemic appeared to have magnified other illnesses like poverty and injustices, calling into question what it means to be a cultural practitioner, designer and entrepreneur at this moment. CAIM, which Novik mentions, has already begun to meet regularly to share challenges facing the sectors in the longer term and design innovations to meet them. These collective findings will be presented at Ixel Online 2021.

Offering amplified contact among new collaborators, Ixel Moda has become an event with a most purposeful position that, while centering Colombia as the host country, has worked hard to select and represent a more diverse event for the creative industries than it had been when face-to-face.

In the face of the pandemic, or other personal and professional factors that may limit participants' ability to travel, Ixel Online continued to facilitate engagement. Even with borders closed, this platform allowed, and will continue to allow in its iteration in 2021, new opportunities for those who wish to meet other conference participants virtually at exhibits and panels or wander into multi-floor shopping center, and museum hallways.

## **RETHINKING COLLABORATIONS**

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. Sponsored by the Colombian Ministry of Culture and Fontur, cooking shows, fashion videos from throughout Latin America, concerts, and dance performances predominated. 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 places 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, other advantages that did not go unrecognized:

Creemos que debemos mantener la disminución de la huella de carbono a través de un congreso desprovisto de papel, de volantes y documentos, trabajamos por menos cartas físicas y más propuestas a partir de un mundo digital, esto nos ayuda a entender un presente y un futuro en el que nuestro compromiso vaya más allá de ser un evento que congrega a la red académica más grande de Latinoamérica en moda, y nos comprometamos a mantener un mundo viable para todos. Debemos ser pioneros en la construcción de un pensamiento conectado con la realidad de nuestro mundo hoy. (2021)

Ixel Moda Online, he reminded us, continued its path as a trailblazing congress at once committed to dialogue, connections and new creations. Nothing like this had been done before. The future was, as the congress theme had announced, something no one could have ever imagined.

**Note:** All interviewees gave their consent for their thoughts to be used in this essay<sup>6</sup>.

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6 GARCIA, Carol. Professora do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Arquitetura, Artes e Design do Centro Universitário Belas Artes de São Paulo. E-mail: [maria.garcia@belasartes.br](mailto:maria.garcia@belasartes.br)

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**Data de submissão: 30/04/2021**

**Data de aceite: 25/01/2022**

**Data de publicação: 01/02/2022**

