

**Fashion**

## Chiara Ferragni — the Italian influencer who built a global brand

She launched her Blonde Salad blog 10 years ago as a bit of fun. Now she manages a €30m business and is one of the most influential people in fashion

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Chiara Ferragni © Jonathan Frantini

Going to meet Chiara Ferragni, social media meteorite, is like going to see the queen of a small realm. In fact, not so small a realm.

The 31-year-old is founder of [theblondesalad.com](https://theblondesalad.com), a fashion blog that has turned into a global retail business, with 17m followers on Instagram, equivalent to the population of the Netherlands. Add in her husband, the Italian superstar rapper Fedez, and their combined followers (25m) equal the population of Australia. The equivalent of the UK (67m) watched, shared or read about the #Ferragnez three-day wedding extravaganza in Sicily last September as it unfolded on social media: she wore three custom-made dresses by Dior.

The capital of her world is Milan, where Ferragni grew up and where she first started taking photographs of herself outside fashion shows and sharing them with friends. Today her office is across the road from Italy's famous Palazzo dell'Informazione, the national press tower that once housed some of the country's best-known newspapers. Ferragni's face, she tells me later, will be plastered all over the building as a hoarding during Milan's upcoming fashion week, which seems an apt metaphor for what digital has done to traditional media. But this meeting is not to talk about Ferragni's rise as a media star. Instead she wants to talk about her desire to be recognised as an entrepreneur.

It is 10 years since Ferragni started writing her blog, in Italian and English, while studying international law at Milan's Bocconi University. The Blonde Salad began as an irreverent take on fashion. It was all about mixing it up, like a salad, she says, and playing on the cliché of the dumb blonde. (As it happens, her hair colour isn't naturally blonde, but a reddish brown. She dyed it when she realised being blonde would make her stand out among the ranks of wannabes then swarming the entrances of the shows. She was correct.) She never finished her degree as her fame in Italy grew fast enough to earn her a decent living. She quit studying just three exams short of graduation.

She moved to Los Angeles in 2013: the Milan stage had become "too small". She wanted to internationalise herself, learn English and lose her Italian accent. Soon after, Forbes named her in its "30 under 30" list of power brokers and Spanish Vogue put her on its cover. Harvard Business School used her as a case-study in how to monetise the dual streams of a blog and a personal brand as a business.

She returned to Italy in 2016, as the world's most followed fashion blogger with the international recognition she wanted and endorsement deals worth thousands of dollars.



Ferragni skiing in Seiser Alm, Italy © @ChiaraFerragni

Three-quarters of her followers are in Europe, first of all in Italy, followed by France, Russia and Spain. Another 15 per cent are in Asia and the rest are in the US. The clothing and accessories line that she launched in 2010 sells on her own websites, in flagship stores in Milan, Paris and Shanghai, in pop-up stores, such as in Selfridges and Le Bon Marché, and on Alibaba's Tmall and JD.com in China. Last year she made €30m in combined revenues from her retail site and from selling herself as a clotheshorse via her talent agency, which is forecasting a 20 per cent uptick this year. That business broke even at an operating level last year. Via the talent agency she books herself out to brands such as Lancôme, Dior and Intimissimi.



Her latest project is an online beauty masterclass called Beauty Bites and this year she became chief executive of all her companies. Further to that, she has just been named ambassador of the LVMH Prize, which lends her some longed-for credibility in an industry that has sometimes held her at arm's length. And she will attend the Oscars for the first time this month.

In person, she is brassy like Dolly Parton and wearing pink sparkly heels, pink jeans so tight I wonder how she got into them and a pink sleeveless top, as fluffy as candyfloss. But Ferragni's Barbie-like demeanour is deceptive. She's very much focused on business.

To that end, she recently hired a designer from Off-White to bulk up her [chiaraferragnicollection.com](https://chiaraferragnicollection.com) designs, the line of contemporary streetwear she sells alongside theblondesalad.com, which offers a more europop evening aesthetic. The streetwear is very girly, glittery and pink. Her signature motif is a stylised winking blue eye emblazoned on ballerina shoes, swimsuits, wallets, sweatshirts . . . It is pricey stuff. A backpack retails for €395.

Her business plan is a blend of tech entrepreneurship and good old-fashioned Italian business sense. She namechecks Emily Weiss, founder and chief executive of millennial online beauty brand Into the Gloss, as a friend and influence. Weiss, a former fashion assistant and intern at Teen Vogue, has built her beauty blog into a business with \$100m in revenues and raised \$86m in venture capital funding. Ferragni, whose age is smack in the middle of the millennial generation, would like to emulate that model. But while Weiss has always kept herself at some distance from her brand, Ferragni has made her face the focus. She is gradually introducing more family members to work for her talent agency: her younger sisters Valentina (who has 2.4m Instagram followers) and Francesca (728k followers), and her mother Marina (380k followers) have all secured brand-sponsored deals to showcase their lives as well-heeled Milanese.



“I would like to create something that I can wear and my mother can wear and my younger sisters can wear,” Ferragni says of her interest in the family brand. Are we talking about a desire to emulate the Kardashians here? She laughs. “Maybe — in the future”.

She is also completing a documentary about how social media and the internet have changed the rules of fashion. It is due out in September. “I had a need to talk about myself, to find myself a public to tell my story to and to talk about what I was doing,” she says. “It was a way to make me feel good about myself. It is egotistical in the end.”

**Ferragni is a rare thing among a sea of ageing, gerontocratic men. Power is still very much in the hands of men in Italy**

Ego is the root of Ferragni's existence. She blames her mother, Marina di Guardo, who writes thrillers, for her obsessive photo taking. "My mum used to come back with 10 rolls of film from our holidays," she says. "She was always taking photos and videos of me and my sisters to show my aunt, my grandmother. I do the same but with millions of people. I consider it exactly the

same thing," she says.

Her focus on being hugely famous for just being herself seems preternatural. Two years after launching her blog she was offered a job by Silvio Berlusconi's media group to be a fashion reporter on Italy's biggest private TV network. She said no. "I didn't want to do TV. That wasn't my dream," she says. "I wanted to be known internationally. TV would have given me fame much faster, but fame only in Italy. And in Italy, sooner or later your potential audience is going to end," she says.

She has since found that audience, but even today, she has her detractors. Early on, when she went to fashion shows, industry insiders would ridicule her, literally slamming the door in her face on some occasions. Ferragni says it made her "put on armour". Her response to the critics is: "To keep going. When people try to put you down, it's the best response you can give," she says. "I let it slide off me."





Chiara Ferragni photographed for the FT, at her headquarters in Milan © Jonathan Frantini

Sabina Belli, chief executive of jewellery brand Pomellato, which used Ferragni for an advertising campaign last year, says Ferragni's vision and drive to become the most powerful fashion influencer in the world is an "admirable feat" for any entrepreneur. "Chiara speaks directly to the digital generation," she adds.

Another veteran Milan fashion executive is more critical. "I doubt she has real substance," he says. "I don't think anyone sees her as cool. She is mainstream. For a brand that is not just trying to sell handbags she is not the right kind of person". Nevertheless, the same person did acknowledge that Ferragni was in "the right place at the right time, and did a lot of the right things".



Her recent marriage has made her a superbrand. She and Fedez have their own hashtag, #Ferragnez, although she is the more famous internationally. “He is better known in Italy,” she says of her husband. “He is known by everyone; he is very recognisable. And he is very envious that I am international but there is a language gap,” she says.



Ferragni with her husband Fedez at their wedding in September 2018 © @fedez

Ferragni insists that she doesn't have a social media strategy. She says she posts instinctively. “If I feel I want to do something, I do it. This is a strength in this world where to be authentic wins,” she says. Her posts can be surprisingly candid or excruciating depending on your point of view.



She posts about six times a day and, like other influencers, who are predominantly women, she prizes being able to do many things at once. But sometimes something gets lost in the mix. “A thousand times you feel that the image you have taken of the event is stronger than the experience of the event itself, and that is when you realise you were not present enough in the moment,” she says. Her new year’s resolution was to learn to meditate.

And what about boundaries? Ever since his birth, her son Leone has been a regular feature on her feed: his debut post saw him being washed after birth. Does she worry about exposing him to so much scrutiny? Ferragni argues it would have been strange for her not to share the most positive thing in her life given she shares so much else. But she does admit there is an ethical discussion to be had.

“Small children cannot choose anything about their lives. They cannot choose their religion. They cannot choose how they are educated. A child unfortunately isn’t free to do many things because its parents set it on a path, and then the child when it is older has to make the choice whether it is its true path or not,” she says.



Ferragni with her son Leone © @ChiaraFerragni

By posting images of her son — in the bath, in the first-class airport lounge, on his tricycle — she argues, not wholly convincingly, that she is making a broader, feminist point. “We are a modern family. I can be a woman with two companies, and also be present as a mother. I do not have to make a choice between being a mother or a working woman. It does a lot of good for a lot of people to send this message,” she says.



Nevertheless, it also must be exhausting, constantly globetrotting in search of new backdrops. Although she gives away few signs of fatigue there are hints she is looking to step back from the limelight. “I am trying to evolve the brand that will go ahead by itself without my continuous support,” she says. “I want to be more behind the scenes. And that people will like it because they like the product.”

For a time, she says, she had a crisis about being Italian. When she first went to the US in 2013 she was struck by how, if she had been born American, “I would not have had to strive so hard”.

But she has since rethought and now sees her strength is being “an international Italian”. In a country with a significant brain drain of its talented young, this is a specific category. It is also an indictment of Italy’s political class. In particular, it strikes me that Ferragni is one of only a handful of high-profile Italian businesswomen — a rare thing among a sea of ageing, gerontocratic men. Power is still very much in the hands of men in Italy.

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Ferragni’s newness and embrace of internationalism is invigorating, in contrast to the mood in Italy, which is bleak. When we speak, Italy’s far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini, a man who would be prime minister, has caused an international outcry refusing to let a boat of migrants disembark. Recent data suggest the country may be heading back into recession. Everywhere the talk is of decline, a very beautiful country calcified by the past, fearful and unable to renew itself.

Ferragni and Fedez are already positioned on one side of the divide that is ripping up the country. Fedez has emerged as a critic of Salvini, attacking him on Twitter for racist and xenophobic statements.

As I walk out of Ferragni’s office, past the old Press Tower now filled with luxury design stores, I see a poster for Satispay, a new fintech started by another of those international Italians. Then a tram rattles past blazoned with advertising from Algebris, a hedge fund turned alternative investor started by yet another.

Certainly, Ferragni is part of a global media story about influencers, the fall of media titans, about young women storming the barricades. Like her or loathe her, Ferragni is also undeniably part of the small green shoots of renewal in Italy.

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