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Fashion: From Collective Selection to Individual Style

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Summary

The paper aims to shed light on the question of why fashion appears in terms of collective selection in a movement towards individual style in the way we dress. In this paper, fashion will be illuminated in terms of collective fashion trends and personal style. Thus, it is the clothes, dressing habits, and garments that are observed in the research. The paper shows how the theory of symbolic interactionism can be used in an analysis, in order to bring transparency to the movement from collective selection towards individual style in the fashion industry. One reason for choosing such a theoretical approach, which is connected to social interaction, is to avoid the classic trap in research of making statements through the study of cause and effect. The analysis is made based on empirical examples of garments, observing the process in its entirety - from the initial meaning for the person giving it a symbol in social interaction, to finally becoming an individual style. There are four such sections that jointly create the final picture of why fashion is heading towards individual style. Findings from this theoretical approach can be divided into four sections, which call for further exploration of the movement from collective selection towards individual style in fashion. They all have different empirical sources, and naturally provide different answers to the initial question in this paper. First there is a process of transformation from collective selection to individual style, which originated in 1852 in Paris. It is also obvious that there is currently a collapse of what can be labelled as the “total look” in fashion, which is well supported by fashion designers and customers who often seek extreme individuality in fashion. The initial question is “why fashion appears in terms of collective selection in a movement to individual style in our dressing habits”. As it has been going on at least since 1852, we can consider that this is not a recent phenomenon in fashion. However, designers have changed the role of collective fashion norms over time by giving garments a style that follows fashion trends. Then, once those garments are turned into individual style, as customers seek more detail in garments, then we have the collapse of the “total look” and thus achieve hyper individuality. With this background it is reasonable to conclude that this will have a strong impact on how consumers will perceive brands in the future.

Keywords Fashion, collective selection, social interaction, symbol, individual style.

Introduction

In this paper, fashion will be examined in terms of collective dress and personal style. Thus, it is the clothes, dressing norms, and garments that are observed in the research. For most of us, our choices in fashion are normally intended to be conscious, but this is often not the case. In general, it is reasonable to assume that most of us take part in fashion trends we know very little about, and sometimes call it our individual style. These choices, whether conscious or not, are not free from general social interpretation of the changes taking place around us. At the moment, there is a movement from collective thinking of fashion towards personal style thinking, at least when considering the fashion weeks and shows on the market. This leads to an obvious question: why does fashion appear in terms of collective selection in a movement towards individual style in our dressing habits?

Background

In the past, the leading capitals in fashion such as Paris, London, Milan and New York, simply gave us a view on fashion. In spite of this, it is becoming increasingly difficult to spot the sources of fashion internationally, and in global production and consumption. Another distinctive feature of our times is that currently, collective fashions are to some extent being replaced by individual choice. In other words, we mix our style rather than sticking to a single brand that controls our outfits, as was previously the case. This observation is clear in the study of Woodward (2009: 13); 'the myth of street style', the style itself, is reduced to empty phrases such as 'mix and match' or 'being individual'. It is therefore also clear that the role of the designer has been dramatically impacted. Designers were previously closely linked to specific fashion houses for the greater part of their professional careers. Now their expertise is becoming a specialized asset that can be bought and sold between fashion houses. This also allows a designer to come from different environments and different social classes, and to seemingly appear out of nowhere. One example is street wear, where London and Tokyo, in particular, have been greatly debated in the resulting subcultures.

Other causes underlying the increase of fashion can be the decline in relative clothing prices, and an increase in the number of fashion courses being offered at several Western universities. Fashion is now even an attractive field for venture capitalists, which have increasingly begun to invest in the fashion industry. Add to this the increase in social media where bloggers and

twitters are searching for trends and styles on the Internet. The most remarkable example might be Scott Schuman, who is the creator of the popular fashion blog called 'The Sartorialist'. He is well known for photographing what has been described as real people who have a sense of style, and who show us that there is a current movement from collective fashion towards individual style, guided by social media in this case.

In conclusion, it is clear that fashion is affecting more groups in the community, while simultaneously gaining a more important role in our lives and finances. From this background, it might be interesting to study fashion in terms of collective change linked to our choice of individual style.

Previous studies on the subject

Fashion content has recently become more and more diverse, and is therefore very difficult to grasp in terms of its variety and performance. Today there are very few disciplines and subject matters that have not been involved in fashion studies - from logical sciences to humanities. Historically, fashion has been studied as a trickle-down effect by Spencer (1885), Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1904). It concerned an upper social class that applied seasonal change to their dressing habits, in order to take control of the current dressing trends. Another type of research has focused on the structure underlying the development of fashion. One representative for such research is Levi-Strauss (1971). This research addresses the struggle to find similarities in the fashion system by comparing two collections side by side, and looking for the underlying similarities that unify them. Similar to this approach is the system approach, mostly known from a study by Barthes (1983) on fashion. It primarily concerned identifying different types of garments.

Furthermore, postmodernism has radically changed fashion research and design. Baudrillard (1994) argues that in fashion, we live in a world where we experience a kind of reflection of reality. This reflection, which is known as 'simulacra', is then turned into value for the customer in the consumption of fashion. Bourdieu (1984) focuses on the role of social power and status relationships in fashion. The term here is *habitués*, which is an individual document outline, a pattern of behaviour that is learned and that leads to the individual making specific choices that lead to the reproduction of power hierarchies. However, this only applies to fashion if we as human beings understand the inherent power of what we wear and its significance, which is a

very noteworthy point in the research. Other sources of fashion include the idea that fashion is addressed by discourses, Foucault (2000). A discourse study is a general term for a number of approaches to analyzing the use of written, spoken or signed language. Fashion is then interpreted on the basis of the meeting with the people, texts and images that change our opinion about the different outfits that ultimately create fashion. The analysis mainly concerns the language itself, which means that how we say things or express ourselves is important for those studies. Derrida (1997) is another French postmodern philosopher; he is known for establishing deconstruction. Thus, we have seen that the traditional system that was the ideal for interpreting clothing has been replaced to a large extent by Japanese avant-garde and postmodern deconstruction design, frequently represented by fashion designers such as Ann Demeulemeester and Martin Margiela. Moreover, Featherstone's (2007) observations emphasize the concept of the specific fashion. There is a belief that the individual's consciousness about his or her appearance has become more a result of constantly measuring against and comparing him or herself to idealized images of the body. That is, the ability to interpret impressions from the outside world has become an important skill for the modern individual, which means that fashion exposure is essential for these people. It is also interesting to note that there are authors who have a relatively broad perspective in terms of studying fashion. Kawamura (2007) is one of the people attempting to treat fashion as a matter of fashionology, making it a specific subject in research and education. Hers mentioned theories concern a system of cultural globalization that has replaced the Western costume system. The cultural globalization system being studied employs production and consumption of fashion, as well as institutions and individuals. This approach is highlighted throughout the fashion collective dimensions along with the designer's role in controlling fashion. To conclude, there is a huge interest in fashion studies and fashion writing at the moment, which will result in light being shed on the mystery of fashion.

Research Process and Data Collection

In this paper, fashion will be illuminated in terms of collective dressing and personal style. Thus, it is the clothes, dressing, and garments that are observed in the research. The paper shows how the theory of symbolic interactionism can be used in an analysis to bring transparency to the movement from collective selection to individual style in the fashion industry. One reason to choose such a theoretical approach, which is connected to social interaction, is to avoid the

classic trap in research of making statements through the investigation of cause and effect. The analyze is made on empirical examples of garments, which is observed in a process from the initial meaning for the person given it a symbol in social interaction and finally coming to be an individual style. There are four such sections that give all together the final picture of why fashion is head for to individual style.

In the first section where the same garment may have different meanings for us an empirical source is Eijkelboom's (2009) study, which is based on photographs of fashion garments. The source shows interpretation problems when we draw conclusion based on pictures trying to answer the question why fashion appears in collective selection.

In the second section where the same garment may have the same meaning for us there are frequently cases of typical known garments given us the picture such as the Burberry trench coat, Duffle coat and Cardigan. Such garments give an illustration of the process from collective selection to individual style in this paper.

In the third section where different garments may have different meanings there is a situation where the prize structure and the brand are critical aspects in the marketing communication with the customer. This problem is illustrated in a discussion using large retailers as cases in the fashion industry.

Finally, in the last section where different garments may have the same meaning for us the strategy of the department stores becomes severe. Le Bon Marché among many others illustrate the conservative way department stores around the world are operating to give the customer the image of individual style.

In sum the empirical stuff is mainly to give an illustration on what is meant to each section and why it is done the way it is. I do not go further than that. But, together along with the chosen theory and the analysis it is possible provide a critical examination forward in getting an answer on the leading question in this paper, why fashion appears in terms of collective selection in a movement to individual style in our dressing.

Theory

In the study of fashion, focus is on the changes that take place in collective fashion and on the fashion of individual style. The initial question focuses on the issue of why fashion appears in terms of collective selection in a movement towards individual style in our dressing habits.

Observations of garments, which are classified into categories depending on the meaning we as consumers assign to them, address this issue. The theory used in the analysis is known as symbolic interactionism, Blumer (1969). Fashion is then defined as a desire to keep up with the times, and to express the tastes that are emerging in a changing world. One reason to choose such a theoretical approach, which is connected to social interaction, is to avoid the classic trap in research of making statements through the study of cause and effect. An early attempt was made by Goffman (1957) to see society as a theatre, in which we always try to play our social roles as well and as convincingly as possible. Studies of social roles and social interaction come very close to clearing up what fashion can be.

Further on in this study, symbolic interaction will include the theoretical context upon which the analysis is based. It is essentially a matter of setting out three basic premises of the perspective. In the first phase, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things, which could correspond to things like 'I would like to be in fashion'. In the second phase, the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and society, which could correspond to something like 'I would like to be like a Lapo Elkann or an Alexa Chung, which are symbols in fashion that currently communicate style'. Symbolic communication means that meaningful gestures are used consciously by the individual, which are essential in communicating the message so that it is perceived in the same way by a sender and receiver. It is important to note that clothing becomes symbolic and fashion when it refers to something beyond itself, such as showing changes in society and in our environment. Finally, in the third phase, meaning and symbol become the created individual style. This is the result of the connotations being processed in, and modified by, an interpretative process used by the person when dealing with the things he or she encounters. 'I would like to have a fancy individual style', is a statement that corresponds to this third phase.

The four categories of garments in this study are defined qualitatively in terms of their meaning in fashion. They have different merits in terms of the theory in use for the symbolic interactionism. Finally, the paper aims shed light on the question of why fashion appears in terms of collective selection in a movement towards individual style in our dressing habits. In this paper, fashion solely refers to a style of dressing that is created within the social influences of a specific time.

Analysis

Through analysis, we will be able to identify the significance of clothing from a fashion perspective. Thus, the analysis is based on the fact that we cannot ignore the clothes when studying fashion. The method in use is qualitative, in that a garment has certain qualities of meaning for us as consumers. In the following analysis, fashion is interpreted from collective selection to individual style in our dressing habits. Theoretically, there is a desire to create an individual style that starts with meaning, moves on to social interaction that creates symbols, and finally emerges as perception and goes on to individual style. The aim of the study is to find answers to the question, why does fashion appear in terms of collective selection in a movement towards individual style in our dressing habits?

The analysis below is a deduction of the symbolic interaction where the following four situations and qualities of garments are observed. Each section below begins with a critical analysis of the concept of meaning in wearing apparel, followed by empirical examples of clothing and garments.

1. The same garment may have different meanings for us depending on social interaction and symbol.

When the same garment has different meanings, we are faced with the most common reality when observing specific garments manufactured and sold around the globe. This is also a reality in older studies where Sapir (1931) is a good example in the field. His experiences can be summed up as concluding that the main difficulty in understanding fashion and its apparent extravagances, is the lack of exact knowledge of the unconscious symbolism of forms, colours, materials, postures and other elements that express a given culture. This difficulty is considerably increased by the fact that some expressive elements tend to have different symbolic references in different areas. It is interesting to note that current studies in fashion are in contradiction with such logic. One example is Eijkelboom's (2009) study, which is based on empirical evidence - photographs of fashion garments. The work reveals stunning similarities between three cities - Paris, New York and Shanghai - where identical products are sold. Globalization, combined with the desire of cities to achieve visually spectacular elements, is leading to city centres everywhere where people look the same.

The fact that we interpret the cities to be the same, simply because we look the same, can be modified by symbolic interaction. In these terms, the meaning derived from dressing in a certain way in a certain place on the globe is accomplished with the symbols of social interaction, and then finally boils down to an individual style. When considering the process of interaction over time, one must be careful when interpreting meaning in terms of individual style. That is, all design including draping, asymmetry, colouring etc. around the globe sometimes has a very local oriented style, even if the style pertains to the same garment and the same visual design. It is thus reasonable to argue that people, at least geographically, extract different meanings due to different languages and symbols, giving their interpretation of individual style on dressing habits, even if they use the same garment in their outfit. This is the danger when applying meaning to the garment in use, so we go further with the symbol and the individual style in garments. However, looking back in history there have been good opportunities to change the picture and play with this context, like designers often do. For example, it is a well-known fact that Chanel gave women their freedom; years later Yves Saint Laurent brought them power. The initial significance of those typically male clothes such as jackets, shorts, tuxedos, tails etc., came to symbolise freedom and power when applied to the female gender. This is proof of a symbolic transfer from an initial meaning in dressing habits through symbolising and finally ending in an individual style, giving power through dressing in a certain way. Definite examples from the past are Katharine Hepburn, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich. Today we have nearly reached the final point of this type of process, using unisex styles or mixing sexes to create individuality in our clothes.

2. The same garment may have the same meaning for us depending on social interaction and symbol.

When the same garment has the same meaning, it is straightforward in communicating belongings, simply because the garment can be understood exactly the same for both parties. Spencer (1885), who is the founder of 'Social Darwinism', examines power and dressing habits and uses the expression 'survival of the fittest'. He implies that the same garment can have the same meaning for us in social interactions, when using it as a symbol. Later on in Lönnqvist's writing (2008) about power games in apparel, communication with the assistance of garments is very outspoken. It is a matter of how we dress and turn ourselves out with different versions of

clothing - from the warrior's fearsome armour to sexy underwear. Power can be manifested in different ways, and clothing is among the more visible. Clothes can radiate dominance and dignity, but also a sense of ridicule and humiliation, destroying their initial purpose of meaning. But the question is, when is it fashion, if it is a matter of a desire to keep up with the times and express the tastes that are emerging in a changing world? The answer can be found when observing garments over a period of time. If, for instance, ideas change from time to time, which often is the case; we can see a redesign of the garment resulting in symbol-creating fashion. One such example is the Burberry trench coat, which changed from being a military uniform garment used by Humphrey Bogart's secret agent character in the film industry, to becoming unisex fashion and now finally even art. Thus, fashion based on uniforms is frequently created this way. First uniforms are meant to communicate power, which is achievable when the same garment has the same meaning. The same garment is given a symbol through social interaction, which changes over time, and we have fashion according to the definition. Duffle Coats and Cardigans are well known examples in the same line. Finally the garment is connected to actors, artists or other celebrities, and then we have the thought, or, as it means here, the individuality of the garment that, in its extreme, even strive to be art in its design.

3. Different garments may have different meanings for us depending on social interaction and symbol.

When different garments have different meanings in fashion, there is a communication problem. This problem highlights the structure of fashion design as well as pricing in the industry. There is perhaps no industry like fashion, in terms of a certain design and garment's close correlation to price. The price criterion cuts across market criteria in the structural segmentation of the fashion industry. According to Saviolo & Testa, (2002) there are five price categories: couture, ready-to-wear, diffusion, bridge and mass. A designed garment on the upper level in terms of price might differ radically from the design of a garment on the mass production level.

Why is the fashion industry able to hold onto these segments so definitely when it comes to level of fashion and price isolated to certain target groups? Certainly, from the symbolic interactionism in place, it is clear that each degree of fashion from couture to mass production has its own meaning, a symbol that finally creates style that results in a perception about the garment from the customer's perspective. On the basis of the applied theory, the price can best tell us such

a meaning, giving us the language to communicate thoughts about the garment. This, to some extent, explains how the structure of price connection and segmentation are related in the fashion industry. However, the function of the brand, with regard to bringing a meaning to us as customers, is jeopardized by the demand economy itself, and the behaviour of actors in the fashion industry. For instance there is a frequent use of brand extension, allowing a brand to cover more than one price level, as for example Armani, where the same brand is covering several target groups like Giorgio Armani, Armani Collezioni, Emporio Armani, AJ Armani Jeans and A/X Armani Exchange. The same company is using what we call brand stretching, which is hunting into other product fields using the same fashion brand, such as Armani casa, selling furniture instead of clothes. At this time, many other firms and fashion retailers are following this concept of market extension. In this way, large fashion firms have recently been giving a split vision of brands in their hunt for public relations, expected to give hype sales and new target groups. One close example might be H & M, the Swedish clothing company which is known for its fast fashion clothing offer for women, men, teenagers and children. It has around 2,000 stores in 37 different countries and employs around 76,000 people, and frequently creates publicity through brand alliances. This successful collaboration started with Karl Lagerfeld (2004), Stella McCartney (2005), Viktor & Rolf (2006), Madonna (2007), Comme des Garçons (2008), Matthew Williamson, Jimmy Choo (2009), and Lanvin (2010). However, H&M was not the first one in making “frienemies” on the marketplace to extend the brand. In the mid 90’s Debenhams launched “designers at Debenhams” with an English fashion designer Jasper Conran. Marks and Spencer was also an early adopter in lingerie-collaboration with the Australian designer Collette Dinnigan in 2001. Today, anyone with fame: designers, artists, actors, musicians, can build a relationship with a fashion brand, and thereby create a good marketing opportunity for both parties that otherwise would have been extremely costly to achieve. This trend of cooperation among brands across borders radically alters the relationship between producer and consumer. In line with the theory used in this report, the consumer's ability to create meaning in their clothing becomes more intricate when the fashion houses mix brands and fashion degrees. Together with a demand economy of escalating choices and the schizophrenic brand market, there is a risk that consumers become more and more individual in their choice mixing garments creating a hyper personalized fashion. Phau & Lo (2004) found in their study that innovators were found to have a unique self-image as they are more excitable, indulgent,

contemporary, liberal and colourful. And in a recent study, Bjurström & Hedemark (2010), we find that innovators in fashion utilize the most widely used sources of information like friends, unique people, social media etc, to catch up with fashion. Add to this that fashion innovators do not copy the whole outfit on a person, but instead it is the individual details of a style that are interesting. This means that we can spot a collapse of the “total look” in fashion. The “total look” was the anchor connected to certain brands, with a solid and stable price structure giving us the picture of fashion degrees, quality, etc. This collective selection has now come to be in line with an individual style, in knowing where to find fashion.

4. Different garments may have the same meaning for us depending on social interaction and symbol.

When different garments have the same meaning, department stores and “shops-in-shop” are frequently used together with branding to introduce different garments with the same meaning or target groups on the market. To start with the situation which enables department stores to be used, for example, this has been studied by Miller (1981) in detail, focusing on Le Bon Marché in Paris. This refers to a large fashion department store and its place in fashion history, showing us symbolic interactionism in practice. In short, the common social image of the Le Bon Marché from 1852 has created a sense of change in clothing, interior and exterior, to create a lifestyle and meeting place for fashion and consumption. Consequently, the community spirit of fashion in individual choice and lifestyle appears to be very outspoken in such a fashion house, compared to the mass-produced garments on the market.

The essence of Le Bon Marché department store is the symbolic interaction and the exposure of meaning to collective interaction. We can spot fashion shows, fashion weeks and happenings taking place in almost every department store nowadays. For some of us, this process has given meaning to fashion, resulting from the ongoing social interaction that takes place in such commercialisation. It is also likely that the more consumers who are involved in fashion interactions with stores when different garments have the same meaning, the more consumers will arrive at what is known as personal styling. From this point of view, the department store has a central role in the process of collective fashion turned into personal styling, when we participate in department store communication. That is the role of the department store: to bring different brands into the same meaning, when we have such “shops-in-shop” situations. At the beginning,

department stores played an important role as a gathering place for middle class women, where they could move about without a male relative as a "chaperone". Today it is still an important aspect, as the meaning of such a strategy is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others within the department store domain.

Findings

Findings from this theoretical approach can be divided into four sections, which call for further exploration of the movement from collective selection towards individual style in fashion. They all have different empirical sources, and naturally provide different answers to the initial question in this paper.

The first finding is derived from a design that was initially meant to be the collective male dressing norm, which was turned into a female style, providing personality and individuality to strong individual women.

The second finding is derived from certain collective garments, primarily from the army, which began as a united design that fashion designers turned into individual garments. The third finding concerned the collapse of the "total look" based on brands. Fashion is sought in individual pieces of an outfit and not on the whole look, thereby supplanting the collective look with individual style.

The last finding referred to the role of department stores since 1852. The collective marketplace that the department stores represent by using shops-in-shop, are in fact a place that protects the consumer's individuality by creating shopping and a lifestyle inside the store where customers are free to develop their own individuality and style.

From those four findings we now can line up the following conclusion.

Managerial results

The initial question was "why fashion appears in terms of collective selection in a movement towards individual style in our dressing habits". As it has been going on at least since 1852, we can consider that this is not a recent phenomenon in fashion. However, designers have changed the role of collective fashion norms over time by giving garments a style that follows fashion trends. Then, once those garments are turned into individual style, as customers seek more detail in garments, then we have the collapse of the "total look" and thus achieve hyper individuality.

With this background it is reasonable to conclude that this will have a strong impact on how consumers will perceive brands in the future.

Limitations

The study may be limited by the plain use of fashion clothing in terms of symbolic interactionism in the society. The study illuminates the existence of such interactions by the use of secondary data and cases to back up the logic in the used theory. Further on, there is no focus on the economic value of fashion changes or the frequency of purchasing certain garments in terms of personality or status consumption. Finally, there is no focus on brands, which certainly has an importance for this field of research. However, the outcome of the study is showing changes in the consumer's view of fashion, which might to some extent jeopardise the fundamental branding strategies in this trade.

Further research

For further research, these findings and the underlying logic can very well be studied from the perspective of innovator in fashion like Goldsmith (1991) and Goldsmith (1999) or to study consumer's involvement in fashion like O'Cass (2004). There are also empirical investigations of conceptual models of fashion such as the "fashion transformation process model", Cholachatpinyo, A., Padgett, I., Crocker, M., Fletcher, B. (2002). In this field there is of course a frequently a focus specific on fashion designers and suppliers always search for a new sense of fashion from innovators, which is known as "cool hunting" by O'Brien (1999). Further on there are qualitative contributions to the understanding the role of fashion and fashion meanings. Recently the study of certain industries and trades in the fashion domain where the focus is on the beauty industry and what we do to our individual style by Jones (2010) is such an example. Furthermore, it is the variety of method and critical dialog on fashion and to explore new ways to think about scholarship regarding it, which is the contribution for the moment.

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