Fashion Through Time

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This paper examines, with the use of in depth interviews, how consumers view fashion in relation to time. Our main findings reveal that consumers reconstruct time in general and their lives' timeline in particular, through the reading of fashion. Moreover, they view fashion as an historical record. The study demonstrates consumers' perception of the relationship between time, change and fashion, through their everyday understanding of time, temporality and change, and explores the implications for fashion designers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is a growing sense of respectability for fashion as a topic of study, which has resulted from the publication of a variety of ground-breaking texts that have aimed to place the study of fashion alongside other phenomena of popular culture such as theater, journalism, advertising, and film (Breward 2003). Moreover, it has been supported that fashion theorizing illustrates and contributes largely to theories of consumption (Rassuli and Hollander 1986).

Subscribing therefore to the notion that fashion “now occupies the centre ground in popular understandings of modern culture...and defines the tenor of urban life like no other visual medium” (Breward 2003), we attempt to examine how consumers read fashion in relation to time.

Furthermore, and since the interpretation of the past is almost exclusively done by historians and art historians, the consumers’ interpretations of the past, present, and future in relation to fashion and how this reflects on their views of the existence and consumption of fashion through time will be explored here for the first time. In addition, and since studies in fashion have not focused on the life of fashion products once they have left the sphere of production and consumption (Breward 2003), we attempt to shed light into what consumers do with fashion and its imagery once it has left these realms.

TIME AND FASHION

According to Kroeber (1952), fashion expresses style and culture and has to be studied throughout time and space. For Simmel (1997) “fashion time” is understood through the spatial and time dimension of fashion. He maintains that fashion does not happen at a fixed point in time or space. And that is why, now more than ever, the meaning of fashion has a strong, even dominant sense of time’s passage (Carter 2003).

Time can be viewed as not just the arithmetical accumulation of moments, but as the medium in which human history unfolds: time is a socio-cultural concept which expresses a person’s situation. “Time is itself expressed or reflected in dress: traditional, anti-fashion adornment is a model of time as continuity (the maintenance of the status quo) and fashion is a model of time as change” (Polhemus and Procter 1978, p.13).

Thus, the fashion process is about the creation of oppositions through time: that which is perceived as current and that which is perceived as past” (Niesen 2003). As Lipovetsky (1994) argues, fashion is socially reproductive and helps us in being flexible and responsive to change in a fast changing world. “Fashion socializes human beings to change and prepares them for perceptual recycling”. While, on the other hand, fashion provides the means and milieu for resistance and opposition to that same process (Evans 2003). Hence, one of the key elements of fashion is the concept of change over time (Welters and Lillevirthus 2007).

THE STUDY

In order to explore how consumers read fashion in relation to time, in-depth interviewing has been selected as our data collection method, since it is concerned with how participants actively create meaning (Silverman, 2001, Jones 2004). We conducted eleven in-depth interviews in the U.K. with female participants of the working and middle class within the age range of twenty to fifty years old, as “often fashion has a feminine connotation and is linked to young women” (Welters and Lillevirthus 2007, p.x). Even though we are not denying the importance of the male perspective, we chose to concentrate on female participants because female fashion incorporates novelty and change throughout time, while male styles remain relatively static (Kawamura 2005). In an attempt to use stimuli that matched our participants’ spatial, historical and cultural background, fifteen fashion pictures were selected based on their representation of different periods of time in the U.K. The concepts emerged were analyzed using the interpretive thematic analysis technique (Spiggle 1994).

FINDINGS

Initial findings of the data analysis revealed the following main themes:

Theme 1: Consumers reconstruct time in general and their lives’ timeline in particular, through the reading of fashion.

Despite the other elements present in the pictures such as furniture, fashion seemed to be the most prominent element that the informants noticed and through its interpretation reconstructed a sense of time and timeline in their minds. More specifically, our findings refer us to Bergson’s theory of time (1999), in which he proposes a distinction between clock time and lived time. According to Bergson (1999), public clock time is a counterfeit representation of lived experience produced by the conversion of temporal experiences into discrete and measurable instantaneous moments. In contrast, real lived time is linked with our consciousness and refers to the continuous progress of the past that spills into the future and grows as it advances, leaving its mark on all things.

Thus, and in relation to our participants’ responses, we observe that the fashion picture captures one moment in time; that is the clock time in which the picture was taken. The reader then by looking and thinking about this picture tries to reconstruct the lived experience associated with that moment in time. In other words, participants engage themselves in the re-construction of the entire lifeworlds of the people featured in the picture based on a snapshot of these people’s lives that was captured in the picture long time ago.

It was also observed that participants, through the reading of fashion pictures, made references to their own personal and past experiences, and as a result used the stimulus to reconstruct their own lives’ timeline, in addition to those of the people featured in the pictures. Hence, the
pictures gave them a starting point to talk about their own pictures that came to their mind, and how these snapshots of clock time have captured so many of their memories; that is of their actual lived time.

Theme II: Consumers view fashion as an historical record.

Based on our respondents, the authenticity of a time period is reflected in fashion. Fashion best incorporates the most prominent historical indications of its time period, such as lifestyle, customs, ideas and values. Moreover, associations regarding the historical events and social changes seemed to be recovered through reading into the fashion in the stimuli. Thus consumers view fashion as a valuable data source of history in general and of the history of consumption in particular.

IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, this study explores fashion through time, as time seems to be best able of capturing the changing nature of fashion (Breward, 2003). We therefore, attempt to contribute to a deeper understanding of the way people read fashion pictures, by not only accounting for consumers’ influences based on their lifestyles, reference systems and social forms, but mainly through their everyday understanding of time, temporality and change.

Lastly, and with regards to practical implications, where Evan’s (2003) study on fashion designers reveals that their inspiration and expression of present concerns in their creations comes from images of the past, it is been proposed that the designer who is able to read consumers’ time associations better will create better associations through their designs and hence create a more successful mix.

REFERENCES