Fashion Market Encounters: Towards a Theory of Institutionalized Seduction

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Grounded on the dialectical interplay of Italian fashion context, we develop an institutionalized concept of seduction that aims at overcoming existing gaps in consumer research literature. We analyze data of consumers and professionals focusing on the seduction process. We draw attention to the implications of theorizing seduction in marketing contexts.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1013807/volumes/v10e/E-10

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Exploring Consumers’ and Marketers’ Navigation of Fashion Systems
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Paper #1: Fashion Market Encounters: Towards a Theory of Institutionalized Seduction
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Paper #4: Fashion Consumption by Plus-Sized Consumers: A Socio-Material Perspective
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Baudrillard (1979) has argued that institutionalized fashion systems constitute one of the most central aspects of contemporary consumer culture. To date, consumer researchers have tended to study fashion as a means to understanding conceptual phenomena such as groups seeking cultural and/or institutional transformation (McCracken 2008; Sandicki and Ger 2009; Scarabato and Fischer 2013), or the pursuit of individual identity projects (e.g. Gilles and Nairn 2011; Parmentier and Fischer 2011; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Given the importance of fashion systems to consumer culture, a deeper understanding of how marketers and consumer navigate and shape fashion systems per se is warranted.

The goal of this session is therefore to advance our understanding of diverse aspects of fashion systems as they have emerged over time and in distinctive contexts. Toward this goal, we bring together a group of presentations that illuminates various institutional actors, practices, and processes of fashion systems. Askegaard, Atik, and Borghini examine interactions between producers and consumers to explain seduction in fashion from an institutional perspective. Dolbec and Fischer focus on the practices of consumers who interact in the online fashion world and identify unintended market level consequences of these practices. Rinallo and Pinchera investigate processes that led to the emergence of rival fashion systems in Italy through processes of commercial mythmaking. Finally, Scaraboto draws on a socio-material perspective to investigate the embodied consumption practices of a specific segment – plus sized consumers – as these practices have been shaped by the assemblage comprised of narrative and material elements of fashion systems. Individually, each paper extends a theoretical conversation of interest to consumer researchers: Askegaard, Atik, and Borghini elevate our understanding of the connections between seduction and consumption; Dolbec and Fischer advance discussions of marketplace dynamics; Rinallo and Pinchera shed new light on the role of commercial mythmaking in market systems; and Scaraboto contributes to the small but growing literature on materiality and consumption. Collectively, these papers offer fresh insights on how fashion systems evolve and the roles that consumers and marketers play in the shaping and reshaping of institutional norms and structures.

In all cases, the authors have collected data, developed analyses of their datasets, and crafted preliminary manuscripts to report their findings. This session is aimed at provoking lively discussion among participants and the audience that will contribute to the refinement and further development of the papers included here, and of other scholarly research on the topic. With that in mind, presentations will be kept at 15 minutes each, leaving enough time for discussion and questions from the audience. The papers draw on a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches that should appeal to a broad audience interested both in fashion consumption and, more generally, in how consumption is shaped by and shapes the institutional contexts in which it is situated.

Fashion Market Encounters: Towards a Theory of Institutionalized Seduction

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Fashion as an institutional system and a market process is a (if not the) central part of contemporary consumer culture (Baudrillard 1970). Fashion translates symbolic meanings into consumable signs that consumers can adopt through a variety of rituals (McCracken 1986), however, in doing so they are necessarily altering and to a certain degree personalizing the meanings of the fashion item (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Murray 2002). Clothing in particular represents the most relevant accessory of the personalized body as it most manifestly materializes the consumer’s identity for both oneself and for others – or, indeed, one of the individual’s multiple identities or “multiple self-identifications” (Goffman 1961). Although there are limits to the linguistic metaphor (Campbell 1996), clothes are visual texts that, like other images such as advertising and photographs, can build bridges and create a powerful and effective non-verbal language, able to communicate to the self and to others (Barnard 2002; McCracken 1986). Consumer research has contributed significantly to the understanding of the fashion consumer as an active and individualized agent, exploring and exploiting marketplace resources for personalized life projects. If the agentic consumer has been in the forefront of the consumer research on fashion, so far less attention has been paid to the dynamic interplay between the different agents in the fashion market.

Peñaloza (2001) was among the first to describe marketer and consumer interaction in a cultural process of consumption and production. Her context of the Western rodeo show, perhaps surprisingly, bears a lot of similarities to the world of fashion in the ways in which this cultural production unfolds. First of all, consumers experience this market offering as a mixture of entertainment, education, and business. Secondly, she observes, consumers’ prior familiarity with the context is decisive for the experience. Furthermore, in the cultural production process, consumers interact with other agents representing both marketer and consumer groupings. The resulting process is one of consumption as cultural production through a variety of marketer-consumer interactions; parallel to what is the case within the fashion industry. Kozinets, et al. (2004) add a significant dimension to our understanding of producer-consumer relationships through their discussion of ludic agency. Their observation that consumer-marketer relations are complex and dialectical, and consist of
moves and countermoves between market agents is insightful also for the functioning of the fashion system. Rather than “diabolical”, they qualify the marketer-consumer relationship in the ludic context of the ESPN zone as dialectical. More important, they draw on inspiration from Deighton and Grayson’s (1995) analysis of the constellation of playful consumption and marketer seduction to suggest an even more complex relationship between these concepts and their role in marketer-consumer power structures, concluding that in order to understand the scope and character of consumer agency, we must assert that play and playful consumption is “simultaneously seductive and subversive” (Kozinets et al. 2004, 660). This observation, we would argue, is equally valid for fashion consumption.

Seduction has been very rarely used in a consumer research context. Whereas the concept is more applied in the context of psychoanalysis, the seductive elements of marketing and consumption tend to be downplayed if referred to at all. Seduction is absent from major works in the social sciences, except Baudrillard’s (1979) rereading of Kierkegaard’s philosophical and aesthetic discussion of seduction and Lipovetsky’s (1987) treatise on fashion and modernity. None of these can be said to represent any firm theorization of seduction and none of them include any empirical validation. Beyond the work of Deighton and Grayson (1995), no single work has made any attempt to theorize or empirically demonstrate seduction in marketing and consumer research literature. Deighton and Grayson underline the social construction of seduction and set out to explore the paradox of seduction, that “it induces consumers to enjoy things they did not intend to enjoy” (1995, 660). Their otherwise meticulous analysis of the relations between seduction and marketing suffers from a few weaknesses when seduction is considered at an institutional level. First and foremost, their model asserts that social systems emerge from individual transactions, whereas the opposite from a sociological perspective is equally true. Secondly, their restriction of seduction to processes where the new social consensus is narrow-based prevents the model from saying much about seduction in connection with broad social institutions. In other words, while a fashion may be contestable, fashion in broader terms is hardly contestable – and absolutely difficult to escape due to the contemporary marketplace thriving on differentiation (Arnould 2007; Heath and Potter 2005), where also anti-fashions are highly fashionable.

Our analysis tries to remedy this weakness by introducing an institutionalized concept of seduction. The fashion world, while not having exclusivity to institutionalized processes of fashion within marketing, is an obvious context for an attempt to develop a more institutionalized theory of fashion. As far as data gathering is concerned, the research underpinning this article consists of 36 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted by two of the three authors with middle class professionals both on the producer and the consumer side. Sixteen employed women represent fashion consumers, and six fashion designers, and fourteen other fashion professionals representing the industry were interviewed in total. The data were collected in a major European city, by most considered one of the absolute capitals of the global fashion industry.

We analyze the data with focus on various dimensions of the seduction process in an institutional perspective, drawing mainly on the conceptual apparatuses of Baudrillard (1979) and Lipovetsky (1987). We discuss our findings first and foremost in relation to the work of Deighton and Grayson (1995) in order to expand their analysis and provide building blocks for an institutional theory of seduction in marketing and consumer research. We conclude by drawing attention to the broader consequences of theorizing seduction in a marketing context.

**Same Same, But Different: How the Imperfect Reproduction of Institutional Practices by Inter-Connected Consumers Changes the Online Fashion Market.**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

This presentation contributes to a growing body of knowledge on the creation, maintenance and disruption of markets by explaining how the imperfect reproduction of existing institutional practices by consumers leads to the emergence and reinforcement of new institutional practices and boundaries, and parallel taste regimes. Previous research has broadly looked at (1) how markets are being transformed under the actions of marketers (e.g., Giesler 2012; Humphreys 2010) and (2) how dissatisfied consumers actively work to influence market dynamics (e.g., Giesler 2008; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). In our context, consumers are not actively seeking to change the market. Rather, unintentional changes are brought about by their everyday actions when pursuing and sharing their passion with other consumers. Although consumers’ value-creating practices have been the object of previous inquiries (e.g., Ansari and Philips 2010; Schau et al. 2009), little is known on the effects of those practices on markets.

The context of this study is the online fashion world. We used a multi-method qualitative approach. Our data set is composed of field notes and observations following a 22-month long ethnography of an outfit sharing website, lookbook.nu; interviews with 17 fashion bloggers, designers, buyers, and participants in lookbook.nu; journal articles from major fashion magazines and websites, leading world journals; interviews with industry actors; and data gathered from leading online fashion forums and fashion bloggers.

Institutions are continuously reproduced by institutional actors who, following established but tacit rules and norms, and sharing common cognitive and cultural beliefs, carry out taken-for-granted institutionalized practices. Our use of institutional theory is consistent with structuration theory, where “structures shape people’s practices, but [...] people’s practices [...] constitute and reproduce structures” (Sewell 1992: 4). We view fields as “co-evolutionary systems,” where the practices of actors influence the dynamics of the field (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010). A change in the institutional practices can, then, disrupt an institution and instigate a reworking of existing relations between actors, meanings and practices (Zilber 2002), and institutional practices and boundaries (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010).

This research uses as a starting point recent socio-technological changes, such as the wider availability of high speed Internet and high end photo cameras, the rise of blogs and forums as spaces of discussion, and the diffusion of the major features associated with social news websites, which provide a context facilitating institutional changes. These socio-technological advances create a schism between older and newer options available to consumers who want to talk about and get informed on the latest fashion trends, which opens up a space for “imaginative and/or deliberative response” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and the emergence of new institutional actors (Ansari and Philips 2010). We argue that these new social sites allow consumers to gather together and exchange on their fashion practices; to adopt, interpret, and imperfectly mimic existing institutional practices; and to gain influence by doing so. These new entrants have the potential to instigate institutional changes (Zilber 2002).

Online, consumers consciously or unconsciously mimic existing institutional practices previously exhibited by other actors in the field. Participating on websites such as lookbook.nu and polyvore.com, they do photo shoots and exchange pictures of their outfits, and
urate looks by selecting certain brands and products. On their blogs, they advertise their favorite brands and designers by writing about them, and critique fashion shows and collections. In street photography blogs, they select upcoming trends and document them. In other words, they emulate the work of, respectively, fashion stylists and fashion photographers; marketers, designers and retailers; and fashion editors. Consumers, though, do not possess the full array of human and nonhuman resources necessary for the perfect interpretation and reproduction of existing institutional practices. Most of these participants have little to no experience in the field of fashion. Their lack of experience and knowledge in fashion contribute to new interpretations, and hence modification, of existing practices (Ziber 2002). Moreover, consumers also lack the appropriate material resources, such as the financial resources to procure the brands advertised by fashion magazines, or the tools, such as high end cameras and lighting equipment, required to carry out certain practices; this further initiates changes in the way practices are carried out (e.g., Shove and Pantzar 2005).

These modified practices are enacted en masse on a multitude of Internet websites, by tens of thousands of interconnected consumers. The human and nonhuman resources that consumers share and their interactions online allow for the diffusion of the modified practices and associated objects and meanings. Through this, new institutional boundaries, which delineate new roles for this category of actors, such as fashion bloggers, street photographers, and fashion forum participants, emerge. The socially constructed values, beliefs, and material practices of this new class of actors, that is, the institutional logics structuring this subfield (Thornton and Ocasio 2008), are different than the ones that exist within the broader field of fashion. Rather than being dominated by the logics of art and commerce (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), this subfield also operates under the logic of accessibility, favoring a fashion genre that is wearable and affordable. Ultimately, this leads to the development of new ways to orchestrate objects, doings and meanings, i.e. practices, that ultimately converge in a new, parallel taste regime, or a way to orchestrate “the aesthetics of practice” (Arsel and Bean 2012). As taste is itself a boundary mechanism, this new regime further solidifies the new institutional boundaries.

Our research offers new insights in how market changes by identifying interconnected and passionate consumers as unintentional agents of change who, by wanting to carry out existing institutional practices, end up affecting the institutional dynamics of the market of fashion. We also highlight the role of material changes and materiality in reproducing or disrupting institutions. Finally, we show how new taste regimes emerge.

National Mythmaking, Foreign and Domestic: A Historical Analysis of the Birth of Italian Fashion

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This presentation contributes to the session’s goal of contextualizing fashion by looking at the historical development of Italian fashion in the 1950s-1970s period. Specifically, we examine commercial mythmaking activities centered upon the first Italian fashion shows, which were instrumental to the development of distinctly Italian fashion collections which would not take inspiration from French style. Our theoretical point of departure consists in work that has examined how marketers shape the past for competitive purposes inside a nation. Peñaloza’s (2000; 2001) twin analyses of a Western stock show and rodeo conclude that collective events (such as the fashion shows we examine) might serve as collective platforms for an ongoing collective renegotiation of the past in ways that favor the national industry. Thompson and Tian’s (2008) analysis of two US Southern magazines propose that marketers can be conceived as commercial mythmakers that compete for identity value through the ideological shaping of popular memories and counter-memories about the nation’s past. Our goal is to extend such stream of research by investigating the cultural and political processes inherent in commercial mythmaking at the international level, when local historical resources are employed to legitimize the national industry vis-à-vis foreign competition.

Employing theories on nations as imagined communities (Anderson 1992) and nation building as assimilation projects (Geller 1983), and drawing on recent directions in the sociology of collective memory and commemoration (Conway 2010), in this presentation we employ historical research methods to reconstruct the origin and initial development of Italian fashion. Italy, now a world leader in fashion, emerged in the international scene only after WWII, thanks to the activities of Giovan Battista Giorgini, who organized the first Italian fashion weeks in Florence. Before, Paris was the only center from which all fashions were emanated and the occasional attempts to create alternative epicenters (notably, in the US, during WWII and the German occupation of France) had been short-lived. Notably, Italian fashion was symbolically and materially built on local historical resources and in direct opposition to French fashion. The emergence of Italian fashion is therefore an appropriate empirical context to shed light on the processes involved in commercial mythmaking aiming at building nation brands.

Our research team consists of a consumer culture theorist and a business historian. Building on previous accounts of Italian fashion history, we examined data from the Giorgini Archive of Italian fashion, which contains press clippings (mostly from US and Italian newspapers and magazines), promotional material, letters and pictures about fashion collections, which enabled us to follow the emergence of Italy as a fashion country. Before the 1950s, Italian fashion did not exist. Since the XVIII century, tailors and dressmakers in Turin, Rome, Milan, Naples and elsewhere had been completely dependent on Paris as Italian consumers (aristocracy and the bourgeoisie) demanded to be dressed à la mode de Paris; despite such dependence, French collection would be adapted to local taste since, as sharply noted by a journalist (Bernasconi 1950), some of its extremely decorated details would be considered superfluous in Rome and slightly ridiculous in Milan.

Giorgini, a resident buyer of handcraft leather goods for US department stores, after repeated attempts, convinced 13 Italian dressmakers to present in Florence, in front of a selection of North American buyers and journalists, fashion collections different from those showcased in Paris. The first Italian fashion shows took place in 1951 and only attracted eight buyers and a few journalists, but enjoyed enormous media visibility, paving the way for increased success and attendance from the years that followed. The rules of the game set by Giorgini for participating fashion producers were strict. Firstly, Italian collections could not be inspired by French fashion; additionally, Giorgini suggested presenting “boutique” clothes designed for leisure, sport, and informal occasions, targeting American women. Secondly, promotional activities would leverage on local heritage and appealed to one of the institutional logics of fashion, that of art (Scaraboto and Fischer forthcoming), to create a sense of continuity with the past: “Italian collections translate in lines, cuts, and portability the Renaissance artistic tradition”, 1951’s press notes reported. Taking place in historical palaces, fashion shows and special events would convey the (historically inaccurate) idea of a direct continuity with one era, the Renaissance, which provided a powerful and resonant selling proposition for Italian fashion.
Despite its immediate success, the history of Florentine fashion shows was plagued by strife among fashion houses, which were mostly located in Rome and Milan. Already in 1953, eight Roman “secessionists” provocatively presented their collections in Rome before the Florence shows. Over the years, uncoordinated calendars and domestic rivalry between Roman and Florentine fashion shows resulted in reduced international attendance, until the moment when political interventions forced the two fashion events to merge and coordinate their schedules. Eventually, with the advent of prêt-à-porter, history repeated itself when in 1974 some leading fashion houses left Florence and created a separated event in Milan, which quickly became the new Italian fashion city.

By documenting the emergence of Italy as a fashion country and rivalry among Italian cities to become the country’s fashion capital, our study shows that before national mythmaking can occur, local marketers must be mobilized towards common marketing goals such as projecting internationally a coherent image and supporting national-level marketing events that can act as platforms for export promotion. Local place branding efforts and the sovereignty of market leaders has therefore to be opposed at the level of ideology, public discourse and marketplace practices. Italy, with its many secessions and “civil wars”, show that such processes are often unstable: marketers can and do resist attempts to “unify the country”.

**Fashion Consumption by Plus-Sized Consumers: A Socio-Material Perspective**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Research on fashion consumption has most often considered how consumers attempt to express themselves through their fashion choices (Murray 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997). With few exceptions (e.g. Fornäs, Fredriksson, and Johannisson 2011), little attention has been paid by consumer researchers to the materiality of clothes and of the bodies that wear them. Yet, the consumption of fashion cannot be decoupled from its material aspect: the buttons, the belts, the zippers, the seams and the fabric that may come together with a given body to bind at the waist, hang baggily over the buttocks, or drape elegantly from the shoulders. While the consumption of fashion is a socio-material experience for all consumers, it may be more acutely so for those whose bodies are regarded as deviant from the norms that inform the offerings of mainstream marketers. So-called plus-sized consumers are indisputably within this category (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). In contrast to the skinny body of fashion models and ideal fashion consumers, the fat body has been consistently considered abject, and inappropriate for fashion (LeBesco 2005). Indeed, most evidence points toward a persistent and pervasive prejudice against fat, in the fashion field and beyond (Gesser-Edelberg and Endevelt 2011).

Joining the recent material turn in social sciences (e.g. Canniford and Shankar forthcoming; Orlikowski 2009; Schatzki 2010), this study adopts DeLanda’s (2006) assemblage theory to investigate how both the expressive and the material aspects of fashion matter to the consumption practices of consumers who do not fit the ideals of fashion marketers. DeLanda’s perspective puts into focus the following research questions: How do the fashion assemblages plus-sized consumers are enrolled in become destabilized? How do plus-sized consumers attempt to stabilize these fashion assemblages? Since DeLanda’s perspective highlights that assemblages intersect with one another and can be nested within one another, particular attention is paid to how dynamics within other assemblages may serve either to stabilize or destabilize a given plus-size fashion assemblage. These research questions are addressed through a netnography (Kozinets 2010) of Fatshionistas, plus-sized consumers who blog about their fashion consumption experiences. Data on the online interactions of bloggers and their audiences was collected through observing, reading, and archiving selected posts and comments over the course of three years of fieldwork. Selected blogs were thoroughly read and all relevant content posted on these blogs was collected, coded, and interpreted.

Findings suggest that a plus-size fashion assemblage is continually threatened by a range of capacities exerted by the consumer and by other components of the assemblage. One, for example, is material “wear-out.” Since it is difficult to find clothes that fit, the consumer tends to wear and wash them often, leading to break down of fabrics and stitching. Moreover, when seams or stitches are stretched tightly over the body, they are more strained and apt to pop, rip, or tear; such outcomes are doubly destabilizing, in that they render the garment useless and expressly humiliating. The plus-sized consumers own bodily changes too can destabilize fashion assemblages: either weight loss or weight gain can mean that garments no longer fit. Destabilization is further caused by expressive “wear-off.” Clothes that once were expressive of the consumer’s desired look can become outdated as colors or styles evolve. Even without styles changing, an outfit or garment can be expressly downgraded in the consumer’s own eyes through repeated wearing (outfit repetition is usually shunned at in fashion contexts) and also when the reactions of others lead plus-sized consumers to regard their own clothes as less stylish or attractive than they initially though them to be. At the intersection with other assemblages, a plus-size fashion assemblage is further destabilized by material “lock-out,” i.e. limited or erratic offerings from marketers, which means that garments that are worn out materially or expressively cannot be readily replaced.

To stabilize fashion assemblages, plus-sized consumers can engage in practices that rely on new material and/or expressive elements. One option is to deliberately engage with alternative assemblages, for example sewing clothes that fit the plus-sized body, or foregoing the search for appropriate options from established mainstream fashion marketers. This option, however, means engaging in an alternative fashion system, not necessarily one with which the consumer most desires to be integrated. Another option is for consumers to attempt to lose weight so as to fit into a greater range of available clothing options. This is eschewed by the Fatshionistas we studied, but advocated by other expressive elements within the mainstream market assemblage. A third practice is to introduce new expressive elements (e.g. posting photos of carefully produced plus-size fashion outfits) into intersecting assemblages so as to encourage mainstream marketers to create a wider range of offerings that would make the plus-size fashion assemblage stable (see Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Plus-sized consumers may also work to destabilize intersecting assemblages. By trying on and wearing clothes that were not “meant for them,” for example, they force mainstream fashion assemblages to change. These insights have implications for understanding fashion consumption and other consumption contexts where the materiality of bodies and of products is of paramount importance.