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FASHION THEORY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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For centuries the phenomena of fashion behavior have been the varied subject of social analysts, cultural historians, moral critics, academic theorists, and business entrepreneurs. Spanning decades and centuries of changing fashions, literally thousands of commentaries focusing on the vagaries and nuances of fashion behavior have been published. Taken collectively, this major body of analytical commentary and anecdotal opinion describes fashion as a complex, diffuse, often perplexing, highly visible characteristic of civilizations. More importantly, however, the core of this literature may be integrated into a basic structure of interrelated concepts of fashion behavior. These concepts comprise the "state of the art" in the contemporary development of fashion theory.

Particularly in the most recent decades, consumer investigators from a variety of academic disciplines have taken an increasing interest in describing the unique patterns of consumer fashion behavior. In terms of comprehensive theory development, these efforts have been relatively modest. With respect to the development of principles of consumer fashion behavior, the product has been more substantial. However, the contemporary status of fashion theory development is largely an amorphous network of creative ideas, rather than a structured and interrelated set of concepts, constructs, and principles.

The purpose of this paper is to construct an integrated conceptual framework for a contemporary theory of consumer fashion behavior. The central objective of this development is to define basic constructs and structured concepts which delineate a contemporary theory of fashion. Three conceptual frameworks form the basis of this development:

1. The Generalized Concept of Fashion. Fashion may be defined as a broadly based behavioral phenomenon evidenced in a variety of material and non-material contexts. A generalized definition of fashion is constructed to reflect the generalized concept of fashion represented in a wider realm of non-material as well as consumer behavioral phenomena.
2. Fashion: An Object and a Process. "Fashion" may be conceptualized both as an object and as a behavioral process. The critical characteristics of a fashion, both as an object and a process, are defined.
3. The Mechanisms of the Fashion Process. The fashion process may be mechanistically characterized as a process of social influence and diffusion. The conceptual basis of the fashion process mechanism is developed based on perspectives from the classical and contemporary literature.

The emphasis of this conceptual framework is on concept definition and structuring. An integrative and comprehensive theory of consumer fashion behavior, based in part on concepts contained in this paper, has been constructed by King and Sproles (forthcoming).

THE GENERALIZED CONCEPT OF FASHION

Fashion: Some Definitional Perspectives

The concept of fashion may be illustrated by quoting a variety of definitions offered in the past half century:

1. Psychologist Ross quoted by psychologist Hurlock (1929) defined fashion as "...a series of recurring changes in the choices of a group of people, which, though they may be accompanied by utility, are not determined by it."
2. Economist and marketing professor Nystrom (1928) suggests "Fashion is nothing more or less than the prevailing style at any given time."
3. Retailer Daniels (1951) states "Fashion is a conception of what is currently appropriate."
4. Sociologists Lang and Lang (1961) treat fashion as "...an elementary form of collective behavior, whose compelling power lies in the implicit judgment of an anonymous multitude."
5. Economist Robinson offers fashion definitions: "...Fashion, defined in its most general sense, is the pursuit of novelty for its own sake." (Robinson, 1958) Fashion is "...change in the design of things for decorative purposes." (Robinson, 1961)
6. Marketing professor King (1964) writes: "Fashion adoption is a process of social contagion by which a new style or product is adopted by the consumer after commercial introduction by the designer or manufacturer."

7. Home economist Horn (1968) defines fashion as "...a manifestation of collective behavior, and as such represents the popular, accepted, prevailing style at any given time.

8. Websters Unabridged Dictionary offers fashion as "The make or form of anything; style, shape, appearance, or mode of structure; also, peculiar shape or style."

Substantively, these definitions illustrate versatile and contrasting conceptualizations of the fashion phenomenon. Each definition is unique, adding specific dimensions which are not apparent in other definitions. The central similarity of these definitions, which is more than inferentially apparent, is that fashion may be theoretically conceptualized as a generalized behavioral phenomenon. Therefore, the fashion concept may be theoretically refined by a refocusing on this generalized nature of fashion.

Fashion: A Re-Definition of the Generalized Behavioral Concept

Describing fashion as a generalized behavioral concept represents a basic step to the development of a comprehensive and contemporary theory of fashion. In the broadest sense, elements of what is termed "fashion behavior" are represented in a general milieu of material and non-material phenomena. Classically but in a narrow sense, fashion historically has referred specifically to fashions in clothing, dress, and personal adornment. However, elements of "fashion" are an influence to major consumer purchase decisions in products such as automobiles, furniture, home furnishings, housing architectural design, foods and nutritional selections. Even in a wide range of non-material contexts, such as the dissemination and acceptance of ideological movements, educational practices, scientific pursuits, and emerging lifestyles, the forces of fashion may be directly influential to the acceptance process. Though the contexts in which fashion operates may be radically different, the principles upon which acceptance is based may contain a consistent similarity.

As a generalized behavioral concept, the fashion phenomenon may be broadly defined:

A fashion is a culturally endorsed form of expression, in a particular material or non-material phenomenon, which is discernible at any given time and changes over time within a social system or group of associated individuals (King and Sproles, forthcoming).

Deductively, the generalized definition may be modified to define any specific fashion phenomenon. For example, in the classic arena of clothing fashion, application of the generalized definition may be derived:

A clothing fashion is a culturally endorsed style of aesthetic expression in dress and adornment, which is discernible at any given time and changes over time within a social system of group of associated individuals.

The generalized concept of fashion may have significant interest to social and cultural scientists, as well as to consumer behaviorists. For the remainder of this paper, however, the primary emphasis will be on fashion as a generalized consumer behavioral phenomenon. This development is derived largely from clothing fashion theory, for it is here that research and concept development has been most active. Nonetheless, the conceptual framework is basic, and can be applied to generalized consumer fashion contexts with limited conceptual adaptation.

FASHION: AN OBJECT AND A PROCESS

An evaluation of the generalized concept of fashion suggests that fashion may be conceptualized on two separate dimensions, the fashion object and the fashion process. These dimensions have separate and distinct connotations:

1. The fashion object, in consumer behavior theory, may be a specific stylistic product, and in some cases a technological/product functional innovation or a consumer service. As a non-material "social" product, the object might be any behavioral practice or ideological philosophy.
2. The fashion process is a mechanism of stages by which a potential fashion object moves from its creation to public presentation and public acceptance. In the fashion process, a potential fashion object is introduced to the members of a social system, it is adopted by certain leading individuals frequently referred to as innovators, and is ultimately diffused to other social system members to a certain level of acceptance. The fashion process represents a dynamic mechanism by which the object ultimately emerges as an accepted or rejected fashion.

As both an object and a process, fashions have unique characteristics which differentiate them from other behavioral phenomena. A summary of some of the critical characteristics and elements of fashion will illustrate how fashion phenomena may be differentiated as a specific behavioral phenomenon.

Characteristics of the Fashion Object

The fashion object, particularly in physical product objects, can have a number of unique characteristics:

1. The fashion object must be a non-permanent object which is subject to change, obsolescence, and eventual replacement by "newer" objects. The fashion object may be discarded from the useful inventory of objects before physical or functional obsolescence occurs.
2. The fashion object may have characteristics of functional utility, but in general the acceptance of the object is largely based on qualities other than functional utility. Qualities unique to the fashion object may include styling, aesthetics, social acceptability, ego gratification, status symbolism, and other psycho-social qualities.
3. In any given period of time, the "current" or "acceptable" fashion objects are subject to and defined by public "tastes." The fashion objects of any given time symbolize the "collective tastes" of social system members who have adopted the fashion object.
4. When initially introduced, the fashion object is characterized by conspicuous newness and novelty, and therefore becomes "exclusive" when compared to existing and accepted fashion objects. The fashion object

loses this exclusiveness as a desired characteristic when the object is accepted, utilized, or conformed to by a large number of persons.

5. The fashion object may contain directly relevant psycho-social characteristics, such as high social visibility or conspicuousness, and high ego-involvement. The social characteristics of the fashion object may constitute the critical motivations for object acceptance.

6. The fashion product may represent a "luxury" rather than a necessity or commodity product. Specifically in physical products, the fashion object may qualify as a luxury product in that a premium price is discretionarily paid for "desirable" design, or design which is perceived to be newer, more novel, more aesthetically appealing, or generally more "attractive" as compared to other choice alternatives.

7. The fashion object is socially differentiated for various cultural utilizations such as the creation of sex appeal, social role performance, life-cycle position, occupational position, prestige position, and other life-style functions.

When most or all of these characteristics are contained by a physical consumer product or consumer service, the object may be specifically qualified as a fashion object. These characteristics are most dramatically apparent in the major consumer expenditures of clothing, automobiles, and furniture. In other significant areas of consumer decision, including housing, foods and nutritional selection, entertainment, and services, the characteristics of fashion frequently are critical inputs to consumer decision-making.

The Process of Fashion

The emergence of an object as an accepted fashion in the mass population is a complex and multi-faceted behavioral process. Subdividing this complex process into its most basic components, the fashion process may be thought of as an interacting behavioral system characterized by six basic elements:

1. The Object, having specific fashion object characteristics, which is introduced to a social system composed of potential adopters.
2. The Purpose of the Object, which describes the utilitarian, functional, or artistic and aesthetic performance expectation of the object.
3. The Adopters, or the individuals operating within their social systems, who may potentially accept the object in their day-to-day life-style or behavioral patterns.
4. The Motivations for Adoption, or the needs, drives, values, or reasons which are activated to stimulate individual adoption of the object. The motivations for adoption may range from a variety of psycho-social satisfactions which are achieved by object adoption, to a perception of the object's superior functional quality.
5. The Level of Acceptance, or the percentage of social system members who actually adopt the object. For the object to reach the status of an accepted fashion, it must reach some prevailing or discernible level of acceptance within the social system to which it is introduced.
6. The Dimensions of Change Over Time, the manifestation of which is the presentation of new alternative fashion objects to a social system of potential adopters, ultimately resulting in a shift in popularity from the existing fashion objects to the newly emerging fashion objects. Change is implicit and critical to the fashion process. Changes which occur over time include change in the object, change among the individuals adopting, and change in the level of acceptance of the various competing fashion objects.

This generalized construction of the interacting behavioral elements of the fashion process may be uniquely applied to any specific fashion phenomenon. For example, in clothing fashions the elements of the interacting behavioral system may be specified:

1. The fashion object is a style of dress and personal adornment.
2. The purpose of the object is aesthetic expression.
3. The adopters are individuals operating within their social systems who accept the clothing style in their daily dress and adornment behavior.
4. The motivations are represented by a variety of psycho-social satisfactions achieved through aesthetic expression.
5. The level of acceptance is the percentage of social system members who dress in the specified style at any given time period.
6. The dimensions of change are evidence in the decline and obsolescence of established fashions, and the emergence of new style alternatives which ultimately mature into accepted fashions.

Each element of the fashion process represents a specific phenomenon for theoretical expansion and empirical investigation. For the purposes of explaining fashion behavior as an interacting system of elements, a conceptual framework delineating the dynamic mechanisms of the fashion process is required for further theoretical development. The remainder of this paper focuses on the dynamics and mechanisms by which the fashion process operates, drawing upon historical and contemporary perspectives of fashion adoption and diffusion processes.

THE MECHANISMS OF THE FASHION PROCESS

Classical fashion theory focuses on a social class orientation of consumer fashion behavior, with specific emphasis on fashion leadership as strictly an upper social class phenomenon. Though upper class leadership of tastes and morals is frequently evident in the early sociological and economic literature, one of the most descriptive statements of class leadership in fashion was offered by the sociologist Simmel (1904):

Social forms, apparel, aesthetic judgment, the whole style of human expression are constantly transformed by fashion, in such a way, however, that fashion--in all these things affects only the upper classes. Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on...

Perhaps even more well-known is the Veblen (1912) theory of "conspicuous consumption," which similarly focuses on fashion as a symbolic expenditure practiced most actively by the most wealthy social stratum. Though the Veblen theory deals very much with the symbolic value of consumption, the flavor of the upper class fashion leadership argument is no less explicit.

The intuitive simplicity of the upper class fashion leadership approach has historically generated a broad basis of support for this so-called "trickledown" fashion process. In contemporary analysis, however, a number of alternative conceptualizations are emerging. Most interesting of these are the "horizontal flow" or "mass market" theory, the youth theory, and the lower class innovation theory. As in the case of the trickle-down concept, each of these alternative theories is based on a social class conceptualization of the fashion process.

The horizontal flow concept, as structured by King (1963), represents a major conceptual framework of contemporary fashion theory. In essence, this concept suggests that in a mass production and mass communications environment, fashions tend to spread simultaneously within each social class over time. Key arguments supporting this proposition are that mass production makes new fashions almost simultaneously available at all price levels, and that mass communications rapidly disseminates information and influence on new fashion offerings.

The remaining conceptualizations of the fashion process focus on the youth influence on fashion, and on cultural or social class minorities as transmitters of fashion ideals. These conceptualizations of fashion are not significantly documented in the literature, but are rather based on observations of contemporary fashion adoption movements. Of these latter approaches, the youth influence in fashion is highly visible in the consumer market, whereas the impact of the lower socioeconomic and minority segments of the population are less well defined.

These "models" of fashion adoption appear to perform complementary roles in conceptualizing the fashion process. However, the theoretical emphasis on a socioeconomic or demographic explanation of fashion represents only a base point for a more inclusive behavioral theory. Contemporary fashion may be expanded around these key conceptual structures, but with a more detailed focus on the behavioral mechanisms of fashion innovation and diffusion within social and cultural systems.

The Social Mechanisms of the Fashion Diffusion Process

Comprehensive fashion theory development requires a detailed focus on the psycho-social dynamics of the mechanisms by which an individual fashion is adopted and diffused in mass populations. This process mechanism may be conceptualized as a basic application of the general theory of the adoption and diffusion of innovations. [For a conceptualization of generalized adoption and diffusion theory, see Rogers and Shoemaker (1971). Applications of the generalized theory specifically in consumer behavior have been conceptualized by Robertson (1971).] However, the fashion diffusion process has some specific characteristics which define fashion as a significantly unique diffusion phenomenon. Most importantly, the motivational force behind fashion may be thought of as social conformity or social "contagion," whereas traditional diffusion processes may be thought of as being motivated by innovation characteristics such as technical superiority or perceived functional utility. Furthermore, fashion may be conceptualized as a "social mechanism" of collective behavior among a mass of people, in which the collective tastes of people are modified for reasons not generally associated with economic or technical utility. [The concepts of "collective behavior" and "collective taste" as key features of the fashion process have been described by Lang and Lang (1961) and Blumer (1969).] For these basic reasons, fashion diffusion represents a dramatically unique application of general diffusion theory, emphasizing the collective social mechanisms of fashion object acceptance.

As a social mechanism, the fashion diffusion process may be structured into phases which are similar to both general product life-cycle and product diffusion processes. The fashion mechanism may be characterized as a five stage process propagated largely by social motivations:

1. Adoption Leadership by "Consumer Fashion Change Agents." This phase represents the introduction of the fashion innovation, the purchase of the innovation by certain individuals who function as leaders of collective taste within their social networks.
2. The Social Visibility and Communicability Phase. In this phase, the fashions go into a "use cycle," primarily by fashion change agents operating within their social systems and unique life-styles. During this phase, the fashion is characterized as "new" and "novel," and thereby emerges as a highly visible and communicative alternative to the existing fashions.
3. Conformity Within and Across Social Systems. Having passed the introductory initiation of the fashion process, the newly emerging fashion gains a further base of social legitimation and social acceptance as it is communicated within social system networks and across social systems over time. This diffusion process is propagated by social contagion and social conformity to a new set of fashion "tastes."
4. Market and Social Saturation. The fashion reaches and passes the mass marketing phase. The fashion has reached its highest level of acceptance, and the mass conformity to the fashion creates a form of "social saturation" in that the fashion is in constant use by a large and visible number of people.
5. Decline and Obsolescence Forced By the Emergence of New Fashion Alternatives. The market and social saturation of the fashion, combined with the emergence of new fashion alternatives, forces the ultimate decline in use of a fashion. The fashion, at this point, has lost all its connotation as a unique or novel "taste" due to the mass conformity movement which has been generated. As an acceptable fashion, the object is obsolete at the point in time when the level of acceptance, or utilization of the fashion decreases to a minimal percentage of the social system members.

The central feature of this conceptualization is that fashion is a process predominantly motivated by social communications and social influence. There can be little doubt that other forces bear on the fashion process, of which market availability, social system attitudes toward fashion change, consumer purchasing power, social system life-styles, and psychological motivations are among the more important. However, of all the conceptual structures on which contemporary fashion theory might be based, the conceptualization of fashion as a sociological process provides the most generalized conceptual framework for both describing the fashion process and taking into account its collective behavior connotations.

The Concept of Consumer Fashion Change Agents

Though each stage of the fashion process mechanism represents a construct for fashion theory development, the phase in which fashion trends are initiated and propagated are critical to the conceptualization of contemporary theory. In recent research on the initiation of fashion adoption and diffusion processes, emphasis has been placed on the constructs of the fashion innovator and the fashion opinion leader. Fashion innovators, the earliest buyers or users of a fashion innovation, have been found to have unique behavioral patterns and characteristics when compared to mass consumer populations. Similarly, fashion opinion leaders, or interpersonal communicators of fashion influence, have been identified as a uniquely characterized segment of the consumer fashion market. [For examples, see Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), King (1963, 1964), Grindereng (1967), Summers (1970), and Reynolds and Darden (1972).]

From both a theoretical and pragmatic perspective, the concepts of fashion innovators and opinion leaders may be broadened in the concept of the "consumer fashion change agent" (Sproles and King, 1973). Although innovativeness and opinion leadership represent alternately distinct constructs, in the specific realm of fashion behavior they appear to significantly overlap. For example, the fashion innovator is essentially an "opinion leader," in that the innovator visually communicates information and influence concerning new fashion objects. Furthermore, the opinion leader is most likely to be influential in the early stages of the diffusion process, by influencing standards of "taste" within his or her peer and social networks. Functionally, the impacts of the innovator and opinion leader are simultaneously and similarly operative, and appear to be uniquely inseparable influences to fashion acceptance.

The interaction of innovativeness and interpersonal influence in fashion argue for the broadened conceptualization of fashion initiation and propagation around the single concept of the consumer fashion change agent. The consumer fashion change agent segment of the population represents a major population segment demonstrating a combination of innovativeness, interpersonal influence, knowledge, and interest in fashion products. In the adoption leadership phases of the fashion process, which are characterized by high social visibility and communicability of the fashion, the functions of innovativeness, interpersonal influence, knowledge and interest are performed simultaneously by a significant population segment. Individuals performing any or all of these roles, as "leaders of collective taste" in an emerging fashion movement, may be categorized as members of the broadened consumer fashion change agent market segment.

CONCLUSION

Some basic concepts contributing to a contemporary theory of fashion have been structured in this paper. Fashion behavior represents a unique form of consumer behavior influencing a variety of major consumer choice decisions. Though fashion behavior has been classically viewed as a clothing-specific phenomenon, the central argument of this analysis has been that fashion is a generalized behavioral concept. The development of a contemporary fashion theory, while having its most basic origins in clothing choice theory, may be conceptually structured for application to a wide range of consumer behavior phenomena.

The comprehensive contemporary theory of fashion combines a wide range of behavioral concepts, constructs, and principles. Much of the theory has been developed from consumer research applications, predominantly from the area of clothing fashions. The conceptual framework synthesized in this analysis represents a base from which comprehensive and empirically tested models of the fashion process may be constructed (King and Sproles, forthcoming).

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