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Colour and trend forecasting in a sustainable world

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Abstract

This paper challenges the underlying philosophy of the colour and trend forecasting sector and the process currently used to market and promote trends that are contributing to excessive mass consumer consumption and the mass production of devaluing fashion product. It discusses how the trend forecasting sector needs to change to support a sustainable fashion system, beginning with colour. Such change is essential in light of the popularity of nostalgic tendencies, the availability of new shopping channels and in recognition of enhanced shopping experiences enjoyed by consumers while seeking fashion products that better resonate with their own tastes and lifestyle choices.

Key words: Trends, Forecasts, Style Rivalry

INTRODUCTION

The earliest evidence of the initiation of a trend forecasting sector dates back to 1915 in the USA and the 1930s in the UK with forward thinking individuals considering the control of colour consistency and colour change in a marketing context that allowed dyers to be more responsive to industry needs. With the demise of the textile industry in the western world in the 1960s and 70s many former textile workers migrated into the newly developing forecasting sector that now incorporated fabric, garment design and style along with colour for a more complete forecasting service, making forecast companies more competitive. A small number of companies have remained with a focus on colour only and have extended their services to other industry sectors including the home-ware and interiors industries, cosmetics and even to car manufacturers, in fact any industry that can harness colour trends to create sales of consumer products are targeted by colour forecast companies. Those focusing only on colour are essentially directing the mainstay of the larger trend forecasting sector resulting in two levels where the higher, colour focused level develops and promotes colour trends in a very particular manner, which feeds into the lower level that complements the generic data with style direction [1]. While in the first instance the underlying philosophy was to provide guidance for a consensus of colour in fashion products on a seasonal basis to assist the dyeing industry, this also resulted in a system that should essentially support an economically sustainable industry. However, the power of colour as a sales tool was quite possibly at that time not fully realised and certainly the impact of the forecasting system on sustainability in a broader context was never a consideration then; in fact it is only through this work that it is being considered today.

COLOUR AND TREND FORECASTING

In essence, colour forecasting and trend forecasting can be viewed as being both a service and a process. The service sector thrives through the volume of sales of their forecasting packages which is supported by marketing efforts reinforcing the forecasts as being 'on-trend'. However consumers and consumer trends, or trends in consumer behaviours, attitudes, interests and opinions (known as AIOs in marketing terms), are the only real

drivers of trends. If insufficient numbers of consumers buy into the trend to make it explicitly visible to others then the result is simply unwanted product on the high street. Fashion theorist George Sproles [2] believed fashion forecasting to be reliant upon the timely anticipation of consumer acceptance. The process therefore involves an evaluation of consumer interests and purchase preferences past and present with informed and accurate projections of changing tastes into the near future [3].

There are basically two types of forecasts, those that are long-term and those that are short-term. Historically long-term trends are considered to be products that remain popular for around three to five years or more, otherwise called classics. Denim jeans can be thought of as being a long term trend. However the particular style and colour of jeans is more subject to short-term trends; those that are expected to remain popular for one or two seasons or for one or two years before losing consumer favour. In today's climate consumer lifestyles are becoming more recognised as being influential drivers of fashion and of product and service consumption. It is therefore increasingly more important to view such consumer trends as being the core element of long term trends before even considering the design of products. The importance of consumer tastes, preferences and trends had been recognised by many entrepreneurial businessmen long ago. For example it is known that ceramist Josiah Wedgwood and Matthew Boulton (manufacturer of metal wear for fashion and for the home) actively sought knowledge of fashion taste from gentry in the eighteenth century [4]. On realising that periodically there was sure to be a renaissance for the taste for nostalgia, Wedgwood, for example, marketed tea sets in a new neo-classical form [5]. Wide-spread consumer trends are, and have always been, of more value to fashion product design and production than the development of whimsical short-term style trends which have no relation to consumer interest and appeal. Sterns [6] recognised the drivers of consumerism to be the promotion and acquisition of un-needed goods, of which the forecasting service is a major part.

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

Another drawback to the current forecasting process is the seasonal demand for change. This demand is fuelled by the industry rather than by consumers and has gradually developed into style changes on the high street every six to eight weeks thus accelerating the pace of fashion change. This type of product obsolescence is discussed below. Traditionally forecasters worked on two packages per year (Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer) approximately two years ahead. In order to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace forecasters attempt to reduce this timescale to market and to produce more than the traditional two packages. This all enforces a faster pace of fashion change and consequently adding to the obsolescence of trends and to the procurement of fast fashion. The industry takes advantage of colour change as being a major driver of sales as it is easier to refresh a range through colour than through

style changes, which is a more time consuming process incurring design and production change [1].

Inevitably over time consumers will grow tired of particular colours and styles and will seek something new, this creates a natural form of product obsolescence, but will happen at different points in time as individual consumers' tastes will change at differing speeds, and vary for different products. Consumer product industries have however developed strategies to enforce obsolescence when it suits them. For example, component parts may no longer be made available for repairs or a new improved model may be released to market rendering previous models obsolete. For the fashion industry style and colour changes are essential and are controlled and marketed through the forecasting process. However, the promotion of new fashion trends does not guarantee that consumers will 'buy in to' the new trend and retailers risk holding large quantities of unwanted stock. To further aid sales retailers are engaging more and more with discount sales. Consumers are wise to this and will often purchase only during the sales periods. Although retailers are selling their products they are doing so more and more at a lower mark-up and thus reducing their annual revenue; and consumers are further encouraged to shop excessively. To enable retailers to take a cut in revenue the quality of products has reduced to lower production costs, in turn products are inferior for lasting wear and even inferior for recycling, resulting in garments ending their life in landfill. When we consider that almost two million tonnes of textiles and apparel waste are sent to landfill in the UK alone per annum [7] the enormity of the problem can be fully appreciated.

STYLE RIVALRY VERSUS PRICE RIVALRY

Currently consumer acceptance of colour and style is anticipated by the forecasters and by designers. Retailers are much closer to consumers to better understand their own target market's preferences. However, as yet, owners of smaller boutiques are more likely to purchase stock directly related to their regular clientele's needs and tastes than chain store brands will. This is mostly due to larger retailers having no feedback system in place and poor staff training. Current fashion on the high street has generally been acknowledged by authors and researchers of sustainable fashion as being a poor reflection of consumer taste and preferences. For example, Kate Fletcher [8] recognises that such product does not imbue characteristics that offer any potential for emotional attachment or sentiment, thus making these items even less likely to be kept and cared for in the long-term.

In 1947 economist Paul Gregory [9] postulated that competitive rivalry among retailers with a similar offering would result in one of two things; retailers would either enter into a price war (price rivalry) or common sense would prevail and design would be used as the determining factor (style rivalry). Due to the nature of the industry at that time, which was essentially pre-trend forecasting era, Gregory proposed that style rivalry would indeed prevail. However, today we are experiencing price rivalry to the detriment of the industry and to the economy, and have been doing so since the establishment of the forecasting sector ago. As previously stated, it is the practice of price rivalry in the retail sector of the fashion industry that is fuelling mass consumption and the influx of waste product in landfill. To combat this, it is obvious that radical changes, both in the

system and in the mind-set are necessary. This concept is also fully endorsed by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Forum for the Future, Peter Madden, who blames the fast fashion business model and poor quality products as critical factors contributing to waste [10].

SLOWING DOWN FASHION CHANGE

Slowing down fashion is a commonly held concept by many. However, up until now this has only really been considered in relation to production and retailing, with little or no recognition of the part that the forecasting sector plays in the fashion system. Sproles [2] had recognised that mass communication and marketing is needed to support mass production, which King [11] had recognised even earlier in the 1960s. With retailers increasing their own presence on high streets, the ground was set for mass marketing from which the fashion media also benefited. The whole fashion system now relies on price rivalry to continually enforce changes in trends to be marketed, and planned obsolescence to happen to make room for the trend changes. This business model can only exist however if products can be produced at low cost, both in terms of the materials and design, as well as the production and distribution logistics.

NEW SHOPPING EXPERIENCES

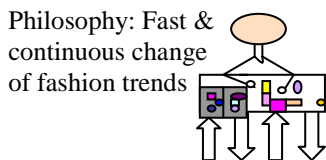
The ease of online shopping through the internet, mobile phones and applications, and TV shopping channels have, through the use of new technologies, changed the way that many choose to shop. This has allowed consumers to very quickly compare products and prices and to order and receive goods without even having to venture out on to the high street. The on-going popularity of the vintage trend and gravitation again toward nostalgia, which works well for those embracing a more sustainable lifestyle, not only is seeking a bargain appealing for many, but also seeking a treasured find adds substantially to the shopping experience. Shoppers of second-hand, vintage and retro now consider themselves as highly knowledgeable to determine the value of many product types and savvy enough to know a good bargain. This, they perceive, puts them in a privileged position, the same as that which has always been associated with antiques dealers and collectors. A wealth of retail outlets are now available to satisfy the sustainability-conscious consumer, as well as those who just love to be a part of the vintage scene, including fairs, car-boot sales and boutiques in the physical sense; but also online with the growing 'auction culture', a term coined by Daniel Nissanoff [12]. As Nissanoff points out, in order for product to hold its value and to have the potential to be recycled or re-used many times by other owners, products need to be well designed and well made. Currently new fashion product available on the high street does not afford such qualities.

IMPROVING THE FORECASTING SYSTEM

If we consider the current philosophy of the trend forecasting sector and the affect of the trend forecasting system as fuelling the fast pace of change of fashion facilitated by price rivalry on the high street as a major contributor to waste product, which is unsuitable for multi-lifecycle existence, we must then conceptualise a realistic solution. One approach that may be taken is known, ironically, as back-casting [13]. Where forecasting evaluates the likelihood of futures happening and scenario planning can be used to evaluate a range of different alternatives, back-casting begins with a vision of the desirable future prior to implementing stages that will take you to where you

want to be. The vision therefore for a sustainable fashion world must take into account the wealth of debate that currently surrounds this ideal as well as the problems that researchers and others have already identified. For the purpose of this paper we restrict that body of knowledge to the aspects briefly discussed here and show this vision pictorially in figures 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1: The current colour and trend forecasting system



Price Rivalry: Mass Production: Mass Marketing

Figure 2: The affect of the current system from a sustainability perspective

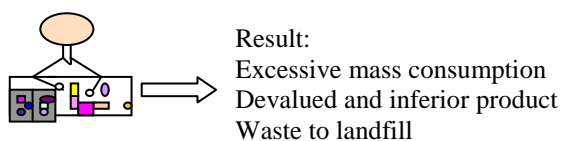
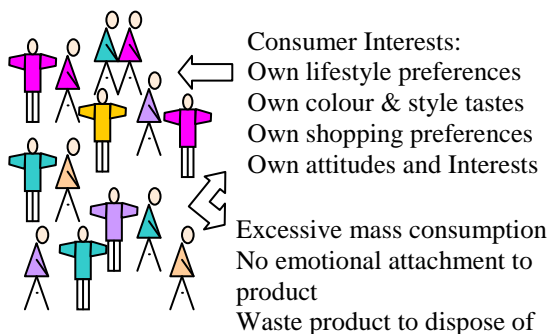
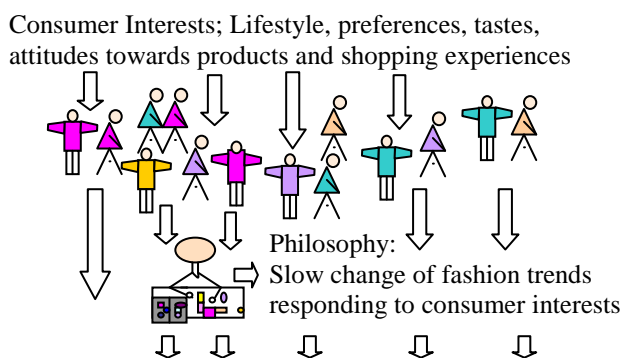


Figure 3: Consumers as an independent factor of the current system



For the purpose of back-casting the vision (shown in figure 4) would be a sustainable system that is responsive to the needs of the industry, and consequently the economy, as well as to consumers.

Figure 4: The vision for a new system



Style Rivalry; Sustainable Products, Production & Marketing

Rather than the trend sector creating and marketing trends that, at best, anticipate consumer appeal and short-term, trends would need to be a reflection of current consumer interest and far more long-term.

CONCLUSION

This paper challenges the underlying philosophy of the current colour and trend forecasting system with a brief discussion of how this twentieth century industry sector has developed supporting price rivalry on the high street and the marketing of fast fashion change. It introduces the reader to the concept of style rivalry as a means to improve the quality of products enabling the potential for fashion to become more sustainable in the changing fashion environment. The current situation is expressed through three rich pictures and a fourth rich picture shows the ideal scenario as a starting point for a back-casting process to now be further considered. The purpose of this paper is to invite interested parties to add to the discussions of the viability of the proposed vision for a new system shown in figure 4.

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