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1st Global conference; Fashion – Exploring Critical Issues

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‘Style Surfing’ changing parameters of fashion communication – where have they gone?

Abstract

This paper sets out to explore the changing face of fashion communication and its role in creating fashion ideas and promoting trends. The focus is on the generation that do not know life without the internet, looking particularly at the online material that they engage with and the influence this has on their style ideas. It draws on the theory put forward by Roland Barthes ‘*The Fashion System*’ and the importance of textual dissemination of fashion through specialist magazines and editorials.¹

The authoritative voice of the fashion journal is being challenged by assertive fashion bloggers, so much so that even a blogger can gain international recognition for their own predictions on next seasons fashion trends. If the internet has changed the process by which an expert is declared, so too is it changing the way in which the discourse or message is received and the meaning conveyed. It is therefore important to consider the fashion content of the online communications that are engaging this generation from websites, music sites, You-Tube and social networking sites like Face book and Bebo.

The internet allows time and space to be treated differently. The control has shifted from the sender to the receiver as audiences are no longer passive but actively seek information and engagement with ideas and relevant discourse. However, how does this technologically savvy generation deal with a communications network that gives free access to infinite amounts of information on fashion without editorial guidance. Can they really push parameters of fashion style without a concept of the boundaries they are challenging? Do the boundaries exist within themselves and their own conflict driven by the need to express themselves and assert individual identity opposing the need to belong to a collective. Does communicating fashion ideas on the internet give them both?

Key Words: Social networks, blogs, internet, fashion communication, myth, fashion discourse, magazines, connotation, denotation

The communication revolution is here! The channels for communicating have mushroomed in recent years; society is quickly adapting and finding new ways to use these channels to get their voice heard, to socialise, to interact, build relationships and to learn. This creates the desire to plug in, to be connected to the stream of information constantly, creating the behaviour Linda Stone² describes this as “continuous partial attention”. These activities of the internet are not all separate roles but, they are merging and interlinking as people take control for themselves defined by their own interests and individualised agendas. The rules of engagement have changed we no longer have top down communications but we are witnessing the democratizing of communications. This paper explores this communication landscape in the context of fashion. It has come about through my observations of students and the way in which they are engaging with fashion through multiple channels. The study draws on both the theory put forward by Roland Barthes ‘The Fashion System’ and observations of undergraduate students. An exploratory study of fashion interested young people was undertaken to consider the process of engagement with fashion and fashion communications. The methodology for this research combines the understanding gained from an empirical study of undergraduate fashion students over a period of three years and a snap shot survey to capture the ‘top of mind’ connections they have with the various fashion media.

‘The Fashion system’ by Barthes is considered for its meticulous focus on the written word; communicating fashion, however although noted for its’ fastidious approach it is only concerned with the written word as translation of fashion.³ As Barnard notes Barthes does later dismiss the work as a semiological disaster, this perhaps is more relating to the scientific approach taken than a complete dismissal of the work.⁴ Barthes considers the denotation which he refers to as the vestimentary code the object, and connotation referred to as the rhetorical system which has the function of naturalizing the denotation.

“precisely when fashion constructs a very strict system of signs it strives to give these signs the appearance of pure reasons; and it is obviously because fashion is tyrannical and its sign arbitrary that it must convert its sign into a natural fact.”⁵

We are often not fully aware of connotation however the connotation does create the subjective quality of the sign. Within cultural boundaries it is fair to assume connotative meaning is often largely shared therefore making it intersubjective.⁶ Fiske does note that it is easy to read connotative values as denotative facts and that semiotic analysis is an analytical method that can help to guard against such misreading.⁷ This is all well and good when we had a top down communication system where the fashion magazine played a vital role in the dissemination of fashion as media channels were narrowly defined. The interpreter power was held by only a small handful of editors. These editors engaged educated writers and journalists with a degree of sensitivity for the use of language to communicate meaning and the importance of the word and the sentence as a translator and communication of that meaning. The editor was the gatekeeper to the dissemination of fashion ideas and even the embodiment of the statement made by Barthes that *“Fashion is both too serious and too frivolous”*.⁸ My exploratory study as you may expect found that the vast majority of those who considered themselves as either passionate or loving fashion from the ages of 12 to 23 stated they read Vogue. It may be argued that the youngest age group of 12 to 14 may not own their own copy of Vogue but are familiar with it and consider this to be indicative of how serious they are about fashion. The most variety of different magazines read was by the 18 to 20 age group who are mostly fashion undergraduate students. Surprisingly however the majority of this age group do still confine their fashion reading material to the mainstream fashion consumer magazines.

The democratization of communications that the internet has facilitated especially with the arrival of web 2.0 and the prevalence of user-generated content has increased the subjective nature of fashion writing. Blogs are becoming a popular way in which anybody can express their opinion on any subject they like. Fashion blogs are popular as the subjective nature of fashion encourages endless discussion. What is happening is the casual informal use of language no longer confined to the rules of grammar is facilitating the misreading of connotative values. The conversational nature of the communication coupled with the immediacy of the transmission means there is limited care taken over the construction of the message. This in turn is making the communications even more arbitrary and yet the tyrannical fashion message is conveyed through the bloggers broadcasted opinion.

Blog example 1

*“Sometimes nothing is more perfect than a one piece.
Sonja is wearing a jumpsuit by S’NOB. What really
caught my eye was the gathered neckline and overall
drapeyness of the suit without teetering into the realm of*

bulky, making it both flattering and comfortable.”
Jennine of The Coveted.⁹

The jumpsuit is referred to as perfect. 'Perfect' is not explained it is included in a very subjective statement yet it can so easily be misunderstood as fact. The creation of a new word 'drapeyness' and the misspelling of 'comfortable' are evidence of the lack of reflection on the construction of the communication and the evidence of the lack of respect for the conventions of grammar. This does however carry the power to naturalise the tyrannical statement of "*Sometimes nothing is more perfect than a one piece.*"

It maybe argued that the internet is only another platform for communicating and that the fashion communication is now embracing just another channel. The internet and more specifically web 2.0 has reduced the individuals 'entry barrier' to communicate widely. This may free communications but it does however strip away any management and control system in terms of the total editorial edict. It is this lack of governance that is revolutionizing communication. Fiske explains Barthes two orders of signification; the first order includes the reality; denotation, and signs.¹⁰ The second order of signification is where the sign is inserted into the value system of the culture by means of connotation and myth. Fiske described a myth as a story by which a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature.¹¹ It is at this point the sign becomes ambiguous and the ambiguity of the meaning can increase as insertion into the intended culture is not guaranteed. The method of multi directional communication and the reduced control of the process from interpreter of the sign to the interpretant notably the culture of the interpretant means it is easy to read connotative values as denotative facts and this in turn can be distributed further thus having the potential to change the meaning altogether.

The advances in communication technology means that communication of a message can be almost instant with little or no reflection on the meaning. This coupled with the phenomenon of 'continuous partial attention' which Linda Stone¹² explains is the desire of an individual to be attentive to the continuous stream of information acting as a 'live node' in networks, connecting, engaging with and transmitting information, means that the distribution of an idea can be quite arbitrary with little or no thought again given to the cultural dimension of the receiver. Fiske states that connotation is the human part of the signification process, the emotional values.¹³ Myth also belongs to the second order of signification, Barthes explains how myth naturalises history thus obscuring the political and social dimensions. "Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message".¹⁴ Barthes believes everything can be a myth and that "every

object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things".¹⁵ The internet is the mechanism that is facilitating the appropriation of myths and therefore has the potential to challenge the tyrannical nature of fashion.

The bloggers are advancing on the territory previously the domain of the fashion journalist. Liz Hoggard points out in her article about Catherine Kallon's blog www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com for the London Evening Standard "...she can be more candid about the clothes than print journalists, who are often fearful of alienating future interviewee".¹⁶ The journalist has gone through a rigorous apprenticeship and steadily built up their reputation. The development of the internet has resulted in the lowering of the entry barriers to publishing an opinion on any subject to potentially hundreds and thousands of people. This does not spell the end for the fashion journalist, but we are witnessing the upheaval of the roles people are engaged in. The technological advances of the internet has created the opportunity for the development of another writing genre, web logs (blogs) blogging. Blogging connects with people on a very personal and emotional level. The internet now allows for a more democratic declaration of an expert, Susie Lau's blog 'Stylebubble' is one of the most enthusiastically read fashion blogs read by 10,000 people a day.¹⁷ Susie is now been Dazed Digital's Commissioning Editor and the big names in fashion invite her to their product launches. Catherine Kallon's blog www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com is also enthusiastically read by more than 12,000.¹⁸ The blogger still undergoes an induction period where the blog is monitored to ascertain its authenticity, popularity and sustainability. The blog does have to have a sense of an informed view that is validated by the content of the blog itself.

The personal nature of the blog discourse gives the reader the feeling of a personal conversation not one which is being broadcast widely. It could be argued that a blog goes further and gives the sense of tapping into another's consciousness, even tapping into others dreams. Joe Sinclair who writes the blog www.whatkatiewore.com explained that "*the point of the blog for us was a love letter*" because he loved the way his partner styled herself each day.¹⁹ Blogs therefore can be considered important for their ability to capture streams of conscious thought pushing the boundaries of the known and culturally accepted imagining alternatives to today's realities. Blogs connect with their readership in two ways firstly by the conversational communication style of the blog content which includes both written discourse and visual communication. Secondly by the fact that the reader views this on a device that is closely viewed often as a solitary activity and a device owned by them. Small hand held devices such as the iPhone help to

make this connection even more personal, like having your best friend with you. For a blog to gain interest it must have an engaging content that is updated with a degree of regularity. The blog must also communicate a sense of informed knowledge if not 'insider' knowledge.

Blog example 2: Style bubble – 16th July 2009, *When You're A Boy*

*"In theory I should have left this post to Steve seeing as menswear isn't my forte but alas, the boy is somewhere in Dorset"*²⁰

This humble narrative is powerful in its connection with the audience as it sets a very personal tone even suggesting that what follows may not be worthy of note.

*"...and I popped to the private view of the new "When You're a Boy: Styled by Simon Foxton" exhibition at The Photographer's Gallery tonight, the first exhibition I've ever been to that's solely dedicated to a stylist".*²¹

Here by stating attendance at a private view the 'insider' knowledge is conveyed. *"I popped to the private view"* delivers the information that qualifies the insider knowledge in a way that your best friend may tell you they are off to get a pint of milk. The conversational style makes the communication seem very personal, the receiver is connecting with this communication in the personal space of their own screen device. The combination of these two elements makes this 'broadcast' voice connect on an emotional level. Connecting on this level allows the authority to be readily accepted as the author is understood to be your friend because they are reaching you at a personal and emotional level. You can also add your own comment to the blog article read. This now transforms the communication into an active relationship.

My exploratory study indicates that fashion blogs are beginning to be used for fashion ideas by the 18 to 23 year olds and notably not accessed by the younger age groups. However of the named blogs they did not list Style Bubble which is conspicuous by its absence as it is considered by many as the Fashion blog to read. Blogs maybe based on an individuals opinion but they are presenting an oppositional view to the fashion consumer who is conditioned to consume a more tyrannical discourse. The content analysis of fashion magazines of the two separate studies by Fiske and Barnard have found that they did not contain an oppositional view of the audience but were very self assured in their discourse.^{22 & 23} The exploratory study also identified

the importance all age groups placed on retailer and brand own websites to inform them of fashion ideas this was way above the response for any other online resource. Retailer websites are using a magazine style discourse to connect with their consumers some are even using blogs to really personalise the communication and connect on an emotional level. Consumers are already conditioned to accept a very self assured discourse that lacks any oppositional view. Retailers are tapping into the social networking phenomenon and using this very person centred approach to convert online contacts into sales.

Technologically facilitated relationships are now part of an individuals own social network. Human beings are social animals by nature, it is therefore natural that they use computer networks to facilitate their social connections and even widen the range of relationships. Over recent years we have seen the growth and popularisation of social network interface sites with Facebook being one of today's most popular. This socialising practice is the means by which people can negotiate their place in an ever changing world. User generated sites such as YouTube and Flickr are popular for the sharing of content with others, they facilitate the distribution and consumption of original ideas and content along with appropriated content. Social network sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook are an interface that facilitates the networks of connected people on the basis of mutual interests. My study found that the vast majority of young fashion interested people shared their fashion interest through Facebook.

Wellman's research of computerized social networks considers that the increase in the number of network members increases the heterogeneous nature of the network.²⁴ Wellman also notes that people belong to multiple social networks and that no one network has exclusivity over an individual. Hodkinson considers the changing nature of online communications of the UK Goth subculture from discussion forums to individual journals. The discussion forums brought together a homogeneous collective to share their mutual interest in the Goth scene, this consolidates the individuals attachment to the community. This network also increases the amount of time spent interacting with one another. Hodkinson found that the use of journals allowed for a more varied exploration of the individual's own identity, interests and lifestyles as this was individually centred not collectively governed. Hodkinson also found that those using the linking facilities of blogs tended to reproduce relatively insular subcultural networks. The issue with insular networks is that the oppositional view is not considered and is even actively avoided.²⁵

It can be argued that the Internet has not revolutionised the way we communicate, the advances in communication technology have facilitated the evolution of our communication practice. The adoption of technology is diffused as not all of the population have necessarily the willingness or readiness to adopt and integrate the technology into their communication practice.²⁶ Fiske states that the “*change in myths is evolutionary not revolutionary*”.²⁷ Revolution can signify change in social order and therefore signify the demise of one dominant myth and the rise of another to a point of dominance. This is part of the natural evolutionary process and the two myths are likely to operate simultaneously for a period of time one as counter myth to the other. It is at this point that cultural conflict is at its most virulent and therefore could be considered revolutionary. Web 2.0 is the technological facilitator of change, blogs are at the cutting edge of a cultural revolution in communications. “*It is all about the reader not the writer*” Amanda Carr of the blog thewomensroom.co.uk It is the honesty and integrity of blogs that is giving an oppositional view to fashion communications. It is this that is revolutionising the communications.

The revolution is coming from the people blogging, they are embracing Barthes belief that “*there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things*”.²⁸ The Internet has freed communications to allow this embrace and the celebration of the subjective nature of fashion. My research has found that fashion interested young people are only just tapping into blogs they do not understand the power of social network communities yet they know no other world. The tyrannical nature of fashion, communicated through the fashion magazine is now facing the challenge of the oppositional view being put forward by blogs. The rules of engagement have changed and we are witnessing the democratizing of communications facilitated by the internet, the power comes from the very fact that it is not regulated. The parameters of fashion style can really be pushed, the Internet has facilitated the removal of the tangible boundaries however the intangible cultural boundaries do exist where they are is still open to question. The internet and social networking has the potential to push the cultural boundaries but it is imperative that we really encourage the generation who do not know a world without the Internet to use that powerful communication tool to question, challenge, explore and take risks to be creative and innovative and to be promoters of creativity and innovation.

Notes

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- 2.L. Stone, *Continuous Partial Attention...* URL consulted September 2009
<http://www.lindastone.net/>

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3. Barthes, *The Fashion System*, University of California Press, 1983
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