FASHION DISRUPTION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

We are in the midst of a digital revolution, in which real-time technologies have become disruptive forces shaping the fashion industry, necessitating for a revision and re-conceptualizing of extant fashion theories about diffusion of innovations and dissemination of fashion trends.

Keywords: fashion trends, fashion industry, social media, fashion marketing, fashion marketer

INTRODUCTION

The way fashion is marketed and consumed is in the midst of a revolution. The power of social media and new mobile technologies such as image recognition API (Application Program Interface) and their effects on the fashion industry are remarkable. The world as the fashion marketers know it has come to an end and extant fashion theories are falling short in terms of addressing the way fashion trends disseminate in today's digital world.

In this paper, we revisit Rogers' ([1962], 1995) theory of diffusion of innovations and other relevant fashion theories in the light of the latest real-time and social media technologies. We dissect this theory and argue that in the age of the Internet where instant interactions and transactions between the marketers and the consumers accompanied with consumers' need for instant gratification, bring the necessity to reconsider our long accepted theories of diffusion of innovations especially in the field of fashion marketing. While there is a plethora of research on the topics of digital, interactive, and social media marketing, a scan of top academic journals in the field of fashion marketing and management yield very little recent research and new theory that address the role and impact of digital technology and social media on fashion. It is essential that current theories are revised and how fashion is disseminated and distributed from the designers to the consumers are conceptualized.

FASHION THEORY REVISITED

Sproles (1974) describes the fashion process as "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

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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." In his seminal article, Georg Simmel (1904) argues that fashion trickles down from the upper to the lower classes as the latter emulate the former. In a similar vein, Veblen theorized (1912) how the leisure class consumed conspicuously accentuating their status and differences from the lower classes. Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction also emphasizes the social class structures and the judgment of taste. Rogers (1995) defines diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time by among the members of a social system" (p. 5). According to this dominant theory, still found in many of today's major marketing textbooks, innovations are initially adopted by a small group called the "innovators" and then are disseminated throughout the society (or any given market) via other consumers called "early adopters", "early majority", "late majority", and "laggards", based on their rate of adoption. As innovations are adopted by lower classes, upper classes change their consumption habits in an effort to distance themselves from the masses (Bourdieu, 1984). Sproles (1974) argues that fashion diffusion process differs from traditional diffusion processes that are thought to be "motivated by innovation characteristics such as technical superiority or perceived functional utility." Conceptualized as a "social mechanism of collective behavior among a mass of people" (ibid.), fashion diffusion represents a unique application of general diffusion theory, emphasizing the collective social mechanisms of fashion object acceptance. Sproles mentions a number of theories (i.e. horizontal flow, mass market, youth theory, lower class innovation theory) that are alternatives to the trickle-down fashion process, which are all based on social class structures.

REAL-TIME MEDIA: A DISRUPTIVE AND DEMOCRATIZING FORCE IN FASHION TRENDS

Social media technologies are disrupting the fashion world in unprecedented ways and democratizing consumers by allowing access to content that was previously limited to the privileged few. As Manish Chandra, founder and CEO of Poshmark, puts it "[f]ashion is ripe for disruption [...] because a lot of the ways things are done now — fashion-of-the-week shows, buyers, very powerful editors in major fashion capitals — these were the ways that trends were distributed, and they weren't very democratic. But the Internet democratizes everything" (Xavier, 2014). Undeniably social media has transformed the way fashion is previewed and the trends cycles (Weingarten & Brooks, 2013; Abnet, 2015). Today's digital applications and the ease of having the Internet on mobile devices give opportunities for customers to discover brands and be interactive in the shopping process like never before (Weingarten & Brooks, 2013). In an article on Knowledge @ Wharton (2011) it is stated that "[i]n decades past, only those who made it to the tents at Bryant Park during New York Fashion Week got a firsthand peek at the next season's trends. Today, seeing a show is as easy as visiting YouTube, and knockoffs of clothing from the runway can be quickly put into production."

The disruptive movement that first hit the fashion industry was the introduction of social media to the masses, which lead to more intense dialogs between consumers and brands.

For buyers, marketers and fashion forecasters, the three moments that changed the pre-2009 fashion cycle are i) bloggers seated in the front-row at fashion week (sharing images as they happened); ii) live-stream fashion shows for all to see in real-time; iii) social media analytics dictating how trends are forecasted. In the late 1990s consumers were still supplied fashion insights directly from the brands and retailers. The previous diffusion of innovations pattern followed the limited process of retailers, magazines, and selective outlets delivering trends to the masses. This way of distribution of a trend had a limited reach in terms of who would encounter the trend and when. The fashion industry has been impacted by free flow of open-source information. Today digitally connected consumers enjoy everything online no matter what their economical standing is or whether they are an "early" or "late majority" adopter. The hierarchical trickling down process of a trend is beginning to flatten out and trends are spreading to the masses much more rapidly whereas before it would follow more of a cycle. Instead of filtering down, content is open-access that flows-out equally. In fact, the concept of "horizontal flow" pre-dates the digital age. As far back as 1963, King suggested "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" (Sproles, 1974).

Previously, fashion bloggers and industry influencers (e.g. editors) were sharing with the audience (readers) their interpretation of the trends that were readily available to the mass consumers. In other words, these influencers spoke of trends; but not in a way that would disrupt the fashion cycle. It was not until 2009 when the fashion industry began to feel the need to address consumers' yearning for more information about pre-launch of collections and more images from the runway shows. Fashion bloggers continued to share all they were privé to on the runway and later at industry-only tradeshows. Information that was being shared with consumers and insights about fashion collections ignited consumers' desire to know about fashion behind-the-scenes more than ever before. The democratization of fashion began when non-industry influencers were invited in, to see behind the scenes and were allowed images to be shared with the mass consumers. New rules of 'what is shareable' were yet to be written and fashion-minded consumers yearned to know more about the creative process behind the fashion industry.

The fashion industry had to adjust to this change in where and when the consumers were being exposed to fashion trends from the runway and the influencers. Fashion marketers are scrambling to adapt to the next generation of digital nesters (people comfortable with and are on digital channels on a regular bases) by coming up with trends that will withstand the quick cycle of real-time fashion content. As Abnet (2015) rightly states "[t]oday, trends are born and die within an infinitely faster and more turbulent environment, in which brands, celebrities, magazines, bloggers and end consumers on social media all jostle for influence over what is 'in' and 'out' of fashion." As digital technology is shaping and shifting consumer behavior, the fashion industry is adapting in various ways. Below are a few examples of these disruptive technologies on how fashion is disseminated to the masses in the Internet age.

Commerce on Social Media. With the emergence of social media, consumers started experiencing new forms of engagement with images and products and the desire to own what they see online. This was the social media version of Home Shopping Network business model. LikeToKnow.It, API software applications and Twitter "buy button" are some of the prime examples that allow customers to directly shop brands via social media platforms.

Crowdsourcing For The Fashion-Conscious Consumers. Social media users have long been taking screen shots of fashion items they like. They use their smart phones and tablets all day long, like flicking through a magazine looking for inspiration and "walking into stores with their Instagram feeds" (Jones, 2014). The Hunt application allows "users to post 'hunts,' or pictures of unidentified clothing items from Tumblr, Pinterest, or the like that they want to track down [on The Hunt's site]" (Brooke, 2013).

Image Recognition Technology. Image recognition technology is changing the way consumers will shop and interact with their mobile devices. The idea behind the technology is a visual search database that works off of the visual data to track garments or brands with similar features. Applications like Gandr, are finding direct ways to get products to customers with image recognition technology. The consumers are able to see items their favorite characters are wearing on popular television shows and purchase them with the ease of a simple click. The premise of applications like this, are to make shopping a more streamlined process for customers (Fratti, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we aimed to revisit the theory of diffusion of innovations in the digital age and discuss how fashion industry is in the midst of a revolution that is changing the way trends are disseminated. The Internet had democratizing effects on the fashion industry in unpredictable ways, by disrupting the long withstanding, established process of fashion dissemination that trickled down from the privileged few who had access to runway shows, to the masses who have real-time, instant access to the same content. There is no doubt that the new commerce technology is shifting the levels of engagement of the consumers with fashion. The new fashion consumers are exhibiting the learned behavior patterns enabled through new mobile technologies, which include sharing, liking, commenting and shopping. They have a high demand for visual content and spend hours scanning social platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest. Fashion-on-demand is the idea that the consumers have a "see-want-buy" mentality while shopping for goods and services; where everything they see is right at their fingertips.

Conferences like GAMMA create critical and significant environments to discuss the latest developments in fashion marketing and management. We hope to start a lively discussion on this eminent topic of disruptive digital technologies that would germinate the seeds for new ways of conceptualizing fashion theory.

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