Lost in Transformation? How Class-Based Emotions Shape Fashion Consumption Practice

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In the last couple of decades, transformations in the fashion industry and marketplaces have ignited debate about the nature of social class relations today. In her book Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Lustre, fashion and culture writer Dana Thomas (2007) illustrates how, since the mid 1980s, many luxury fashion houses passed the management of their brands from the family kin into the hands of external former CEOs of multinational corporations. New CEOs began to aggressively target the mass, and primarily middle class, markets - a move which was to alter the intrinsic nature of the industry, having initially been founded to visually differentiate the elite from subordinate classes. Thomas (2007) outlines how, in the pursuit of expanding the bottom line, quality and craftsmanship started to be compromised as new lower-priced product lines made the point of entry for this form of consumption more accessible across class fractions. Braced by the desire within the mass markets to compete at this level of self-fashioning, sales thrived while outlet stores and duty free shopping began to spring up. Impressive highstreet stores also arrived with low cost production models that could deliver stylish garments at a fraction of the cost of luxury fashions. By the late 1990s avid followers of fashion had more choice than ever. Thomas (2007) questions the morals behind the tactics of industry professionals, who in her view have tainted the deluxe nature of high-end fashion, though essentially her thesis assumes that the field of fashion consumerism has undergone processes of ‘democratisation’. After all, whether paying cash or using credit, buying in flagship stores, duty free, or online, consuming the real deal, past season stock, or indistinguishable counterfeits – almost anyone can, presumably, consume luxury fashion.

Thomas’s work raises interesting questions about whether social equality is actually achieved through the exercise of freedom in consumer choice. How ‘free’ do consumers actually feel when making fashion choices? Are they really free to consume as they please? It is important to appreciate that lower cost production models have made self-fashioning a more accessible practice across class fractions, and that egalitarian principles are increasingly employed to sell clothing and beauty products (the L’Oreal advert tag line “because you’re worth it” springs to mind). However, I stress that the field of fashion consumerism very much remains today a space of social activity where class discrimination actively continues, though now based upon how the consumer practices self-fashioning rather than their possession of branded objects. I also argue that, far from being equal, the capacity to practice is constrained in various ways. Thomas’s work also illuminates the powerful allure of fashion as an intriguing site for research inquiry. Why do some people exhibit such a vast appetite for consuming fashion?

Relating to this, Rebecca Arnold (2001) makes a significant point in claiming that despite consumers becoming increasingly aware of marketers use of visual manipulation to seduce them into consuming, ‘this knowledge has not lessened their fascination with the promise that [fashion] images hold out’ (Arnold,
2001: 3). She labels this phenomenon the ‘mystifying allure’ of fashion. At the outset of my research, I found myself musing about this mystique and questioned whether the field of consumer research has delivered a satisfying answer as to why this allure is so potent? Although difficult to discern in the wake of all the aforementioned transformations in the industry, what became evident throughout my research was the continued relevance, rather than dissolution, of social class structures in shaping the alternative patterns of fashion consumption. Consequently, I found myself following a line of argument which contends that the notions of ‘individualisation’ and ‘freedom’ within consumer choices must be theorized adequately by situating them within the context of social structures, whilst still accounting for the autonomy of the consuming subject (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Holt, 1997; Entwistle, 2000; Savage et al., 2001; Warde, 1996).

To investigate the allure of fashion for female consumers, I focus upon the sphere emotions that surround fashion consumption experiences, as well as those that are embedded into the desires, tastes, and distastes that women express about fashion styles and choices. While consumer culture research has recognized the significance of emotions in both the domain of general consumption (Hirschman, 1992; Arnould and Price, 1993; Swinyar, 1993; Gould, 1997), and specifically within the context of fashion consumption (Otnes, et al., 1997; Clarke and Miller, 2002; Jantzen et al., 2006; Roux and Korchia, 2006), attempts to fully unpack the myriad of emotional experiences that prevail around fashion culture, while situating those emotions within the context of competitive social relations, have been underexplored. Modern thought within the sociological discipline suggests that emotions, when situated within a class-based perspective of the social world, can be integral when explaining courses of human action (DeSwaan, 1989; Dolan, 2009; Hughes, 2007; Reay, 2005).

The primary underlying assumption here is that many of the fashion consumption patterns found in today’s marketplace can most adequately be explained by fully unravelling the psycho-social and affective components of fashion consumption experiences. Central to this argument is recognition of those practices as contemporary derivatives of the more traditional tensions that exist both between women and amongst social class relations. This assumption stems from developments in the field of sociology, which correlate class-based emotions to specific sets of social behaviours (deSwaan, 1989; Reay, 2005; Hughes, 2007; Sayer, 2005), though not explicitly to consumption behaviours. For example, Hughes (2007) establishes the causes of feelings of social envy and reconsiders their legitimacy.

By firstly exploring women’s conceptions of their moral (self) worth, and then the emotions that occur within competitive female relations, the psycho-social dynamics at play that shape women’s preferences for particular fashion styles can be assessed. Consequently, this study probes into the psychic, affective, and moral landscape that surrounds fashion consumption. Being careful not to dismiss emotions as abstract and/ or independently occurring ‘moods’, nor to relegate the emotional dynamic of consumption to mere consequences of action, the psychological and emotive spheres of human experience are situated within the context of social class relations to look for connections. From this perspective they can adequately be seen to hinder, fuel, compromise, or enhance female consumer subjectivity.

Initially this exploration highlights the complicated relationship between fashion-- as a specific form of consumerism-- and feminine identity today, and then goes on to illuminate the competitive currents that underpin the cultural and political dimensions of that relationship. Following Bourdieu’s (1984; 1990) social theory of practice and extending it with a more overt emotional dimension, a woman’s tendency to assume particular fashion consumption practices is understood in two primary contexts. Firstly, her self-fashioning practices may be qualified as habitual behaviours that feel natural to her although they have in fact been learned over time, via pedagogic or autodidactic processes, after being immersed into a particular culture for some time. Secondly, her self-fashioning practices are sometimes deliberate, but often less consciously enacted, having stemmed from the woman’s interpretation of how she should assume her feminine identity, or experience herself as a consuming subject in the world. Those practices are therefore regarded as strategies that are employed to help cope with an often intensely scrutinizing female consumerist environment.

Based on in-depth interviews and using a narrative approach, I found that the positional constraints and/or advantages that are experienced over the course of a woman’s life trajectory to determine the type of psycho-affective states that she experiences. In turn, these states play a crucial role in shaping how women interpret and try to enact their feminine identity through self-fashioning practice. I argue that the self-
fashioning practice should be understood as inherently social, rather than individual, behaviour, and that researchers should recognise the central role that social structures continue to exert in developing many subconscious motivations for fashioning feminine identity. In this respect, self-fashioning practice can be understood as a negotiation between the individual’s desires, their perception of their own self-worth, the constraints that they experience, their tendency to think of themselves as individuals, and also their efforts to ‘fit’ into the social world in some way via their appearance.

It is necessary to stress that fashion should not be perceived as a purely commercial force that exerts manipulative power and control over people. Fashion is, undoubtedly, a far more complex social phenomenon, and so it is important not to provide naive representations of agency by framing the consumer as easily deceived and lacking in their autonomous capacity. Bourdieu’s theory is valuable in this respect because through the constructs of habitus, cultural capital, and field relations it overcomes the objectivist/subjectivist false opposition. Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates that that taste in cultural consumption acts as a powerful form of social differentiation which distinguishes different classes of people. He stresses that while culture becomes embodied, it shapes the minds and bodies of its members in expected, rather than abstract, patterns (Bourdieu, 1984: 25).

Cultural consumption thus demarcates bodies that can be *classed* because those people have experienced similar conditions of existence and developed similar tastes. Habits, mannerisms, taste preferences, and consumption practices become markers of class, and so they are significant when attempting to understand the how relations occur and movements (or lack thereof) unfold within the social hierarchy. The body and its practices thus serve to reify and distinguish class differences, and so they carry many political connotations. Following Bourdieu (1984), it can be theorized that many women may consciously and subconsciously strategise their consumption practices in an effort to advance, or at least to position themselves favourably, in the ‘games of culture’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 12).

It is important to clarify further what is meant by the term ‘fashion’. This clarification requires more than a simple definition of the term as definitions tend to vary. Reviewing the literature, it is clear that ‘fashion’ is not any one definite or stable article. Rather, it is something which transforms (Davis, 1992: 24), mutates, diverges, converges, and even regresses over time (Hamilton, 1990; Hebdige, 1979; McDowell, 2000; Steele, 2006). In order to clarify what fashion is exactly perhaps it is easier to establish what fashion is not. Normative understandings that relate specifically to clothing may typically propose that fashion comprises either the objects used to dress the body, or the means by which people dress and style the body. But these understandings overly-simplify and conflate what fashion actually is.

Perhaps the most commonly agreed interpretation of fashion within academic literature is that which sees it as a specific (aesthetic) system for dressing the body. And surely it is, but the problem with such evaluations is that fashion is prescribed some kind of definite and resolute form, rather than being envisaged as a concept situated within psychic realms of social interaction. Consider Thompson and Haytko’s (1997) account of the myriad of countervailing discourses that surround the field of fashion consumerism, each of them promoting value in particular appearance styles while concurrently directly or inadvertently attempting to de-value other styles. Similarly, the data derived from this study indicates that the meanings surrounding practices of self-fashioning and forms of fashion consumption are very much disputed amongst women from different class backgrounds, who do so with the intention of serving their own group interests.

For example, the actual notion of ‘being fashionable’ held several divergent and oppositional meanings. While it was perceived as a favourable label and used by women with lower levels of cultural capital to describe themselves, the same marker was considered to be highly undesirable for those with higher levels of cultural capital. The latter group saw it as representing a failure to participate at the forefront of fashion trends, or else as indicative of one’s ignorance that consuming classic styles of fashion (quality) was preferable to superfluous and ephemeral fads (quantity). Instead, spending money wisely on pieces that will have longevity in the structures of taste was seen as a marker of distinction.

According to Entwistle (2000: 2), studies of fashion ought to acknowledge that when conceptualising it, the concept should not be reified. Rather than seeing fashion as actual objects or methods of dressing, she contends that fashion is something that has a determining influence on the modes of dressing people assume, and so it becomes ‘translated’ into the everyday dress styles that consumers choose (Entwistle,
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2000: 4). I extend her argument by stressing that fashion is a practice born out of competitive social relations, and so it can be conceptualized as a competitive psycho-social mechanism that causes styles of dressing to be revised frequently.

In framing fashion this way, the array of dress styles that people adopt can be understood as different interpretations of what constitutes ‘being fashionable’ or ‘stylish’ at any point in time, depending on different taste preferences. As a result, I contend that fashion can best be understood as a psycho-social mechanism that has both derived from increasingly competitive social relations and continues to fuel them. Hence, the nature of self-fashioning is often more temporal and transient than it is stable. Fashions are consistently redefined as they are evaluated, and then either embraced and valorised, or dismissed and disregarded by divergent sets of collective groups of consumers. Many women find themselves interacting within competitive social networks, where the desire to advance to a lifestyle offering greater advantages is likely to co-exist, and psychologically clash, with the pressure to avoid shifting further down the hierarchy of lifestyles.

The work of Angela McRobbie (2005; 2008) illuminates the numerous social processes that complicate the relationship that many women today have with fashion. She demonstrates how the pressure to conform to dominant appearance standards is further intensified, and social comparison further encouraged, by the media as it saturates the marketplace with visual representations of ideal appearance codes. According to McRobbie (2008: 174), in the public sphere of social life many women today feel placed into a ‘spotlight of visibility’, which has the effect of spectacularizing feminine subjectivity. She argues that this stimulates desires in women to be able to command positive attention via their fashioned appearance, and exerts increased pressure on all classes of women to fashion themselves according to dominant tastes despite many of them lacking the necessary cultural, economic and social capital requirements to do so (McRobbie, 2008: 174).

In work in progress, I have been applying this framework to women’s self-reported experiences of consuming fashion, through which the emotions resulting from social class relations can be ascertained. For the women in this study, fashion was described as both friend and foe. They provided accounts where feminine subjectivity is inextricably tied to consumption because, for them, the practice of fashioning their femininity has the potential to produce considerable emotional rewards. As a result, knowledge of how to consume and self-fashion in the ‘correct’ ways is critically linked to their psycho-affective well being or balance, but when capital resources are lacking experiences of self-fashioning tend to be shrouded in negativity. In conceptualizing fashion as a mechanism that operates within the psychic landscape of social (classed-based) relations, it becomes evident that it continues to be used as a tool of distinction and segregation for social collectivities, albeit in increasingly less perceptible ways. Experiences linked to different class backgrounds and capital compositions produce specific sets of emotions that play a key structuring role in consumption patterning and in the production of categorisations of fashioned feminine identities. And so, this article proposes that consumer researchers should be hesitant to accept theoretical accounts that tend to dismiss the relevance of class-relations in the enactment of self-fashioning practice today.

References


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