

Fashion Environment as Community: How Digital Images Create Collective Identity

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This paper forms a challenge to only looking at the image and representation of fashion through official sources of fashion knowledge (such as magazines), by emphasizing the importance of the place of digital imagery and representations in everyday, street fashions. We argue that in order to understand how fashion communities and style groupings emerge, it is necessary to look at how fashion is experienced and transmitted through collective approval. The process of creating fashion is not static, but is a phenomenon that is a processual and ongoing. In depth ethnographic research and fashion expertise bring together this paper presented by an anthropologist and a designer.

The paper is based upon a research project which aims to document 'street' fashions in Nottingham, UK, as part of a Mass Fashion Observation. The project captures the experiential aspects of fashion, through qualitative interviewing, and serves as a visual record of these young people through digital photographs. This act of photographing was initially used as a method of research; however, to be discussed here is the ways in which with the advent of camera and video mobile phones, digital images form a crucial part of the human fashion environment. As fashions emerge through friendship groupings, the digital images of each other have become a key part of this mediation of new fashions. The accumulated photographs of the youth fashion community were displayed in a public arena; young people, on observing the photographs, identify with the fashions and community represented, and see them in a relationship of distance: as they become social and fashion commentators. The gallery of images allow them to be both the viewers and participants of the local fashion community. This community then becomes an environment of fashion 'looks' which acts as a powerful exchange and re-enforcement of collective identity.