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## **FASHION, HUMANISM & THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Fashion locates itself in the territories of commerce and culture while the internet provides avenues for us to explore, participate and disseminate in such territories. Much of the focus of the fashion industry's internet contribution revolves around the commercial arena –providing identity, profiling ranges, locating outlets and at times facilitating purchase. Cultural contribution is often disregarded as an insignificant byproduct of such sales tactics and brand strategies. This paper aims to present sites that exemplify the scope that the internet affords to widen the contributions in the cultural arena by facilitating individuals to explore the commonalities of their community experience – both within industry itself and by audiences.

This discussion involves a broad definition of humanism: embracing an attitude concerned with the interests, needs, achievements, actions and capabilities of human beings. (AHA, 2002) Within this exploration such an attitude has implications for promotion of cause-related concerns, support and facilitation of participation within global, urban sub-cultural groups, creation of dialogue between industry members and the fostering of commercial transparency and accountability.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The internet has created a new environment – essentially a potentially social space – which needs to be fully comprehended by industry players in order to effectively benefit from its scope. It is a digital tool that provides not only access to information but allows for multiple connections to be made between areas of information creating a denser, richer experience for audiences. The term 'viewer' has evolved from the notion that such audiences are both viewing and using through their navigational choices. Such an environment can be used to cohesively create relationships across previously prohibitive proximities – between brand and consumer, individuals and suppliers and sometimes between viewers themselves. Whether such relationships are active or passive is at the hands of the site host but the socio-cultural nature of such a space cannot be denied.

Implications for the fashion industry are multi-faceted. And so they should be. In a space which has the potential to be multi-layered, multi-sensory, simultaneous, plural, non-linear and participatory – the possibilities for communication are infinite. The challenge, however, is to render such communication meaningful on a larger platform than that of commerce. Through the internet, Fashion holds the power to create space for social, cultural and altruistic discourse. The suggestion is not to dislocate fashion from its commercial territory, which would amount to biting the hand that feeds it. However the multi-layering of internet based communication affords the opportunity to participate in the arena of commerce while remaining culturally relevant, responsible and active.

To follow is an exploration of online offerings covering cause-related contributions, enhancing of youth subcultures, participatory strategies, nurturing of inter-industry dialogue and communication of corporate governance. Together these contributions

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embrace such notions as accountability, inclusivity and transparency that value human relationships and social exchange along side commercial relationships and financial exchange.

## 2. CAUSE-RELATED

In an increasingly user-led marketplace attention is being paid to evolving consumer values in the shape of the 'conscious consumer'. (Ashar, 2006) Cause-related marketing as a strategy is a relatively recent response to such observations, based on a reciprocal persuasion between consumer and brand. The trend has been gaining momentum as citizens and corporates take greater responsibility for causes which were previously thought of as in governments' domains. (Barkely et al, 2005)

Brands can use such strategies to harness emotional engagement with audiences through cause-related alliances, thereby reaching new consumer segments. 'Causeploitation' (McChesney, in Riley, 2003) is a criticism that has been leveled at such strategies yet there are a number of factors that lie in favour of such developments in advertising. Firstly the notion that it is a product of the heightened demands that consumers themselves have put companies under. Secondly, it gives causes access to leverage of audiences that they wouldn't otherwise have the resources to reach, providing a potential win-win scenario. As the strategy gains maturity, companies acknowledge the heightened degree of scrutiny that the internet affords its audiences to cross-check its integrity and authenticity. (Miello, 2006)

A pioneer in this field was Italian Benetton with their *United Colors* campaigns which gave controversially high profiles to issues such as environmental disasters, AIDS and racism from the 80s. The response to their advertising led to polarized reactions from awards to boycotts but with the more recent acceptance of cause marketing it seems that perhaps they were just ahead of their time. (Tinic, 1997) In fact their ads tended to ironically acknowledge that purchasing brightly coloured sweaters would not provide solutions to larger social issues in a brave step that anticipated audiences' ability to separate commodity from cause.

Whereas their earlier ads seemed more aimed at inciting controversy through their provocative and unexplained multiple meanings, later examples were often subtly captioned and at times aligned to established charitable organizations. In terms of online examples Benetton's *Colors* magazine ([www.colors magazine.com](http://www.colors magazine.com)) profiles a particular arena in each issue such as poverty, aids or drugs. The issues are not always cause-related but a global, inclusive and humanistic attitude is usually apparent in these culturally sensitive explorations. The magazine's target audience of 18-34 year olds seems effectively engaged by Benetton's Fabbrica team which has an annual turnover of global designers from this segment.



Global heavyweight Nike has received its fair share of criticism in the past over its sweatshop involvement. Issues such as this stimulated consumer demand for corporate responsibility and it is encouraging to see that Nike have come to the party with relevant contributions in the cause-related sector.

Nike's highly successful online campaign for the Livestrong wristband and Nike's supporting 10/02 range (<http://www.nike.com/wearyellow>) was the result of an alliance with the Lance Armstrong foundation. Armstrong, a world famous cyclist was diagnosed as having cancer on October 2, 1996 and went on to form the Lance Armstrong Foundation which provides support to cancer sufferers. The Nike campaign outsold its expected target of wristbands which have by now been worn by 55 million people worldwide. It is worth noting Nike's decision not to include their logo on the wristband infers some amount of integrity and maturity has been gained since their sweatshop days. The *Wear Yellow* website profiles Armstrong and his mission in a relevant manner for Nike's audience and additionally profiles events like the Livestrong Challenge which includes walking, running and cycling components in select US cities.



A recent development in cause marketing is the networked effort as employed by Product Red, (<http://www.joinred.com>) brainchild of U2's front-man Bono and former music producer Bobby Shriver in 2006. It comprises of a multi-company effort to build awareness of and raise funds for aids victims through specifically branded products and celebrity endorsements. Supported by American Express, Motorola, Gap and Converse amongst others. The website profiles their high-impact brand in an

informative and functional manner that supports both its cause-related and commercial initiatives. This venture signals heightened development in the targeting of causes by commercial players.



### 3. PARTICIPATION

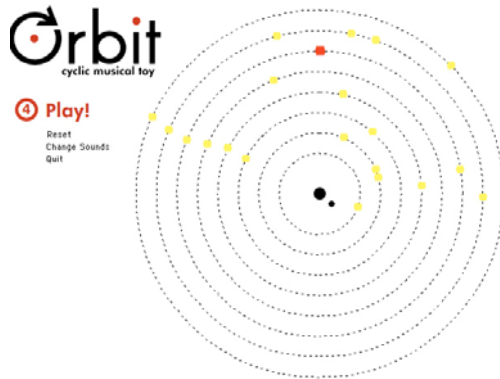
In contrast to more broadcast media like television, the internet has in fact allowed for a considerable amount of demassification of audiences leading to sharper targeting of demographic segments. In such a media scenario management of diversity takes on greater importance for marketers than previously. Knowing *where* they are can no longer form the assumption of knowing *what* they are.

A currently emerging cross-cultural group is the global teenager, (Tinic, 1997) although the scope of such attitudes often crosses the border well into the 20s segment. This nation-straddling audience seems to come complete with a built-in authenticity filtering system yet a deep desire to become engaged. They defy categorization through their singular attitudes, though welcome collaborative endeavors and participation. A group of 'hyper-heterogenous' consumers is emerging, many with mutual interest, but with customized individual tastes. (GTM, 2006)

Observers have noted that this group are not merely consumers of digital content but desire active participation – which is readily afforded through the internet. Forward thinking online players are co-opting such consumer creativity in the form of content co-creation. Focusing on individual's worth and capacity for self-realization, customization strategies are a growing trend for street-wear brands. "Customization has been a simultaneous response by both buyer and seller to establish a clear distinction in identity in an overcrowded marketplace (by sellers) and amongst one's peers (by buyers)." (GTM, 2006, p5) Such developments provide evidence of the trend towards more culturally relevant online offerings in the form of participatory and global 'tweenculture'-supporting communications.

Once again Benetton come to the fore with their participatory web examples. *Benetton Play* (<http://www.benettonplay.com>) explores play as a relevant form of expression and communication as located by international students at Fabrica. Transparency between site creators and viewers is supported through constantly

evolving developments being posted to their ‘playblog’ to which audiences may comment. The site contains the award-winning *Flipbook* (<http://www.benettonplay.com/toys/flipbook/>) which allows people to make doodle-style animations which form an (searchable) online gallery and can be emailed to friends. *Orbit* (<http://www.benettonplay.com/toys/orbit/>) is an accessible, visually engaging music-making interface that allows one to record & upload to the site and once again can be emailed to friends. These examples, alongside others at Benetton Play, provide opportunities for viewers to interact with each other online, acknowledging the potential for the internet to be a site for social interaction.



On their more teen oriented Killer Loop site (<http://www.killerloop.com/>) viewer customization is harnessed through the *Paint Spike City* feature where one can customize rail carts with graffiti which are uploaded and included in flash animations of Spike City. The site allows for globally located viewers to upload their photos of graffiti samples and makes provisions for them to comment on each others’ contributions. In fact many of Benetton’s multiple sites contain commentable-blogs, which encourage two-way communication – acknowledging the development from more limited one-way nature of broadcast media.

The Diesel brand is another fashion player that suitably harnesses the internet to aid self empowerment of its youthful and global audience. Through a series of sites it runs various competitions that aim to tapping emerging talent.

*The Diesel Wall Competition* (<http://www.dieselwall.com/>) is an annual art installation project in which the winners proposals are produced on large urban wall surfaces in Berlin and Milan. “Its just a wall – so get over it” encourages the sites’ generators. Entries can be digitally submitted and finalists are profiled online. *U-Music* (<http://www.diesel-u-music.com/>) is a competition & global platform for unsigned DJs, musicians and producers. Contributions can be uploaded as mp3 files and a number of entries are profiled each week on the site. Various other Diesel sites support emerging artists and designers. Similarly to Benetton, Diesel’s strategies are somewhat informed by a team who form part of the global tween segment – demonstrating a commitment to providing relevance for their target audience.



Sportswear giants Adidas have used the internet to further enhance the launch of their *Adicolor* campaign. (<http://www.adidas.com/adicolor>) Here they give full instructions for customizing one's white Adicolor trainers that come with textile inks. An interactive history of customisation is included on the site and music plays while one reads which is downloadable through the site. A competition for best customised Adicolors is open for public voting, further encouraging participation. Web-based strategies have been effectively combined with a product-based campaign to specifically appeal to this audience.

Levi's *Antidote* feature (<http://www.eu.levi.com/>) "is a living, growing snapshot of what people are thinking and doing across Europe. It's a collection of stories, images, sounds and movies in bite-sized chunks. With each chunk you can find out about the people behind it, and ways you can get involved in the program." It supports events and attempts to facilitate the bringing together of different groups that may share interests. Although not particularly interactive this novel magazine-style site provides an innovative interface for its diversely located European audience and celebrates global urban sub-culture.



Brazil's Havaiana sandals presents a colourful, globally pitched site. It has an area that encourages customisation and viewers can upload photos of their flip-flops in global locations to the site and form a participatory community of 'Havaianatics'.



It is interesting to note that the hugely popular online photo community Flickr ([www.Flickr.com](http://www.Flickr.com)) is also a significant source of owners' Havaiana images as well as many other brands-in-the-field type photos which can be traced according to tags. Exhibition of such brand loyalty and content-creation from within an online community suggests that fashion brands may have something to learn from Flickr's successful interface design.

#### 4. INTER-INDUSTRY

Websites that nourish and provide interaction between members of the fashion industry are less prominent in numbers and by design, most likely due to a lack of corporate input. One hopes that members will begin to acknowledge the effective space that the internet provides for dialogue and exchange of information.

Britain's *Labour Behind the Label* project, has launched a site which aims at *Fashioning An Ethical Industry*. <http://www.fashioninganethicalindustry.org/> It proposes to provide fashion students and faculty with a global overview of the garment industry, creating awareness of current practices and initiatives and encouraging active participation in raising standards in production models. The site is not particularly savvy in terms of interface design but it encourages dialogue through links to a Yahoo Discussion Group.



The World Global Style Network, (<http://www.wgsn.com/>) based in London but with international offices, boasts a client list of many large scale brands. One can subscribe and then access their findings on trend analysis, retail reports, etc. News on trade shows, catwalks, youth markets, material trends are also present. The team draws on the multiple skills of journalists, designers and researchers to centralize findings. Although it does not create a social space between subscribers, it does support networked activity and exchange of information and resources. Additionally it makes full and functional use of the online environment.

Discovered In <http://discoveredin.com/> acts as a hub between designers, potential stockists and interested netizens for the *Eco Design Lab*, brainchild of British-born and Brazil-based Paul Barnett. Registered designers can submit designs to be selected for incubation and production in collaboration with local Brazilian artisans and Barnett is establishing a distribution network also. With plans to expand the model to other developing countries, it's a project that deserves attention as it evolves.

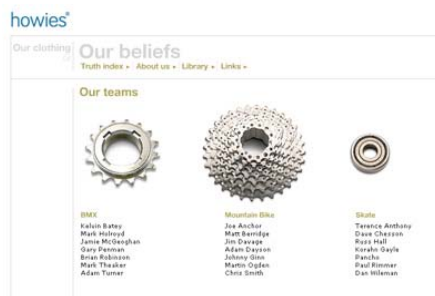
#### 5. TRANSPARENCY AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

The reciprocal persuasion that drove brands to cause marketing has similarly encouraged a sense of corporate transparency for which the internet provides an effective space to communicate. Employees increasingly want to work for socially

aware & ethical companies as do stakeholders want to feel that they have invested in such.

Examples such as Timberland's site ([www.timberland.com](http://www.timberland.com)) display a lengthy .pdf outlining their corporate responsibility which presents its aim to become "the reference brand for social accountability. To this end it includes information on their community investment programme, production model disclosure and their employee's volunteer initiative.

Offerings from smaller companies maybe less corporate in nature but reflect the growing trend in wearing one's authenticity on one's well stitched sleeve. British-based Howies ([www.howies.co.uk/](http://www.howies.co.uk/)) is an environmentally conscious, casual sportswear label that communicates with integrity on its website. It profiles its team, (another trend in the humanising of companies' communication) what inspires them, their ideals and donation policy on sales.



Such displays are reconceptualising industry involvement beyond the mere sales of merchandise. (Tinic, 1997) They also provide an avenue for companies that have tainted past records to evidence their amends. Such is the case with Gap and Nike displaying membership to the Global Alliance which supports workers rights in developing countries amongst other concerns. Within the internet environment concerned viewers find it increasingly easy to fact-check and more importantly communicate such checking to others, leaving industry players little choice but to behave.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Reciprocal persuasion has led to changes both in what people expect from fashion industry communications and what the industry feel worthy of providing. Add to this the scope that the internet has added for networked activity and one can observe that it is becoming very much possible for the fashion industry to make online contributions that cross-pollinate the arenas of culture of commerce. Whether they be cause-related, dialogue supporting or encouraging of self-actualisation through participation, they provide some sense of individuals being able to relevantly engage with commonality through communication. One hopes that such initiatives gain momentum and maturity in providing enhanced meaning.

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Meena Kadri is a currently a faculty member in the Communication Design Department of India's prestigious National Institute of Design. With a bachelors degree in Anthropology from New Zealand and significant experience as a graphic designer and lecturer, she recently attained a postgraduate qualification in from Australia's RMIT which included research into Design for New Environments.