

FASHION ENVIRONMENT AS COMMUNITY: HOW DIGITAL IMAGES CREATE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

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.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper forms a challenge to only focusing upon 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. Magazines like Harpers and Vogue provide us with the official face of fashion, as it is mitigated and brokered by vested interest groups, such as stylists, editors and advertisers. These magazines define which trends are 'in', or who is the current fashion muse. In contrast, this paper focuses upon fashion as it is created and worn by ordinary people. Fashion is defined here not as a top-down process defined through official sources, but as it emerges organically through the creative practice of assemblage (McRobbie, 1994, Woodward, 2005). In focusing upon individual creativity, this research forms an important contribution to understanding the innovations of new styles, as creativity is not understood from the point of view of particular designers

(McDermott, 1999, White, 2000), nor from defined 'sub-cultures' (Muggleton 2002, Sweetman, 2004), but rather as the everyday practice of ordinary people.

Whilst 'street' style has long been recognized as culturally significant, there has been no systematic attempt to document and understand it. This is what this research proposes to do. This paper is part of the larger Fashionmap project, at Nottingham Trent university, which involves a mass observation of 'street' fashion, in order to document and understand how new fashions emerge and take root. This is particularly important as 'the street' has become the topic for major exhibitions (at the Victoria and Albert Museum), designers (such as Vivienne Westwood) and academics (Polhemus, 1994). As a mass documentation of street fashion, we are situating the individual assemblages within the wider fashion communities of Nottingham, in order to understand the relationship between innovation and style convergences. The urban environment involves a multiplicity of fast-moving visual fashion stimuli, from the items in shop windows, to advertising hoardings, to clothing as seen by people on the street or in particular locations. To be discussed in today's paper is how digital images form a crucial part of this visual environment. With the ubiquity of digital cameras as part of mobile phones, the constant data capturing of each other forms part of the everyday interactions of young people. We discuss today how such daily practices of digital capture of fashion 'looks' becomes part of the establishment of localized fashion trends.

The Fashionmap project utilized digital photography initially as a means of data-capture, to record what people are wearing; however, as the digital images were amalgamated and displayed in a public space in the university, we also discuss how young people respond to these images as they both identify with the images, and see their 'community' in a relationship of distance. We therefore discuss how these young people are situating themselves in 'fashion' and assessing their own style status. As 'street style' sections have become a crucial part of fashion periodicals, we discuss how this impacts upon how these young people see the displays of images of their own socialized networks through a similar lens. This involves a complex mediation of the understanding of 'official' fashion, and of their sense of localized fashion identities.

2. METHODS AND DATA CAPTURE

2.1 The Fashionmap Project

The Fashionmap project was created in the School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University in 2001, out of a realization that high street fashion, and indeed the consumption of fashion by ordinary people, was under-represented within research into fashion. Despite the dominance of the discipline of cultural studies in current fashion research, with its emphasis upon the everyday constructions of meaning (Breward, 2000), there has been little attention paid to fashion from the perspective of everyday assemblages and practices. Rather the emphasis has fallen upon the textual analysis and decoding of magazines, or more clearly defined 'sub-cultural' style, which as McRobbie (1991) has highlighted is usually male sub-culture. As such, this project has as its core aim to document street fashion, in order to understand both what this says about 'fashion'

and the generation of trends and styles, and indeed also as these trends are situated in particular cultural contexts, as a more broad reaching cultural commentary. This paper involves the marriage of the two perspectives; as we point to both the ways fashion is a localized group identity that emerges from local youth communities, yet also as it ties in to wider cultural trends, such as the impact of digital technology as a medium of everyday life. Moreover, the research project has commercial implications, as it arises out of an awareness of the dearth of qualitative information about the consumer from the point of view of the high street, reliant as it is upon quantitative EPOS data (du Gay, 1996, Wrigley and Lowe, 1996), or the mathematical modeling techniques which attempt to map and manipulate consumers into buying items (Birtwistle and Shearer, 2001, Fisher and Rajaram, 2000). This research also is a multidisciplinary project which is a resource for academics to research fashion from a variety of perspectives in order to understand fashion as a situated and organic process.

The Mass Fashion Observation aimed to capture street fashion both in terms of in terms of the visual dimensions and also the subjective experiential consumer viewpoint. As such, the project involved students going to various locations in Nottingham (both on 'the street' and to bars and clubs) and photograph and carry out brief interviews with people, who were seen to be either wearing or repudiating the current trend. As such, digital photography was a key tool of the data capture, utilized first of all as a means of documentation. However, as the project progresses, what becomes apparent is that in fact the digital images, and the responses interviewees had to being photographed was in fact one of the most significant aspects of the project, and the ways in which digital imagery mediates and produces the sense of belonging, through sameness and difference, forms the focus of this paper.

2.2. Situating the research in a digital world

The use of mass data capture is a methodology adopted within trend insight agencies such as Trendwatching.com, and Futurelaboratory.com, both providers of brand and futures strategy, which rely on and conduct 'Consumer Attitudes Audits' (Future Laboratory, 2006). These audits are based upon data captured through visual digital communication research and it is this and other methods of relaying outcomes through digital communication methods that powers instant 'fashion literacy' and trend information. The generation of students who are our future designers have fully embraced the digital as a powerful research tool. The model is well established and the veracity of information is unquestioned by this generation of researching students. The cell phone is continuously developed to carry visual information of increasing knowledge and interactive complexity. 'Whopla!', ROCsport.mob and RIENTO are the first CELLebrity magazine to carry images and articles on global celebrities, sports and rock stars, and so on (magazines transmitted via mobile phones). A multi media mobile magazine of instant style icon information the service can also be used for personalisation on the subscribers hand set (www.springwise.com). The photo sharing company 'flickr.com' now displays close to 70 million tagged pictures, uploaded by individuals around the world. Approximately 10 million are added every month (www.trendwatching.com/newsletter).

01 06). This pace of pro-active postings allows researchers to live vicariously through this stream of information.

In the Fashionmap project our tech-savvy researching students naturally use the mobile phone camera and appropriate and utilise any other emerging technologies to compare and qualify data. This generation conceptualises fashion through a multi media lens that the boomers can only catch the complexity of. Digital photography becomes a central component of carrying out the research, given that it is so culturally ubiquitous, and is a key means through which fashion and everyday life is mediated for this youth community. This projects in fact uses students to carry out the research, and in the cases of many of the bars and clubs where photographs were taken, these are their usual hang-outs. Whilst invariably, their presence with an audio recorder too also affected the response of those they were interviewing (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, Pink, 2001), what was evident from the data we uncovered, is that in fact people were very relaxed about having their photographs taken. Of the 800 encounters there are very few records of people refusing to have their photograph taken. In fact, the opposite was found to be taking place, in many cases, people were asking to have their photograph taken. One of our researchers reported that when she was in the process of photographing some people, other people walking past on the street came and asked to be part of it saying '*whatever it is you're doing, can I be part of it?*'. There is therefore a clear desire to be recorded on photograph.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Interactive digital research processes

What is interesting is that initially we anticipated taking photographs to merely be a means to record something, and the subsequent interview to be the interactive part of the research. However, in fact it was the process of taking the photographs and the subsequent response that involves the interviewees the most. A particularly good example of this, is a research project that is being carried out as part of Fashionmap at the moment into 'kids in tracksuits' (Murphy, 2006), looking at this particular fashion style as it is linked to constructions of hip-hop fashions and styles. Interestingly, in this research project, often people were extremely unwilling to be interviewed at first, and seemed hostile to two academic researchers approaching them with a clipboard. However, once the digital camera is part of the encounter, the situation changes. Individuals who were hostile and reluctant to be part of the research stand and pose for the camera. A pertinent example of this is a couple photographed on their way out in the evening. The boy was wearing a black baseball cap, black puffer jacket, pale blue jeans, and black trainers. His girlfriend was wearing aviator shades balanced on the top of her head, a pale blue denim jacket, a fake Gucci bag, a ripped micro-mini denim skirt, with fishnet tights revealed beneath and flat white knee length boots. The process of taking their photograph was a lengthy one, as in total 8 photographs were taken, swapping between taking ones of the girlfriend and boyfriend together, and then him alone, then her alone.

For the final picture, the girl removes her denim jacket in order for her to be photographed in the outfit she will be wearing in the club she is going to: revealing a

tweed waistcoat and red bra underneath it. Every picture that was taken by the researcher had to be shown to the couple for approval, unsuitable ones were rejected, as they carried on until they found an array of ones they liked. The photographs were taken in the evening, in the city centre, and there was a constant stream of fellow revelers passing by. The couple remained unbothered by the jeering and rude comments people were making, instead retorting to any passing insults with *'I'm the one getting my photo taken, you know what I mean yeah'*. This example highlights many points which were common to encounters within this research: the sense in which having your photograph taken was a source of pride. Innumerable people who had their photograph taken, asked if the researcher would show it to anyone, asking if it could be used for any *'modelling'*. The prospect of fame which seemed to be suggested by the photograph was an assumption a great deal of people made.

What is evident is that no longer are people merely objects of the camera, the act of taking photographs is an interactional encounter, as they survey their images in the photographs. Often people rejected photographs as they stated, *'that doesn't look like me'*. Clearly these young people are so familiar with seeing their image in digital form that they know what to expect and conceptualise their own style and identity through such photographs. What is fascinating about these encounters is the poses adopted before the camera. Very few people merely stood as they were, casually and naturally before the camera. Many people removed items of clothing (in the most extreme case one woman removed her top in order to show her surgically enhanced chest), adjusted waistbands, restyled their hair. There is a very definite sense that these individuals being interviewed were performing for the camera. In most cases this readjusting of items of clothing, and repositioning their bodies in front of the camera was a subtle one. Nonetheless, it clearly demonstrates that identity is performed, through bodily deportment and the clothing we wear (Butler, 1990, 1993, Entwistle, 2000, 2001). This performance is both explicit, and implicit: something which may become deliberate in front of the camera as people adjust the items of clothing before their picture is taken. Yet at the same time, it may be implicit, as now the act of having a photograph taken is such an ordinary part of the quotidian, in particular through mobile phone cameras.

The notion of the un-thought out performance, is raised in an observation done of Nottingham city's 'indie rock scene' clubs. As observers and consumers of this 'scene' themselves the researcher group were interested to find out what particular style adoption had taken place influenced by recent exposure in the media; zines, venue flyers, blogs, and websites of so called 'alternative' fashions coming from rock stars such as Pete Doherty. What actually emerged from this observation, when comparing the resulting digital images was the similar body stance adopted when the 'captured' posed. The pose adopted seemed to conflict with the 'alternative' image that might be suggested from their clothing style. A preference to hang the head to one side and to point feet inwards appeared rather coy. The observers were shocked to find this conflicting with 'hard' image attitude and denounced and mocked the images. The clearly thought-out act of assembling the appearance is one of differentiation (Woodward, K, 2002). At the same time their bodily posture, when being photographed is in fact the same as many of our observances of how other people behave. Their bodily deportment is therefore an

internalized and learnt social script (Mauss, 1973). As the presence of photographs is such an ordinary part of daily life, they unthinkingly adopt ‘the pose’.

People both respond to the camera in front of them as they would on an everyday level, yet this also involves a projection out into the wider fashion media. What is incredible is the amount of people who asked about modeling. On one instance a woman’s daughter commented as they had their photograph taken ‘*you’ve made it*’, and the mother then rejected a photo which showed her looking ‘*too fat*’, she then asked ‘*are you workin’ for a magazine or something, am I going to be famous?*’ Even though the digital camera is a familiar part of the everyday, it is also part of the ways in which individuals connect themselves to the images presented in magazines, and on the television. The camera becomes a means through which they can imagine themselves as an image on television. The everyday act of getting dressed involves imagining the self as others see it (Mead, 1982), here this is extended to considerations not only of how your friends will see you, but how ‘the public’ will also see you. Fuelled by the Big Brother culture, wherein tales of ‘ordinary people’ being shot to fame allow people to imagine ‘it could be me’, the digital camera offers a point of connection between the everyday and with the wider official media, and the potential fame this offers.

3.2 The material digital images: interacting with the images

The visual images collected therefore can be seen as a crucial way in which these individuals conceptualise their appearance and identity, as a point of connectivity between the everyday use of digital photography and as part the public media (magazines and television). However, the next stage of the research demonstrates how this ‘self perception’ is in fact firmly linked to how the shared fashion styles and communities are understood. During the process of research, as the young people being photographed wished to look at their images, to be re-photographed, they had already become viewers of themselves. They were not only the object for the camera to capture, but in fact were confident and assured enough to reverse the roles, as they assessed the quality of the images, and not just the researcher who did. This act, whereby young people became viewers of themselves, was accentuated when the totality of images collected were selected from, and then displayed in a public space. A selection of the images were put up on boards in the entrance halls of the university; what was striking was the response of students as they passed through. It rapidly became a hub of activity, as students gathered around, sometimes individually, often in groups, to look and to comment upon the pictures. Most of the pictures taken were of young people, like themselves. The students could either therefore see a literal image of themselves, an image of someone they knew, or an image that could well be them. Therefore students are able to identify and connect with the images they see posted up before them. Yet also importantly this is not just a relationship of identification and of closeness. It is also a relationship of distance. Images that in isolation may seem familiar, maybe on someone else’s mobile phone, or on a friends wall, come to appear alien when in a public location, and placed next to a set of other images. The images have to be measured up against each other, and as such come to be seen as a total look.

The responses ranged from seeing someone as really ‘cool’ and a positive appraisal of the look, through to condemnations. What is interesting is the relationship between what the viewer of the images was wearing, and the photographs they responded to. For example one young woman looking at the display was wearing jeans and Converse trainers – something of a key Nottingham ‘look’. She rejected and condemned several pictures for being ‘boring’. One she particularly disliked was of a girl in jeans, a scarf, a khaki jacket, and trainers, she was rejected for ‘*looking like everyone else*’. Interestingly, it was a look not dissimilar from what the observer herself was wearing, but in rejecting it she was able to distance herself from it. In contrast the outfits she liked were ones she described as ‘*different*’ and ‘*interesting*’. Her favourite being a photograph of one girl taken in a bar in Nottingham, she was wearing a worn grey cardigan, loose bright green t-shirt, baggy white blue and red print skirt, bright blue leg warmers and white shoes: which was indeed an unusual and striking combination. However, the look is far removed from what the observer herself was wearing; when she looks at this photograph and gives it her approval she also states: ‘*I know her*’. In doing so she is able to attach herself to this look by association. As such, through knowing her, she is part of the social network, and therefore as part of the same fashion community.

The responses to the photographs are divided into both approval and down-right ridicule. One of the key ways this happens is through the categorizing others as ‘chavs’. In several of the groups who looked at the photographs, they laughed at certain images, and rejected them for being ‘chav’, such as the presence of trucker hats on girls. the stereotype of a chav that was invoked was seen in a couple of pictures, regularly commented upon, through items such as a denim ripped skirt, white shoes, and the overall appearance of fake tanned legs and white face, straightened hair. One viewer of the photographs exclaimed ‘*who let her into uni!*’ The implication of these comments is that they are unified in their capacity to ridicule a group which is defined in opposition to them. The very presence of the ‘other’ group in their territory is seen as an affront. They are therefore implicitly defining the style territory of their group. Commonality is defined through difference.

3.3 Icons and muses: just People Like Us.

This process of identifying with the images before them is not only therefore the act of identifying with particular individuals. It is also requiring students to position themselves and relate themselves to the images as a collectivity: to position themselves as an insider or outsider of this particular fashion community, often through notions of sameness and difference. As such, they project themselves into this shared youth fashion community, as part of it. The act of looking at and commenting upon these images becomes a moment in which the style grouping becomes consolidated and validated. No longer is the notion of what people wear, or who is a member of this grouping, as diffuse and nebulous as it seems ordinarily, but it is concretized here, and given form. Importantly also, as it is in a space of display for the public to view the images, their fashion status is also validated. The looks and styles of the group are good enough to be displayed. This act of creating the community is only possible through the process and act of reflection.

When these images are presented before the students, they are able to see them both as 'other' and as 'the same'. This is made apparent in one research project, which was investigating men's responses to current fashion trends. The researcher found that men would find it easier to identify their own 'style' of dressing and their preferences for evolving that style when shown examples of other role models. They preferred role models to look at taken from the Fashionmap archive than other 'icons' such as male models or adverts or retail displays. One male, when looking at the Fashionmap images, provoked this comment '*this guy looks like he has taken too much inspiration from the magazines; very false looking*' (this referring to a male holding an umbrella in a cavalier way) another commented about an image of a male '*I Like this look; it's refined, timeless and isn't trying to make a statement*'. Importantly what is happening here is that he constructs his identity through a process of discrimination (Bannister and Fransella, 1986). We are therefore able to position ourselves through reaction to what others present to us.

To take this notion further the influence of what is termed 'icons' or 'muses', terms used by the fashion media to mean those people who express distinctive personal style in tune with the time, has always been a stimulus for fashion evolution. When we compare by decade what is promoted in official sources of fashion, magazines, retail and brand advertising etc to the visual records of what is worn in film, television, and celebrity events (*Audrey Hepburn, Sara Jessica Parker, Posh Spice*) we see that the direct message of clothes being worn by 'real people' mediates between reality and promotion, these images make fashion 'possible' to ordinary people. This is particularly apparent in current magazines such as Grazia, which has a picture of the celebrity, and then next to each item they are wearing, where you can buy a high street, affordable version of it.

What our research shows is that, this notion of the 'muse' happens in the people we see around us every day. This is particularly apparent when the digitally captured image of what is worn on the street is placed in the public domain. The image is given iconic status through that act of public display. Digital technologies give the image a 'same as us' accessibility. As one encounter relates '*I have never been one with celebrities, just because they are wearing it makes it look cool, but what if I don't?*' This conversation with a man also records, in gauging what he wears against his social group, '*I just wear what other people aren't wearing*', in this case the anti '*people like us*' ethic is a positive stance: by asserting what he is not, he is able to define the boundaries of what he is. Another man interviewed states '*even if I see a trend that I like, but then I see masses of it in the images, then I wont wear it*'. This carries the same notion of sameness or difference that the public display of the Fashionmap images. Fashionmap does perform the function it set out to achieve, revealing how fashion is increasingly bottom up, rather than top down, and that retail and the fashion system media is no longer a place for inspiration, change and personality - the three new touchstones for the 21st Century shopper, but for conformity, ubiquity and the slow killing of the fashion moment.

4. CONCLUSIONS: Digital fashions: the coming together of the everyday and the 'unofficial':

Although this research started out looking at the ‘unofficial’ face of fashion, what emerges from this paper is that the photographic image, as a producer of fashion styles and trends, involves the coming together of the official and the unofficial intersect. As the urban environment involves a constant flow of rapidly changing ephemeral digital imagery, the images in magazines and billboards and the images of friends on mobile phones and passing by in the street, all intermingle. In looking at how new styles are generated it is evident that the localized fashion communities, and styles, emerge from particular locations, and comparing themselves to each other. However, this also involves the incorporation of the fashion media. Their viewing of the images displayed in the university entrance is mediated through their experiences of seeing ‘street style’ sections in magazines. In magazines, the ordinary person photographed outside a shop, on a street corner, is placed within the domain of official recognition as being ‘in’ or of being ‘stylish’. The young people in our research come to internalize that this is also the case with their images. The types of images, taken on streets, in pubs, or ordinary young people, are very similar to those seen in *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*. However, what is different is that these are people from Nottingham, people they know or might know, or even might be. As such, they become validated as part of an official fashion community.

Similarly the notion of the fashion ‘icon’ in magazines or in films, is seen at the level of the local: as someone to aspire to looking like, as a style leader, yet also someone who makes fashion accessible. This accessibility is even more marked when seen in terms of the familiar icon or muse, as they are seen to hang out at the same bars as you, go to the same shops, and are thus placed even closer within reach. The act of identifying your self with these icons or muses does not necessarily involve dressing in exactly the same way, as is often assumed of sub-culture. In far more subtle ways, what matters is going to the same bars, frequenting the same places, and also in the act of defining someone as stylish, involves positioning yourself within the same fashion community. This is even more accentuated at the level of the rejection of particular looks. The defining of boundaries, and the adoption of styles is an organic practice that does not involve the ‘copying’ of trends. However, what this research has shown is that it is not entirely distinct from ‘official’ fashion images, which are an inseparable part of the visual stimuli that we are exposed to habitually. The amalgamation of ‘the official’ and the ‘unofficial’ means that these young people are able to position their community within the wider abstracted fashion community and environment. In this process of commenting and distancing, their community is placed within the wider domain of fashion, and they come to see it as both familiar, and unfamiliar. In seeing themselves through the lens of ‘official fashion’ temporarily, they are then able to re-see and reconfirm their fashion community.

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