

A Market for Self and Collective Identities: the Fashion Industry Between Conventional and Relational Goods

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Introduction: why fashion?

What a frivolous, flashy and ephemeral phenomenon, driven by extreme marketing practices and by the commoditization of illusions and dreams, has to do with the value of human and social relations?

Sociology scholars from Simmel to Barthes and Bourdieu told us that the nature of fashion is embedded in social relation and that the power of fashion is fuelled by semantics and language.

Buying a fashion good or searching a job in the creative fashion environment in preference to other sectors is matter of “being part of” or “being in relation with” more than of individual tastes and preferences. On the other hand, the market value of the goods produced and sold by the fashion business is largely depending on relations and collective feelings, in both the supply and demand side of the business. We thus hold that when fashion is part of the business an additional value, coming from social interrelation is created.

We consider fashion as a potentially interesting field of research for the exploration of the relationship between consumption, industry organization, production of commodities and generation of relational value.

The hybrid nature of the fashion business

Fashion goods have a hybrid nature. They are produced in a land halfway between cultural and manufacturing industries and blend material and intangible elements. Fashion creates value by combining in a single product fibers and leather with meanings and symbolic elements (Malossi 1998, Hesmondalgh 2002, Ricchetti 2006). Products similar in terms of material content have different value for the consumers, according to the embedded fashion and *coolness*. The value generated by the fashion component (i.e. the cultural and symbolic components) can be by large higher than the value generated by the material medium.

The whole organization of the fashion industry gravitates around the search for a solution to the problem of embedding fashion into the material component. The problem –drawing from a well known book on the Hollywood movie industry by William Goldman (1984) we can name it as “the nobody knows problem” – is all about the relational nature of the fashion component. A white paper on creativity issued by the Italian Ministry of culture, clearly makes the point:

“Material cultural goods are also relational goods. The latest trend in fashion, design and cuisine is not decreed by an isolated individual. Trends are social phenomena. The demand for fashion or design objects is a demand for a social symbol, which cannot be affirmed a priori, but will only be sanctioned at the end of a specific process. A good will be in demand not because it is considered a fashion good, but because the context we live

in and in which the good will be used considers it to be a fashion good". (Santagata 2009, p.89)¹

The role of the fashion content goes far beyond tastes. In societies of individuals, tastes not only express the socialization of individuals, but also their individualization and therefore their specific identity which distinguishes them from all other members of society. In addition to the demand for social distinction and social identity there is also a demand for individual distinction and individual identity (Barrère and Santagata, 2005). Our consumption choices reveal what we are and what we want to be. But symbolic value and cultural meaning of consumer goods are context dependent (Rosenbaum, 1999) and essentially relational (Bourdieu, 1985) while the context itself is constantly changing so that "*fluidity could be the ultimate solidity*" (Bauman, 2001).

The hybrid nature triggers a further interesting combination of features. Fashion goods are conventional private goods on one hand, whose value for the consumer is based on individual functionality (to cover, warm and protect.), on the other hand, fashion has an intrinsic relational meaning that cannot be valued, and does not actually exist, without cultural value sharing, symbolic interchange and community building.

The value for the consumer, the monetary price he is ready to pay for a fashion good, is the sum of a *private component* - the owner in possession of the good can exercise private property rights on it- and of a *public component* -the style, the fashion content and the coolness that are non rival/non excludable properties - which includes a *relational component*- more *anti-rival* than *non-rival* (Becchetti, Pelloni, Rossetti 2008 p.4), as interpersonal sharing generates (increases the) value more just not destroying it. A trend is *fashion* only if it is shared by many people as a statement Giorgio Armani is credited with makes clear: "it is fashion only when it is sold to many people".

The relational component embedded in the - definitely material - conventional private good, is supplied as a *bundle*, but plays a crucial role in setting the market price of the good. Indeed the relational component cannot be defined *ex-ante* by the seller, but is generated *ex-post* by the *shared feelings* of the buyers, that form the *Zeitgeist*. When the product is misaligned with the socially generated fashion trends, the market value of the item decreases and the good will eventually be sold at a reduced price during the end of season sales. Thus the market value of the good is more influenced by the good's capacity to make the buyer feeling *part of* the community of the fashion conscious consumer or dressed according to the right code as *part of* a group or a subculture, than by individual preferences of the consumers.

¹ Fashion goods are not to be mistaken for luxury goods (i.e. positional goods or related to conspicuous consumption), even though a fashion good can be a luxury good as well. Fashion goods can definitely be cheap, as current market trends clearly show, their main value deriving from coolness (innovation) and symbolic content.

Moreover, on the supply side of the business, the search for an *ex-ante* alignment with the *Zeitgeist* is actively pursued by the producers trying to capture feelings and ethereal trends. It is a definitely complex exercise that involves establishing relationships with the *fashion conscious consumers* -many of these *fashion conscious consumers* are actually part of the fashion community as creative workers themselves - and among the creative workers that take part in the production process: designers and manufacturers in multilateral-multicompetence system of relations. It is what can be named as the *fashion community*.

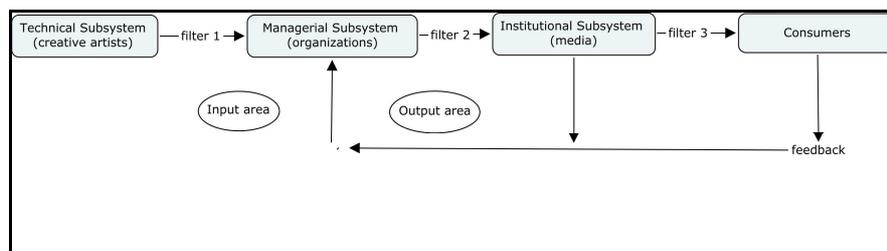
The potential cooperative nature of relationships in the field of fashion

In this framework, design and production processes in the field of fashion can be called collective creative: everyone, from the fashion designers to the users (consumers) is a carrier of specialized knowledge and takes part in the creation process according to collaborative modalities. To analyze what is happening in the fashion system, a three relational dimensions classificatory model of collective creativity processes can be used, based on: (1) *higher* horizontal dimension: the development of forms of collective creativity between producers and professionals, (2) vertical dimension: the interaction between producers and consumers of cultural contents and products, which claims a pattern of circularity between production and consumption, (3) *lower* horizontal dimension: the process of collaboration and sharing between consumers (political consumerism, boycott / *buycott*, unconventional communication, new genres of media, such as blogs, social network, forum etc.).

What does it mean *higher* horizontal, *lower* horizontal and vertical dimensions? The *higher* vs *lower* labels refer to a representation of the fashion system as a *pipeline* with an upstream (*higher*) part including: design, production, marketing, delivering, and a downstream (*lower*) part including the consumption process.

The fashion system is usually represented in such a form because the supply chain is considered as a *route* and commodities to be *simply provided* by enterprises to consumers. In this view, the material as well the intangible values of fashion commodities are thought as created/produced at the higher levels of the pipeline. The model provided by Paul Hirsch forty years ago (Hirsch 1972) represents very well the idea that the creation and production of fashions are firmly and only in the hands of enterprises and creative agencies.

Fig. 1: The selective route of creative industries, according to P. Hirsch, 1972
(source: Griswold 1994)



Hirsch, talking of the organizational structure of cultural industries, described it as a "selective route" (see fig. 1):

Our frame of reference is the cultural industry system, comprised of all organizations engaged in the process of filtering new products and ideas as they flow from 'creative' personnel in the technical subsystem to the managerial, institutional and societal levels of organization. (...) Before it can elicit any audience response, an art object first must succeed in a) competition against others for selection and promotion by an entrepreneurial organization and then in b) receiving mass-media coverage (...). It must be ordered by retail outlets for display or exhibition to consumers (Hirsch 1972, p. 642-643).

Within this framework, consumers play the role of audience, asked to express feedbacks, often surveyed only through purchasing acts or market research.

It is a classical "top down model", drawn on a functionalist framework of organizational control and facilitation of innovations (Boskoff 1964; Hirsch 1972) and considers cultural industries - and fashion industries among them - as organizations producing commodities. Sure, these are commodities with intangible added value that has to be appreciated by audience/consumers. They however seem not to be comprised in the realm of relational goods, that are often thought as services whose value derives from the interactions and relationships needed to produce and use them (Bruni 2005; Gui 2005; Uhlener 1989):

Relational goods are those relational dimensions that can be neither produced nor consumed individually. This is because they are based on ways and motivations that drive interactions among people and can be appreciated only through reciprocal sharing (Bruni 2007, p. 154).

A traditional view - settled by the major scholars Simmel and Veblen at the beginning of 20th Century, when modern fashion played a meaningful role as a specific cultural phenomenon in the developing of commercial and industrial major cities (London, Paris, Berlin)- classifies fashion items as "goods for social competition" that serve the social differentiation process among classes and social groups.

But does this view still hold in our contemporary cities and societies?

To answer the question we need to start from the above mentioned hybrid and relational nature of fashion goods, taking into consideration the relationships that are triggered by fashion good or the fashion goods are a crucial part of. The results of recent research about both the supply and demand side of the fashion business provide us with an alternative to the traditional view of fashion goods as "goods for social competition".

On the supply side, Volonté 2003 describes the "diffused creativity model", a form of collective creativity based on the cooperative involvement of a wide range of professionals from the designers/creators of collections to the sales managers and consumers alike. Some Italian scholars highlighted its economic (Ricchetti, Cietta 2006) and socio-organizational (Giusti 2009) dimensions. Work in the cultural industry of fashion is embedded in a constant intercultural negotiation between experts belonging to different strategic domains (style, product, marketing). This can be referred to as a higher horizontal level of collective creativity. Accordingly, fashion items are not produced individually, even if the context where fashion firms live in and work is highly competitive.

Furthermore, despite this competitive atmosphere, creative people and consultants in the fashion business find a subjective reward from stimulating work conditions more than from, or besides, monetary or prestige incentives. Recent research on fashion designers in Milan (Volonté 2011; Arvidsson & Malossi 2011) outline an ambivalent situation, which is typical of lower level creative labour (Gill - Pratt 2008), which had been called "passionate work" (Mc Robbie 2008). Young professionals experience challenging employment conditions (low salary, high number of working hours, precarious forms of contract and vague criteria for promotion etc), especially when they are entering the sector with high education degrees. Even if work conditions are so hard, young professionals often describe their job using expressions and words as "my hobby is my work", fun, creativity, imagination, play. Their reward, after all, comes from intangible benefit that seem to be existential components of happiness. We don't know exactly if the pleasure they experience comes from the properly relational aspects of their activities. It could be that relationships are source of competition, while fun comes from a good idea somebody has had individually, but, believing the narratives in the mentioned research, the collaborative and collective procedures to realize fashion items seem to be dominant in the whole process: one fashion designer, for example tales the core of his work as the product of collaboration: "[the collaboration] helps to go far away, well beyond what you could do alone (...). Surely even the product I design comes from staying in contact with many other people I trust in and who trust me. I believe so much in the collaboration" (cited in Volonté 2008, p. 191).

We can try to set a first hypothesis: on the supply side, the process through which fashion is produced involves a higher horizontal level of collective creativity, that is highly relational and this relational nature is felt as rewarding by people who work in this field.

What about the demand side? Forms of creative production between consumers had been acknowledged at least since cultural studies had developed their field research in the '80s. Creative work done by ordinary people is normally considered "work for the meaning", like young people do, for example, with their rooms, diaries, motorbikes (Willis 1990) and today also with iPods, PCs etc. For decades fashion has been playing an important role in this kind of activities, which contribute to the construction of social identities of people, through such relational practices as intergenerational differentiation and social identification with friends, classmates etc. With the diffusion of social networks however a new wide field of creative work becomes available for consumers. Even if empirical research is still lacking on this topic, the creative work through web goes from boycott campaigns to management of new forms of social consumption, like Italian "GAS" (Solidarity Purchasing Groups). Fashion hasn't been the first sector to be involved in these practices of political consumerism, but finally it happened (Mora 2008;). Furthermore, fashion blogging is today a quite powerful device for consumers' horizontal collaboration, despite risks and ambivalences the phenomenon contains (Mora - Pedroni 2011).

Let's set a second hypothesis: Real consumption practices have always had a relational nature, if we consider fashion as a system of communication among people, groups, cultures. Web 2.0 however is playing a new role in the relational construction of fashion, allowing people to share discourses and to promote and organize actions. We can call these relational practices lower horizontal dimension of collective creative work.

Finally, another dimension of collective creativity, that could be defined as vertical, can be outlined, if we take seriously into account the consequences of the cultural productive skills of consumers, we made reference to above: production and consumption cannot be considered separate moments of a unilateral relationship anymore. This is at last clear in fashion industry (Mora 2006), where interpretative models (like Griswold's diamond, 1994) accept the circularity among production and consumption (Mora 2005; Ruggerone 2001; Du Gay et Al. 1997). As Louise Crewe stated some years ago:

"value is increasingly being constructed relationally through recursive feedback links between producers and consumers, opening up new possibilities for coproduction in fashion markets. What is interesting now, however, is the scale and pace at which models of coproduction are evolving, and the fashion sector is arguably leading the way in steering and shaping this trend. This in turn begins to challenge conventional understandings of a number of key concepts, including branding, design, authorship, originality and authenticity. What were once seen as makeshift alliances between organizations, or inspired improvisations amongst consumers, are gradually settling in to a new pattern of producer-consumer relations that have the power to redefine what is understood as fashion design, innovation and markets. (...) Second hand clothing [can act] as a memory bank, as a spatial representation of identity. Both, in rather different ways, emphasize the importance of clothing as social practice and highlight that fashion value is always mobile and contingent. Object value is always a process rather than a revelation or a moment[A good] example is an ongoing project by Martin Mairinger looking at shifts in

value and meaning as second hand clothes circulate amongst different owners. When the item of clothing - for instance, a jacket, pair of pants or Tshirt - is sold at a special secondhand shop, the buyer can access ownership information online and find out about the garment's past. The project explores the ways in which the secondhand interface node may yield interesting hookups. The project's long term concept envisions the establishment of a community of registered users who take advantage of the secondhand shop's offerings not only to acquire clothing but also to establish social contacts within the network of human beings connected to the shop" (paper presented at the International Conference "Geografie del vestire", Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Modacult, Milano, 5-6 May 2006, now Crewe 2010).

It would be naïf to think of fashion only as a collaborative field of interactions as well as without taking into account the role marketing and advertisement play in the fashion business and the uses these latter do of consumers' creativity. But anyway, we can dare to advance even a third hypothesis: there is a place in the fashion field, actually a small place with some development potentiality, where we can recognize a sort of *vertical dimension* of collective creativity, that put producers and consumers in a relationship generating motivations, participation and reciprocal curiosity and interest.

The missing link: relational goods and stakeholder theories

Fashion is thus a collective creative system which closely reminds the process of jointly creating value for all the stakeholders put forward by stakeholder theories scholars. As R.E. Freeman (2007) writes, there is

“...an emerging view of business that we shall call “managing for stakeholders”. This view has emerged over the past thirty years from a group of scholars in a diverse set of disciplines, from finance to philosophy. The basic idea is that businesses, and the executives who manage them, actually do and should create value for customers, suppliers, employees, communities, and financiers (or shareholders). And, that we need to pay careful attention to how these relationships are managed and how value gets created for these stakeholders.”²

Capitalism itself is considered by Freeman, Velamuri, Moriarty (2006) as a system of collective value creation:

“We need to focus on how value is created in the basic business proposition. How does this company make customers, suppliers, communities, employees, and financiers better off? Capitalism is a system of social cooperation—a system of working together to create value for each other, value which none of us could create on our own. In this sense, business is already an enterprise with moral ramifications. Seeing it any other way can lead to dangerous social policies, and to the tarnishing of the one institution—business—that

² Also, “a stakeholder is any group or individual that can affect or be affected by the realization of an organization's purpose”. (Freeman, 2007)

still has to play a central role in lifting hundreds of millions of more people across the globe.” (Freeman, Velamuri, Moriarty, 2006)

Purpose is a key concept:

“Capitalism works because we can pursue our purpose with others. When we coalesce around a big idea, or a joint purpose evolves from our day to day activities with each other, then great things can happen. [...] If we frame the central question of management as “how do we create value for shareholders” then the only virtue that emerges is one of loyalty to the interests of shareholders. However if we frame the central question more broadly as “how do we create and sustain the creation of value for stakeholders” or “how do we get stakeholder interests all going in the same direction,” then it is easy to see how many of the other virtues are relevant. Taking a stakeholder approach helps people decide how companies can contribute to their well-being and kinds of lives they want to lead. By making ethics explicit and building it into the basic way we think about business, we avoid a situation of bad faith and self deception.” (Freeman, 2007)

In relational terms, this view shifts the perspective to a business/profits and ethics/values integrated approach; cooperation becomes the primary issue instead of competition, which is in fact a second order problem:

“[...] thinking about it in terms of tradeoffs is a mistake. What’s interesting in the stakeholder idea is the jointness of stakeholders’ interests. It’s about: “how to make customers’ lives better, and also employees’ lives better”. And how doing that is a win for shareholders. So seeing stakeholders’ interests as joint gets you out of that thinking that there are constraints on the real business: you’ve got a new story about business. [...] The jointness of stakeholder interests is the value driver of the business model, figuring out how well being for customers, suppliers, employees, communities and financiers is delivered at the same time. It’s easy as long as those interests don’t conflict. An interest conflict between stakeholders will soon become apparent as is the case when, let’s say, customers want to pay as less for a garment and the producer tries to keep their customers happy through reducing costs of production by taking it offshore, thus affecting local workers and communities. Then everybody does the same, and again customers don’t want to pay as much. The conflict is still there. The solution, as difficult as it can be, can be found through innovation. [...] Businesses have to think differently, to leverage brands that build value on a community of place, on customer well being etc. Figuring out how to invent such a business is a really important.” (Guenza, 2011)

This brings us back to fashion: the predominant relational component of fashion goods highlights the fallacy of the idea of the supremacy of competition as primary fuel of business, and of the need of “buying” the consensus of the consumers through strong traditional marketing tools and investments, when the figure of aware and collaborative consumers arises.

In other words, a pure one-way, persuasive, pushing, offer-driven thus expensive model of communication begins to show its inefficiency in current market, risking to become counterproductive as long as it suffocates a cooperation that consumers

are increasingly ready and available to grant in the process of collective creation, and to do it “for free” (more precisely, in exchange for the recognition of their contribution to the process and expectations in the engagement with businesses).

Of course, this is not to say that tools like advertising are going to disappear in the process of fashion creation or trend affirmation, but to state that there is going to be an increasing role for a two-ways, involving, pulling, demand-driven and less expensive model of communication between businesses and their consumers, driven by focusing on their purpose in the market; and this, to the advantage of both businesses and consumers. It is the case, for example, of the so-called “Firms of Endearment” (Sisodia, Wolfe, Sheth, 2007).

“We offer a substantial volume of case-based evidence that companies that hew to a stakeholder relationship management (SRM) business model develop a significant and lasting competitive advantage over their counterparts who subscribe to the more traditional shareholder perspective. Intriguingly, the companies we examine rewarded shareholders well above the norm. [...] What we call a humanistic company is run in such a way that its stakeholders—customers, employees, suppliers, business partners, society, and many investors—develop an emotional connection with it, an affectionate regard not unlike the way many people feel about their favorite sports teams. Humanistic companies—or firms of endearment (FoEs)—seek to maximize their value to society as a whole, not just to their shareholders. They are the ultimate value creators: They create emotional value, experiential value, social value, and of course, financial value. People who interact with such companies feel safe, secure, and pleased in their dealings. They enjoy working with or for the company, buying from it, investing in it, and having it as a neighbor.”

This kind of communication can be practiced more efficiently with a coherent stakeholder approach at a broader scale (for businesses, actually, collective creation of value with the consumers is simply one of the declinations of “managing for stakeholder” - which is about creating as much value as possible for stakeholders, without resorting to tradeoffs). First because, on the inner-management side of business, managers/entrepreneurs cannot easily adopt different mind shapes according to every category of stakeholder; second because, on the outer-stakeholders side, it happens more and more that consumers “represent” also other stakeholders’ categories in their relationship with businesses (environment, suppliers etc. - see for example fair-trade or consumerist campaigns concerned with the conditions of workers all along the pipeline).

To summarize what said until now, thanks to the relational structure of fashion goods, a joint engagement emerges strongly between businesses/industry and stakeholders and between stakeholders themselves, supported by two drivers: (1) the spontaneous engagement, driven by social developments progressing from a command&control to a sharing model, (2) the managed engagement, driven by companies trying to establish a structured dialogue with their stakeholders to improve their own corporate social responsibility programmes.

Noteworthy, purpose again is a key driver for the transition from a command&control to a sharing model (of business relations as well as organizations at all levels):

“[...] companies that are purpose driven [...] are very different: their employees are engaged in the purpose of the business, they don't need a lot of managers telling them what to do. They know what to do; they're driven by purpose. These companies do not need that sort of traditional command and control bureaucracy that is found in lots of companies. Purpose in a way tends to replace the command and control bureaucracy. Purpose, and values, is a much more effective way of managing than hierarchy and control.”
(Guenza, 2011)

Current technological developments, namely web 2.0, open new frontiers to the relational component of market and non-market value generation. Users can engage in new forms of interaction and the value of relations is built in new ways (eg. establishing a design relation with the consumers), the type of relationship is shaped by the digital networking platform characteristics.

Finally, in the field of sustainability the diffusion, circulation and production of information and knowledge is strategic in order to produce a public discourse and a collective "taking in care" of the different steps of the material and intangible chain. In the framework of such process of collective creation of value through relational goods, sustainability is not only a value or a purpose, an expectation of some stakeholders accepting to engage with businesses on the issue, but the result of taking into consideration the joint interests of stakeholders themselves (Guenza, 2011).

Conclusions

This paper is aimed more at raising questions and highlighting the fashion business as a new potential field of research than at giving answers or proposing theoretical solutions. The study of the process of generating the collective and relational fashion value embedded in fashion goods can provide a more general, and new, view of the relationship between the production and the consumption of commodities processes and their link with the communities building process.

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