Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Communicatio, **3**, (2016) 73–79

Fashion as a Communicative Phenomenon

Agenda Setting for a Research Project on Youth's Clothing Consumption

Laura Nistor
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania
nistorlaura@uni.sapientia.ro

Abstract. In spite of its omnipresence, fashion only rarely constitutes an explicit research subject among Romanian scholars. In the present review, I intend to set the ground for a research project aiming at studying youth's fashion-related consumption mostly from the viewpoint of their "fashion talks", i.e. those discursive repertoires through which youngsters define what is fashion and fashionable in terms of clothes. The assumption is that in spite of its social, economic, and psychological aspects fashion and clothing consumption can be well defined within a communicative framework. In this sense, some theoretical viewpoints and research questions are formulated in order to outline a research agenda for a research project on youth's fashion consumption.

Keywords: fashion consumption, youth, communication

Fashion as a Form of (Over)Consumption

Since Lipovetsky's (1994) observation that in spite of its omnipresence fashion still has a lower academic status, there have occurred significant changes in the academic institutionalization of fashion. Today, we can speak about *fashionology* (Kawamura, 2005), i.e. about the study of fashion as a system of institutions which produce the concept and the practice of fashion. Fashionology is by definition an interdisciplinary field, which implies economic, social, and communicational approaches, determined by the very essence of fashion as a power, cultural, and symbolic phenomenon.

We usually associate fashion with clothing, but not all clothing can be considered fashion. On the other hand, fashion is more than clothing and accessories. Fashion is everywhere, it is a system of meanings which adds extra values to clothing and

objects in general through those invisible elements that exist in people's imagination and beliefs (Barthes, 2005). Fashion is symbolic and refers to those styles that are accepted by a large group of people at a given time, it is a transitory phenomenon "about capturing the moment" (Kaiser–Ketchum, 2005), it is the passion of novelty and change (Lipovetsky, 1994).

Due to its visual nature, fashion is a great example for both conspicuous consumption and overconsumption. In this sense, fast fashion refers to those low-cost clothing collections which are based on current high-cost luxury fashion trends; fast fashion is imitative and it constitutes a response system to high fashion that encourages disposability (Fletcher, 2008). Due to its imitative nature, fast fashion is particularly popular among young consumers, who try to follow the fashion behaviour of their icons; it offers trendy design and immediate gratification for youngsters' identities. In this respect, fashion is inseparable from advertising as far as fashion brand images are associated with attractive lifestyles or celebrity figures through which we are continuously mobilized to wish to consume and look for gratification (Schwartz, 2005).

Bauman's theory of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2005) also contends that in a consumer society identity is permanently cultivated and adjusted in accordance with the mobility of lifestyles and unsettledness. In the context of the ever-changing liquid modernity, people continuously reinvent their identities, and for this purpose (fast) fashion represents a great instrument. The role of advertising should also be mentioned here because marketing techniques and brand images continuously stimulate new consumer desires, and consequently consumers are encouraged to continuously shop and look for new experiences and sensations (Niinimaki, 2009; cf. McGrath, 2012). Then, the places and sites of shopping, e.g. the shopping mall, determine that the engagement with garments occurs mostly through purchase rather than through wearing (McGrath, 2012); moreover, social media and content sharing further enhance disengagement: on the Instagram, for instance, fashion becomes a "shareable experience" (Pike, 2016) – the momentary image of an item of clothing is more important than wearing it á la long.

Similarly, in his work titled *From the Work Ethic to the Aesthetic of Consumption*, Bauman (2001) juxtaposes the ethics of work and the ethics of consumption, and contends that within the framework of the society of consumption modernity's major ethical values centred around duty and responsibility started to lose their validity and have been replaced by the aesthetics of consumption. This means that consumers are aesthetical subjects whose decisions are motivated by strategies of identity constructions, rather than moral subjects who act in accordance with their duties and responsibilities. The aesthetics of consumption links the purport of consumption to the fever of new sensations.

Consumption and Fashion Consumption as Communicative Phenomena

Communication studies and studies of consumption are overlapping on many dimensions: the exploration of the ways in which signs and symbols are incorporated in the process of consumption is a perfect example in this sense. As Baudrillard (1998) put it: the analysis of consumption should focus not on the use-value of the goods, but on the production and manipulation of signs through the process of consumption. Attainment has a visual importance; the happiness of having certain goods does not mean (solely) an inner enjoyment, "it is associated with a display of consumer activity (…); with a presentation of signs or evidence of consuming achieved" (Baudrillard, 1998: 49).

The consumption of signs and meaning is evident throughout the whole system of consumption, but probably the most salient domain of sign consumption occurs in the case of clothing and fashion. Veblen (1899/1953) was among the first authors to talk about the double function of clothing by differentiating between the protective and the symbolic role of clothing, the latter being indicative for the wearer's economic and social position. Literature speaks in this sense about *status consumption* and about the role of visible objects' consumption, and among these especially high-end fashion and clothing items consumption to satisfy not only the material needs of the consumers but also their social needs in terms of impressing others (Husic–Cicic, 2009).

Clothing use is not just a cultural and normative phenomenon, it is also communicative, and for this aspect probably the most eloquent example is first impression, but it would be too simple to reduce the informative role of clothing to this specific situation. In fact, clothing is systematically used in society in order to create appropriate appearances at a particular time (i.e. fashionable appearances) and specific meanings about their users (Crane, 2000).

A specific manifestation of object language is the so-called *clothing behaviour* or *clothing speech* (cf. "I speak through my clothes" – Eco, 1973 – qtd by Hebdige, 1979/2002: 100), a non-linguistic communication through which people manifest, enhance, or manipulate their identities. Clothing and fashion can be manipulated to serve as indicators of power or, in the expression of the anthropologists, they are both bridges and fences (Douglas–Isherwood, 1979) in the sense that fashion items enable the share of common identities within a group, but they also delineate one group from another (according to Bourdieu's theory of distinction, 1984).

Barthes (2005) contends, however, that *fashion language* is much more than the visual image of clothing; it refers to those discourses through which fashion is described, and such repertoires always make reference to both vestimentary

features and evaluative narratives. Such discourses can be located both on the level of institutional discourses, e.g. fashion magazine's aesthetic discourse, which represents a kind of "written clothing", and on the level of daily conversations, which on the level of the lay public defines what is fashion and fashionable and what is not.

In connection with clothing and fashion communication, we can speak both about distinction and adjustment. *Adjustment* (Meyer–Anderson, 2000) describes how people, and especially youth, tend to use their clothing to adjust to their peer groups. Brands that signify specific social status can then enhance the entry into groups that value such brands and brand meaning. Once advertising creates a brand image, consumers are willing to acquire these brands and adjust their social status to that of fashion icons or to that of trendsetters in their groups. Obviously, adjustment is not equally important for individuals, and there can be specific consumer segments ranging from high adjusters (i.e. status consumers) to high deniers, the latter being illustrative of the emergence of fashion subcultures (Hebdige, 1979/2002).

It is worth mentioning that status consumption does not occur exclusively among the wealthy, and economically less better-off are also willing to adjust their status through consumption of status items. What is different, however, is that while upper class individuals' conspicuous consumption demonstrates their social and economic potential, lower class consumers' imitative behaviour (i.e. aspirational consumption) can be explained by their need to increase their self-esteem in the context of social comparison (Husic–Cicic, 2009). In this respect, even the so-called ethical fashion consumption (Fletcher, 2008) can be interpreted as ways of providing uniqueness and distinction, i.e. a form of eco-narcissism (Griskevicius et al., 2010) rather than genuine manifestations of truly moral values.

Starting-Points for a Research Agenda on Youth's Fashion Consumption

Rooted in the above outlined theoretical positions, I propose in the following a research project whose aim is to investigate the phenomenon of fashion consumption among youth from a communicational perspective. As already mentioned, clothing choices are both individual (e.g. pleasure, hedonism) and social (interpersonal influences, status assignments, etc.), and, as far as clothes are visual objects, they represent ways of message encoding and decoding not only about our stylistic preferences but – through these preferences – about our social values, status, group adjustments, etc. More than these, besides the visual

messages of clothes, fashion communication occurs also through the language repertoires in which fashion is described and narrated (Barthes, 2005).

The concrete empirical endeavour of the proposed research agenda is to study young consumers' discourses about the meaning of fashion and about their fashion-related behaviour in terms of consumption habits, fashion-related influencers (e.g. online and offline fashion icons, the role of social media), brand preferences, fast-fashion-related behaviours, conscious fashion decisions (e.g. ethical consumption), etc. (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Research questions to be investigated through the empirical research (proposal)

The meaning of fashion	What does fashion mean for the youngsters? What is the meaning of "fashionable" and "being in fashion"? Which are those examples (people, garments, brands, etc.) they associate with fashion? What types of evaluative discourses do youngsters use in connection with fashion?
Fashion-related information	How informed are youngsters about fashion? (self-identification) What is the role of significant others, institutions, offline and online platforms, and fashion icons in providing fashion-related information?
Fashion consumption	Shopping for fashion: where, when, and what do youngsters use to buy? Who influences the shopping decisions (significant others, fashion icons, social media platforms, advertising, etc.)? How are shopping decisions negotiated? What is the role of fashion in these decisions? Optimized fashion-related choices: budget vs trends; the role of second-hand shops, etc.
Brands and advertising	Which are the most important fashion brands from youngsters' viewpoint? What is the role of advertising and social media in generating brand images and consumption desires? What kind of lifestyles do youngsters try to imitate through their clothes? Do youngsters use and how do they use social media in order to communicate their fashion image?
Status through fashion	How to manage status through garments? The role of brands, styles, images, etc. How does fashion become visual and communicated through clothes? What is the role of social media in communicating status consumption?

Adjustment vs distinction	What strategies does the youth use in order to adjust their image to/distinct it from that of a group? Which are those fashion items that help them in doing so? Are there specific subcultures? How are these subcultures structured and seen by others?
Ethical conduct in fashion consumption	How do youngsters relate to fashion overconsumption? Do they experiment sustainable lifestyles in fashion consumption (e.g. capsule wardrobe, conscious collections, re-use, second hand, flea markets, etc.)? What is the role of ethical values/narcissism in choosing sustainable options?

All these research questions are intended to understand the communicative nature of fashion, the ways in which young people are elaborating narratives and argumentations about their fashion-related behaviour and the ways in which they are using their clothes as a form of non-verbal communication about their actual or preferred social status, self-management, and self-optimization.

The research population consists of youth with various socio-economic backgrounds in order to be able to sketch possible types of fashion and status consumptions. For instance, by taking a research population of students, we can pay attention to how students' economic and parental background, their permanent residence (e.g. rural vs urban culture) influences youngsters' fashion-related behaviours and discourses.

As a method of research, focus-group discussions are proposed, which have the advantage of collecting the data in a more natural way, by taking into account the opinions resulting from participants' reciprocal influencing of one another (Krueger–Casey, 2009). Focus groups are especially useful in exploring debated topics, with pro and contra arguments, such as fashion in our case.

Additionally, quantitative surveys can bring further information on the research populations, help to quantify those major themes which are going to be treated in the focus groups, and allow the construction of various types of publics in connection with fashion consumption.

References

Barthes, R. (2005). *The Language of Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury.

Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures.* London: Sage.

Bauman, Z. (2001). From the Work Ethic to the Aesthetic of Consumption. In: Beilhartz, P. (ed.), *The Bauman Reader*. Malden: Blackwell, 311–333.

(2005). *Liquid Life*. London: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Crane, D. (2000). *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Douglas, M.–Isherwood, B. (1979). *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. London: Routledge.

Fletcher, K. (2008). *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys.* London: Earthscan.

Gabriel, Y.,–Lang, T. (2006). *The Unmanageable Consumer*. London: Sage.

Griskevicius, V.–Tybur, J. M.–Van den Bergh, B. (2010). Going Green to Be Seen: Status, Reputation, and Conspicuous Conservation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98: 392–404.

Hebdige, D. (1979/2002). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.

Husic, M.,–Cicic, M. (2009). Luxury Consumption Factors. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 13: 231–243.

Kaiser, S.–Ketchum, K. (2005). Consuming Fashion and Flexibility: Metaphor, Cultural Mood and Materiality. In: Ratneshwar, S.–Mick, D. G. (eds), *Inside Consumption: Consumer Motives, Goals and Drivers*. London: Routledge, 122–143.

Kawamura, Y. (2005). *Fashion-ology. An Introduction to Fashion Studies*. New York: Berg.

Krueger, R. A.–Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lipovetsky, G. (1994). *The Empire of Fashion. Dressing Modern Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

McGrath, A. S. (2012). Fashioning Sustainability: How the Clothes We Wear Can Support Environmental and Human Well-Being. *Sustainable Fashion* Spring 2012.

Meyer, D. J. C.–Anderson, H. C. (2000). Preadolescents and Apparel Purchasing: Conformity to Parent and Peers in the Consumer Socialization Process. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 15: 243–257.

Niinimaki, K. (2009). Consumer Values and Eco-Fashion in the Future. In: *FFRC eBOOK*: 125–134.

Pike, H. (2016). Tapping Generation Z. *Business of Fashion*. February 2.

Schwartz, B. (2005). *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Veblen, T. (1899/1994). *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* London: Penguin Books.