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A conceptual model of the fashion process – part 1

The fashion transformation process model

A model of the fashion process:
part 1

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Keywords *Fashion, Society, Theory*

Abstract *The purpose of this paper is to present a new framework to conceptualise the fashion process called “the fashion transformation process model”. This model integrates much previous research about the fashion process, fills important gaps that the symbolic interactionist (SI) theory of fashion omits, and makes a number of new predictions about the translation of social trends into specific lifestyles and individual differences. Those new emerging lifestyles are interpreted by fashion designers into fashion concepts and then translated into fashion commodities. The model proposes two important fashion forces: the “differentiating force” and the “socialising force”. These operate at different levels (macro and micro) and through different fashion practitioners. Two empirical studies investigate the framework: a case study at the macro level and a survey interview study at the micro level. The studies provide excellent support for the reconceptualisation and, in particular, suggest that individual psychological factors might be given a new prominence in the overall fashion process and the way in which new fashions emerge.*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a new framework with which to conceptualise the fashion process called, “the fashion transformation process model”. This model integrates much previous research in the area of fashion including the symbolic interactionist (SI) theory and makes a number of new predictions. Two empirical studies have been done which confirm its central variables.

Orientation toward continuous change and progress can be generally found in the modern society. Fashion is one of the most visible media of the change. It reflects the change in aesthetic, economic, political, cultural and social life (Behling, 1985; Bush and London, 1960; Lauer and Lauer, 1981; Robenstine and Kelley, 1981; Wilson, 1985). Individuals and society use fashion to communicate their taste and lifestyle (Barnard, 1996). The common tastes and lifestyle of members of society collectively form and represent the taste and lifestyle of that society (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Therefore, the fashion and lifestyle of a particular time symbolise the “spirit of the times” (Blumer, 1969; Flugel, 1930).

There is a relationship between individuals (members of society) and society as a whole in terms of fashion changes. In other words, there is an interaction between the micro-level (individual) and the macro-level (socio-dynamic) forces.

The SI theory was established in order to explain this complex relationship (Kaiser *et al.*, 1995a, b, 1996). It consists of five principles:

- (1) human ambivalence;
- (2) appearance-modifying commodities in the marketplace;
- (3) symbolic ambiguity;
- (4) meaning negotiation; and
- (5) style adoption.

Figures 1 and 2 show the models of SI theory: the fashion change process at the individual and at the society level respectively.

Soon after the SI theory came into existence, there was debate amongst fashion theorists. Kean (1997) argued that SI theory raises more questions than it answers about why fashion changes and the dynamics of its change.

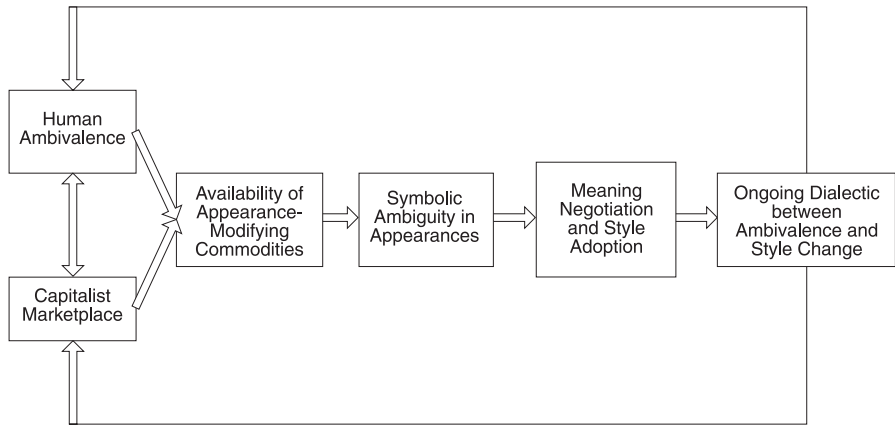


Figure 1.
The fashion change process: individual level (after the SI theory of fashion)

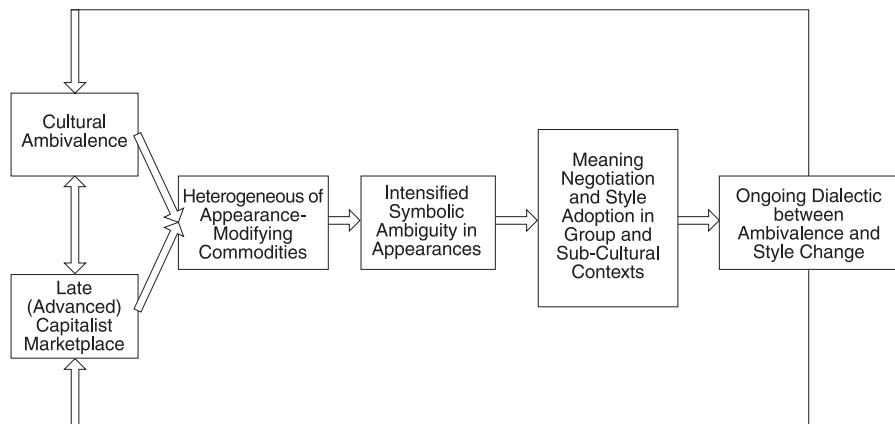


Figure 2.
The fashion change process: society level (after the SI theory of fashion)

She also wondered “what are the forces underlying the increasing range of available appearance-modifying commodities?”. Hamilton (1997) raised various issues. For example, SI theory was based on the view that only one underlying factor is responsible for the changing fashion trends. She argued that there are various ranges of fashion commodities presented by the economic/cultural system from which individuals may choose as they construct their individual appearance. Second, she argued that SI theory lacks attention to the interaction between cultural arbiters at the macro level. Indeed, the SI theory cannot cope with the question of “how do the macro systems influence individual fashion negotiation?”. Finally, SI theory is unclear in describing and defining the link between the macro and micro levels.

In addition, Burns (1991) argued that the SI theory of fashion has not yet been able to answer the following questions:

What is involved with the interpretive manner in which symbolic meanings are constructed by consumers?

What is the process by which consumers associate cultural images with fashion products? What characteristics of the image, product, and/or consumer contribute to or affect this process?

Are there differences between fashion innovators and fashion followers in terms of tolerance of symbolic ambiguity, need for uniqueness, and other related characteristics?

Another perspective on the fashion system model: “the fashion transformation process model”

This paper does not directly criticise the SI theory of fashion, but tries to offer another perspective of the fashion process by integrating significant existing fashion theories. It is based on the assumption that many fashion theories were constructed to explain fashion phenomena from different angles. The integration provided here may allow a clearer view and precise explanation of more aspects of the fashion issues raised by SI theory. Therefore, the following discussion, based on existing fashion theories, re-orientes the central aspects of SI theory and has a number of consequential implications of interest.

According to the assumption that there is an interaction between society and its members, we propose a single model consisting of these two levels – the individual and society. Hamilton (1997) suggested the linkage of macro-micro continuum, which was proposed by Ritzer (1991). It is divided into four sub-levels, namely:

- (1) macro-subjective level (economic values/assumptions that legitimise particular activity);
- (2) macro-objective level (marketplace and economic activities);
- (3) micro-objective level (interaction between individual and variety of fashion objects);
- (4) micro-subjective level (psychological phenomena of individual and of the interaction among individuals).

In using the above structure, it was our intention to use the macro-micro continuum as a framework to synthesise a new fashion process model.

The macro-subjective level

It is at this level that fashion change reflects social needs. Social needs emerge in an ambiguous form, which is called “*Zeitgeist*” or “spirit of the time” or “the issue of the changing trend”. There are some forces, from the historical documentation and analysis of fashion, which may be seen as being of major importance to emerging social needs. These are the socio-political and economic forces, the historical context, the innovation of science and technology, and other special events. All these factors influence society and bring about change. These are reflected in what society calls “social trends”. Since a society consists of a number of sub-society or sub-culture groups, the patterns of behaviour, attitudes and practices of these entities are known collectively as “lifestyles”. This opens up the possibility for the markets to differentiate between different groups of people.

The nature of modern society is continual change and lifestyle is a feature of the modern world that differentiates people. However, the distinctive characteristics of each lifestyle are blurred. Chaney (1996) stated that:

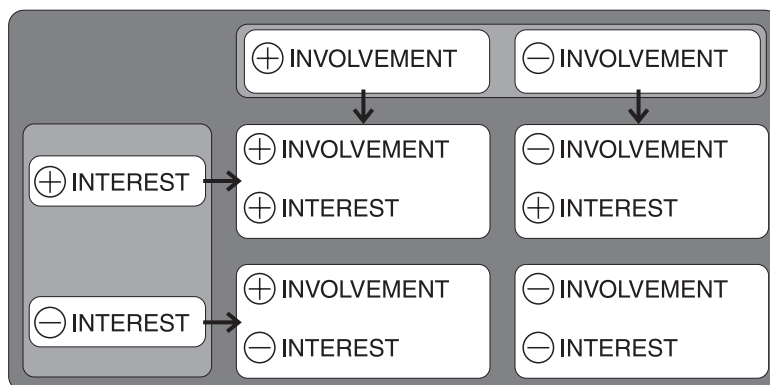
The rigidities of established distinction become increasingly hard to sustain in eras of rapid social and physical mobility, new forms of distinction are continually being elaborated. Therefore the manner of our concern with respect for (or repugnance against) the various possible modes of others’ civilisation becomes crucial in constituting the normative hierarchies of structured difference.

In SI theory, culture does not send straightforward messages to individuals as to what is appropriate, and thus cultural ambivalence appears at this level (Hamilton, 1997). People respond to the cultural ambivalence in diverse ways. Hall (1959) stated that three levels of culture (formal traditions, informal traditions and technical capabilities) contribute different strengths to the emotional resistance to change. Likewise, this paper attempts to predict the major responses which occur when people encounter a new social trend.

Robertson (1971) divided his model of the adoption process into three main stages: the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural. It can be said that there are two categories of attitudes of response: positive or negative. Figure 3 illustrates four possible relationships between the three fields: the cognitive and behaviour fields are represented by “interest” and “involvement” activities, respectively, and the positive or negative reaction takes account of the individual’s attitude.

We hypothesise the following interactions between the elements:

- *Positive interest and positive involvement.* This is a situation that leads to change. People are able to accept and then pursue a change eagerly, because they have both positive interest and positive involvement. This kind of reaction could be called “conformity”.



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Figure 3.
Cross relationship

- *Negative interest and negative involvement.* These people have neither interest nor involvement to change to the new situation. This pattern of negative reactions could be called “anti-conformity”. Such people wish to behave and express their feelings in the opposite way in order to resist the evolving norms.
- *Positive interest and negative involvement.* These people are aware of change; however, they do not want to become too much involved. They behave in a very basic way in order to meet the minimum requirements of the social norms. They do so with the least risk. They are conservative in their choices. This could be called “concealment”. Indeed, these people largely ignore what is happening in the world and their ways of living change very slowly and imperceptibly.
- *Negative interest and positive involvement.* These people are not really interested in new situations but for whatever reason they have to engage themselves in the change. Therefore, in order to keep an internal social balance, they cleverly modify the dominant trends (so as not to conform too strongly) and create a middle path which is different from the mainstream. Their adoption is expressed in the modified semi-influenced way that conforms with the new social direction but is different from it. This reaction could be called “modification”.

These four possible reactions can be applied to the four clusters of trends, suggested by Cathelat *et al.* (1998), recently presented at Premiere Vision Exhibition in Paris as follows:

- (1) *Conformity* is as accept dress. “Accept dress: dressing according to dominant social norms”.
- (2) *Anti-conformity* is as alternative dress. “Alternative dress: dressing as a way of showing one is a contestor”.
- (3) *Concealment* is as escape dress. “Escape dress: dressing like a chameleon in mode to fit in anywhere”.

- (4) *Modification* is as adapt dress. “Adapt dress: a new way of dynamic balance”.

According to the survey by Cathelat *et al.* (1998) for the Premiere Vision L’Observatoire 1998/1999, there were five major issues that the post-modern society encounters – feminine power, high tech power, crisis, ultra liberalism, and a multi-cultural expanding world – each of which must generate sub-trends or lifestyles. When the four clusters of lifestyle are applied to those five major issues, this implies that there is so large a spread of possible lifestyle trends, all striving to emerge in our global society. Socio-trends or lifestyle trends become fashion trends in the following stage. Many fashions emerge at the same time.

In order to illustrate this phenomenon, globalisation and the related, multicultural influences were examined, which attempted to trace the origination and development of fashion idea from the social trend to the fashion object. Globalisation is a social multicultural trend that can be divided into four separate trends. These were named by the Observatoire (Cathelat *et al.*, 1998), as Heritage Wear, Sect Wear, Planet Market Wear and Ethnic Wear. Premiere Vision A/W 1999 forecast a number of fabric themes. One of these was “multicultural”. They presented a range of fabrics to represent the idea. These were, for instance, plain tweed spotted with multicolour novelty yarn, double faced fabric and layered fabric to represent layers of culture. Alongside this, Indigo presented printed design using transparency and layered images to again represent the overlapping cultures. Alexander McQueen in that season’s collection designed overcoats made from patchwork leather, and Jean Paul Gaultier created a Pop Art T-shirt printed with contrasting cultural images, one on the body and the other on the sleeves.

Ethnic costumes around the world have become sources of inspiration for designers to pick up as a theme of design every season, moving from one cultural style to another. Burberry, a traditional English brand often using a check design, has collectively hit the British domestic and international markets. Different ethnic styles have become influential and representative of the global citizens who want to be involved in the multicultural theme but within the safe cultural constraints of their traditional English style exemplified by Burberry. The latter is used to balance the invasive influx of the global multicultural styles.

The macro-objective level

This is the stage at which investors through suppliers grasp the social needs and interpret the four clusters of lifestyle trends into tangible concepts of fashion. These individuals and organisations include designers, manufacturers, and marketing people. Their roles in contributing, both high or lower market capitalisation and supply, are dependent upon appropriate timing in approaching particular markets. The emerging fashion concepts or trends provide ideas of fashion to consumers. Distributors, especially, play an important role in symbolising particular lifestyles.

The interpretation of the symbolic significance of new lifestyles becomes the most crucial part in the emergence of fashion form. Avant-garde designers get inspired initially and in turn seek to represent those lifestyles in their work. Avant-garde fashion magazines imbue these signs with a function in order to present the emergence of the new lifestyles as well as the new fashion styles. The concept of new lifestyles and fashion styles is as “signified”, while the fashion commodities become “signifiers” (Barthes, 1983). Barthes also pointed out that the current forms of fashion commodities decrease in value and are subsequently abandoned when the new signifier readily provides a replacement for the previous signifier. Fashion is an illusion in his opinion.

In addition Baudrillard referred to fashion as a “compulsion to innovate signs . . . apparently arbitrary and perpetual production of meaning – a kind of meaning drive” (Baudrillard, 1981, cited in Barnard, 1996). The meanings drive individuals to seek out those new commodities that could signify them. The meaning can be produced perpetually but the forms of clothing are limited and can be used to signify different meanings repeatedly used (Brenninkmeyer, 1962). There are different speeds and degrees of participation in fashion themes due to the degree of negative-positive cross relationships evident for each lifestyle, and also the degree of differentiating and socialising forces of those participants.

Blumer (1969) stated in his collective selection theory that:

. . . when fashion trends are screened and manipulated into fashion objects, simultaneously, innovative consumers may experiment with many possible alternatives, but the ultimate test in the fashion process is the competition between alternative styles for positions of fashionability.

The collective selection theory can apply to the overlapping of both macro and micro stages. Under such circumstances, the style of fashion selected becomes a reflection of a collectively endorsed standard that the individual perceives (Sproles and Burns, 1994). As time passes, some lifestyles, as well as fashion forms, collectively emerge and become more and more visible. Meanwhile, others appear with a small but discernible population, although some are eliminated from the system.

The mechanisms by which the macro structures or components present particular forms and suggest particular meanings to individuals to select and reject in their personal negotiation were considered by Hamilton (1997). The above discussion, especially the clusters of lifestyles, which become the fashion trends interpreted by suppliers, and the collective selection phenomenon, are clearly able to explain that issue (see Figure 4).

The micro-objective level

The micro-objective realm is the level at which individuals interact with fashion objects in the marketplace. It is the level where fashion objects are selected by individuals to create their looks, in order to conform to the social concepts of the time. Hamilton (1997) defined this stage as negotiation with

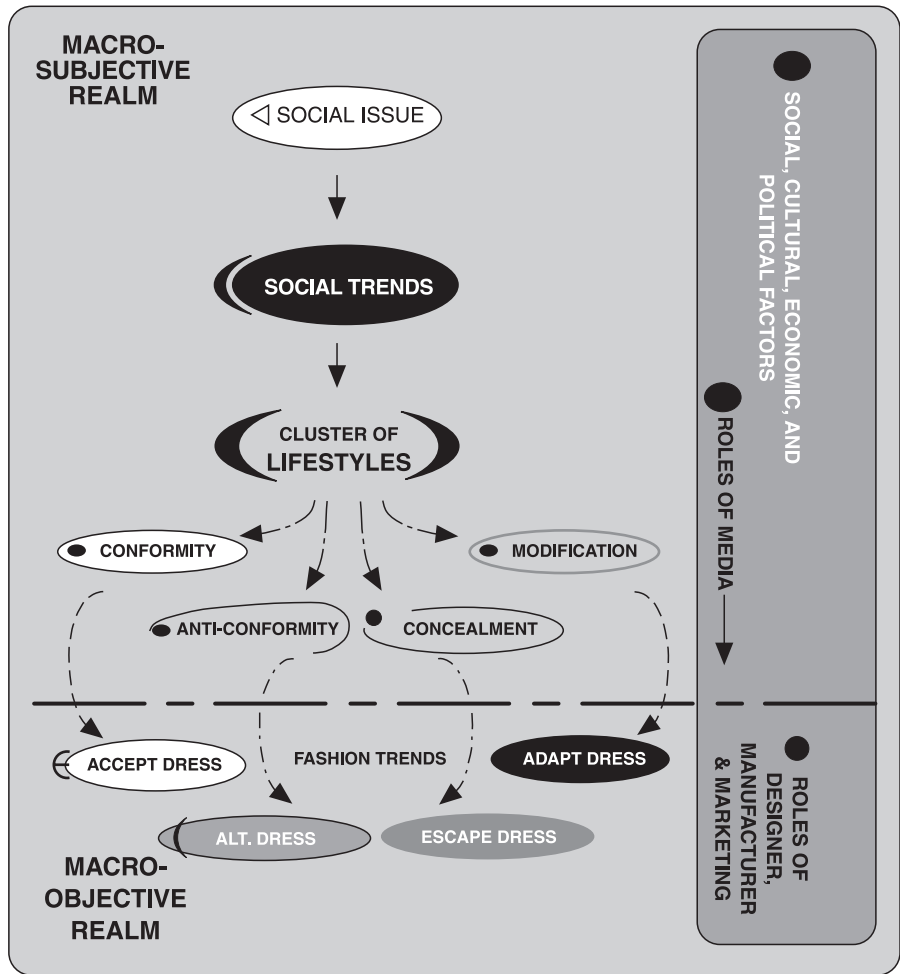


Figure 4.
Fashion process within
the macro-subjective
and objective realms

others. The retailing system influences this level of change in terms of offering various categories of looks.

The roles of fashion commodity merchandisers not only provide assorted collections for individuals to choose and create their looks, but also differentiate them from other ranges of styles (as if they are the critical representatives of the sub-cultural group). Individuals choose particular fashion shops in the same way they make other decisions and choices in society: the two are highly connected.

Apparently, fashion “brands” become more and more important as they act as signifiers symbolic of values, encompassing certain identities in creating community. The interactions between self and others within a community are the virtual negotiation in shopping time. Basically, brands provide fashion commodities ranging from the most fashionable to the least in which to serve

different levels of need, depending on the degree of fashion-consciousness in customers. If one plays as a fashion leader, the most fashionable garments will be chosen. Figure 5 illustrates that consumers access through the homogeneous range of brands or commodities rather than the heterogeneity of all brands. The fashion adoption starts the process within the “homogeneous” consumer

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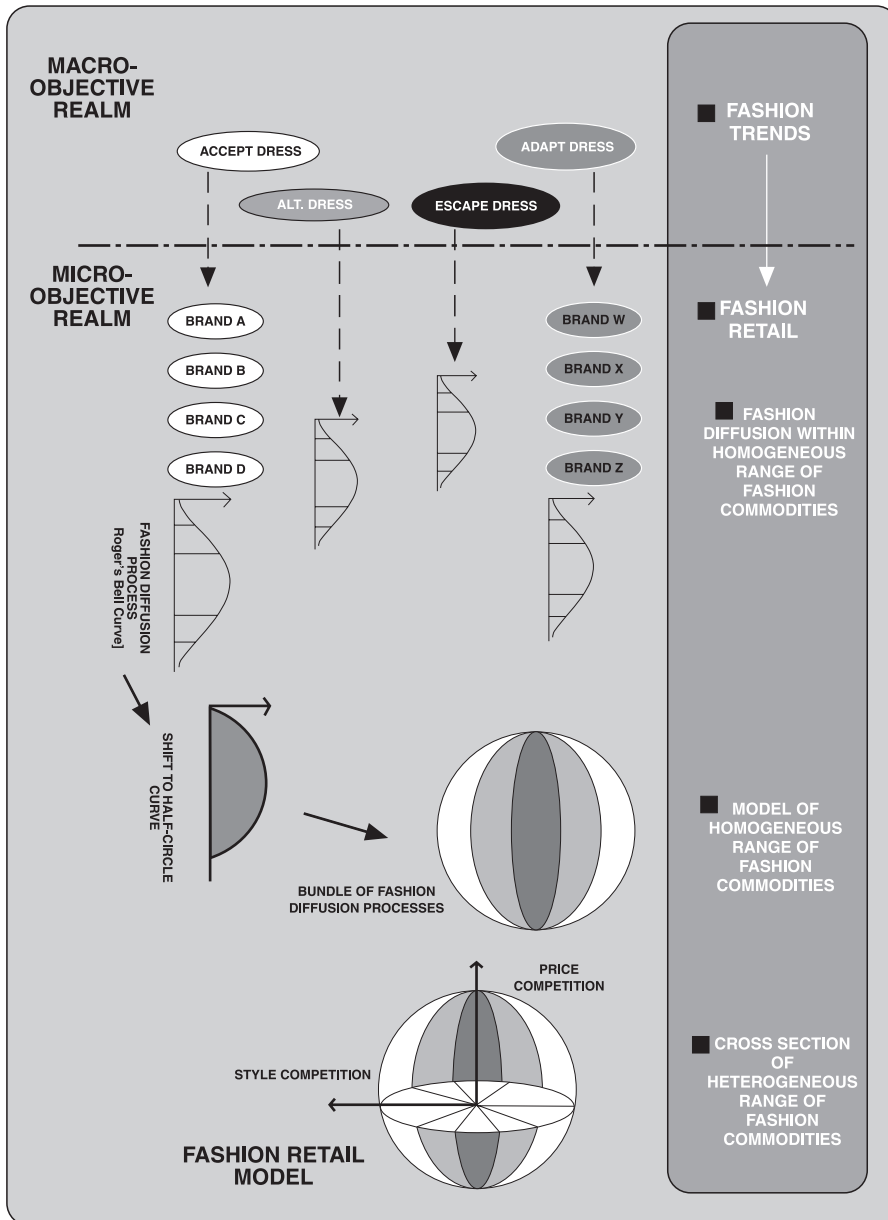


Figure 5. Fashion process within the macro-objective and micro-objective realms

choices, commencing from fashion innovators through to early fashion adopters, fashion followers as well as laggards. The classic bell curve of Rogers (1962) can be applied to this phenomenon.

Paradoxically, as there is no exact boundary of lifestyle characteristics and some lifestyles may overlap each other, individuals are likely to access other ranges of commodities. In addition, the role of each individual in this dynamic post-modern society is not fixed in a particular way: one might behave differently on different occasions. The heterogeneous range of commodities in the marketplace does, therefore, serve all kinds of potential-growth lifestyles and/or fashions.

Kean (1997) also stated that competition in fashions is not based solely on price changes, but also on societal interpretation of changes in the environment. At the same level of price (heterogeneity), all different styles are in competition to provide the signifier forms of fashion. On the other hand, within the same style of commodities (homogeneity), fashion products truly compete in price and timing of availability (see “the fashion retail model” in Figure 5).

The micro-subjective level

It is at this level that individuals interpret the results of looks by negotiating with self in order to satisfy their needs. Meaning emerges in this stage to make sense of symbolic ambiguity. Individuals express the results of negotiation through the fashion objects at the micro-objective level (Kaiser *et al.*, 1997). Meaning negotiation of SI theory can explain this stage.

There are two forces that create a continual force between the competitive desires to display oneself and to retain a sense of modesty (Finkelstein, 1996). That is a basic negotiation between the need for exhibiting and the need to conform to the social norm. Similarly, Simmel (1971) proposed that new fashions would result if the two forces were different. In addition, Douglas and Isherwood (1979), and Barnard (1996) also pointed to the importance of two similar forces, the individualising or isolating forces and the conforming or bridging forces.

We label these two forces the “differentiating force” or “DF”, and the “socializing force” or “SF”. The meaning of individuality in fashion diffusion is defined by Park (1998) as consisting of two aspects: differentiation and independence. Differentiation is a force that acts on individuals, to a greater or lesser degree, to affect fashion choices. Independence has no action in this regard at all.

We have investigated these concepts in two empirical studies. In the first study (Cholachatpinyo *et al.*, 2002) 20 fashion innovators, and 20 fashion followers were interviewed. The study showed that the pattern of adoption is different for the fashion innovators compared to the fashion followers. For example, 73.7 per cent of innovators chose “feeling different” as the first, while 63.2 per cent and 89.4 per cent respectively said “trial” and “to be fashionable” were the second and final steps. On the other hand, the pattern of adoption of followers goes the opposite way.

In a second questionnaire study of 300 people (Cholachatpinyo *et al.*, 2002) we investigated some of the forces operating on the individuals in these three groups. We concentrated on these aspects of fashion and choices (e.g. colour, style, sources of idea) and individual motivations (in terms of DF and SF). Of the samples, 5.9 per cent were innovators, 35.3 per cent early adopters, 50 per cent followers and 8.8 per cent laggards. The results confirm that innovators are quite different from followers in the factors which influence their fashion choice. Followers were much more likely to be influenced by their social circle, others' opinion, and not wishing to be in conflict with friends.

Future fashion refers to the need to change or to be different. This is the crucial underlying factor in the fashion adoption process. Fashion innovators are the first to adopt fashion. On the other hand, early fashion adopters and fashion followers who have a lower degree of DF and a greater degree of SF, adopt fashion in the later stages. When fashion becomes popular, adopted by the majority, the late followers are forced to adopt.

Fashion innovators feel uncomfortable when wearing similar styles and colours that many others wear. In addition, the value of newness in possessing commodities decreases. As a result, the inner feeling, influenced by DF, drives them to seek new styles to replace the current one, which no longer serve the inner purpose. In other words, fashion innovators are the first group that adopts the styles that reflect the appreciated meaning.

The signals for changes are driven by the DF of most individuals, especially innovators. New social issues provide the basis for change options.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the fashion process is better considered as a dynamic process and not a linear continuum of the kind proposed by Hamilton. We propose here that the fashion process (see Figure 6) begins and ends at the individual level but that it is in a perpetual cycle from fashion concept to commodification through lifestyles and social trends. The SI theory proposed by Kaiser *et al.* (1997) explains only some aspects of this fashion process (how appearance-modified by social interaction), but lacks an explanation of the transformation from the macro-subjective to objective realms involved in, for example, manufacture, marketing and selling. The benefit of the model presented in this paper is to extend the SI theory, and its macro-micro continuum. It also serves to integrate many existing fashion theories in a more holistic manner, thereby removing apparent contradictions in these theories. The model may also have applications in predicting aspects of wider debates in fashion such as those that relate to commodification and predicting fashion changes. The conceptual framework offered here does contain certain assumptions, particularly at the micro-subjective level. At this level, specific information can be gathered which may predict future fashion trends. An important contribution of this model is that it recognises the importance of the micro-subjective level factors and acknowledges that fashion (as a concept not a commodity) emanates not from a single stream but rather from a series of many influences which are convergent at different times. It is important,

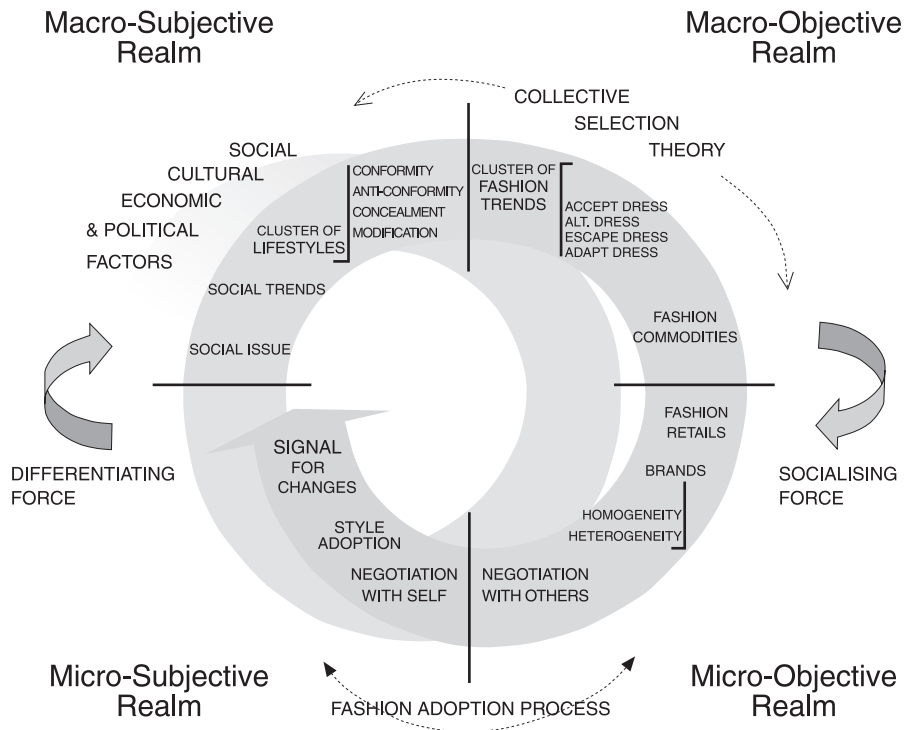


Figure 6.
The fashion
transformation process
model

therefore, to empirically test the status and role of aspects of this micro-subjective level in the fashion process from concept to commodification. This is the subject of empirical research presented in part 2 (Cholachatpinyo *et al.*, 2002). If this model were supported empirically it would predict that fashions change because of continuous micro-subjective level demands for change by fashion innovators, for example, wearers and designers. How quickly fashions change and in which directions, depends importantly on these innovators, but will also be determined by the social trends, the needs to conform, and the other pressures on individuals to be either the same or different from others. These micro-subjective forces should be predictive of all aspects of fashion commodification. Brands will always have brand power but they must also continually evolve to reflect the micro-subjective level forces. Otherwise, their power will be eroded in proportion to their failure to encapsulate the micro-subjective level forces. These forces are, in the end, all powerful.

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