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Title: Fashion Writing: Situation (un)Critical

Abstract:
The field of fashion communication has been undergoing a transformation in the last decade through the integration of digital technology and the subsequent changes in communication that this has enabled. This paper explores some of these changes, through textual analysis of fashion writing in the public domain.

By tracing influential voices or 'fashion tastemakers' in contemporary fashion media, this research looks at fashion ideas and how these are being produced and circulated as written expression. It is concerned with the nature of discourse and language in current fashion media, and how this may be used to gain insight into the structures and social order within the fashion system.

Lasswell constructed a definition of an act of communication in 'The Structure and Function of Communication in Society' (1948). His description of communication as 'Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect' has been employed here, enabling the structure of communication to be broken down into inter-related parts to better analyse specific changes in fashion communication. In addition, Foucault's ideas on discourse provide a framework to understand how some of the social and cultural practices of the fashion system influence and are reflected in the language of contemporary fashion tastemakers.

This research uses the writing of fashion tastemakers as a way of understanding the significance and complexity of some of the changes in fashion communication. It identifies a persistent element of fashion discourse that continues to exist in fashion media, despite the difference and variety that now form such a strong feature of this field. The paper discusses why some types of discourse circulated in the fashion media (and supported through 'discursive practice and formation') are able to maintain their authority and resist change while the rest of the system continues to evolve.

Key words:
Fashion writing / fashion tastemakers / fashion discourse / communication

Body

Introduction
This paper uses the recent changes to fashion communication brought about through developments in digital technology to explore the impact these changes may have had upon fashion discourse. The written expressions of influential voices or 'fashion tastemakers' (selected tastemakers for this study are fashion bloggers and established fashion journalists) have been tracked to gain insight into the transformed fashion communication environment. Alongside this the comparative analysis of data from both mainstream media and fashion media has been considered. This study examines contemporary fashion discourse and its sub-categories and identifies certain features in the articulation and framing of fashion today. This paper goes on to suggest possible reasons for these contemporary perspectives on fashion.

Structural changes to fashion communication

A precise definition of communication is difficult to establish mainly due to the many and various forms communication can take; however the maxim "who said what, in which channel, to whom and with what effect"[1] has been employed to examine structural changes in fashion communication landscape.

The opportunities available for people to voice their opinions on fashion and style have multiplied during the past decade (through greater access to the internet and Web 2.0 technology), with the previous barriers to publishing all but vanishing. This has provided opportunities for a wide variety of new fashion voices to publish their thoughts for a global audience, some of who have gained both status and credibility through their fashion writing. The changes have also enabled professional fashion journalists to increase the range and nature of outlets for their views. These new modes of communication allow audiences of fashion commentary to engage in a dialogue with writers, offering their own opinions, and changing the linear nature of previous communication models in fashion media into something more circular and interactive.[2]

With a new diversity of 'voices' making their views public, what is being said about fashion is changing too. The variety of personal, geographical and cultural contexts from which the 'voices' now come is reflected in the language, subject matter and perspectives of fashion circulating in the public domain.[3]

The choice of communication channels through which one is able to publish has expanded and this development has revolutionised the shape and form of much communication, not only in the world of fashion. The printed article in a fashion magazine or newspaper still exists as it did in an era of mass communication, however along side this a digital dimension has spawned a whole range of other channels delivering messages on fashion in various shapes and sizes (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).

The changes to channels of communication that have happened in the shift from mass media to new media landscape have also enabled greater insight into the audience for fashion writing. The ability of readers to address comments directly to the writer and make public their response has altered the author / reader dynamic, as well as publicising views that would formerly have been left unheard. It is now possible to see an empowered and engaged consumer, connecting and informing discussions.

The effect these structural changes have upon discussions of fashion in the public domain is less clear. It is this part of Lasswell's maxim that is potentially more significant to any research on current fashion communication and the area that this paper attempts to explore.

Fashion Tastemakers
In order to critically analyse the effects of these changes to this fast moving field, the research focuses on the published comments of influential voices or 'fashion tastemakers'. Empirical study of written expressions by fashion tastemakers in contemporary media has been used as a basis. These individuals have been selected as the important and high profile voices that play a crucial role in how ideas in fashion are articulated, presented and circulated. Fashion bloggers have been able to influence the field of fashion communication through the changes to communication and publishing, and in particular Web 2.0 technology. Initially shunned by the fashion industry, the influence and credibility of some fashion bloggers has grown and they now have a key role in fashion taste-making. Established fashion tastemakers from journalistic traditions (fashion editors of major newspapers and magazines) have also been included in this study. The written expressions from these selected tastemakers provide various media constructions of fashion, a type of information described as "a textual product of its society, relying on the reality of the moment"[4].

Through the examination of these fashion tastemakers who use language (rather than image) to express their ideas on fashion, other changes in the fashion communication landscape emerge. By comparing the writing of these two groups (fashion journalists and fashion bloggers), contrasting perspectives become

apparent. The fashion tastemakers from a journalistic background write in a formal style for all communication channels, producing informed commentary that confers a sense of the professional fashion 'insider' through their use of language, points of reference and tone, e.g:

> "This recalled not merely the common threads of working women, black and white, but also their drift through the dirty '30s from country to city."[5]

Most of the fashion journalists studied produce and publish according to copy deadlines and media institution schedules, with the additional digital capabilities requiring increasing numbers of articles produced within decreasing lead times.

The fashion blogger writing as tastemaker place themselves at the centre of their writing, using a subjective and personalized voice in their discussion of fashion. Despite the fashion bloggers working professionally in their role and as such receiving privileged access to fashion events and people, they express themselves using a casual, conversational and 'de-professionalised' voice (often described as 'authentic'), conveying a view of wide-eyed wonderment at the world of fashion, e.g:

> "I had the great privilege of visiting some of my favourite designers who gave me a preview and intimate personal run-through of their collections just days prior to their shows"[6]

Fashion bloggers post comments whenever and however they choose – short sharp bursts about their personal life or lengthy articles about the fashion industry, exploiting the nature of their preferred digital communication channels.

A comparison of the images used to accompany the writing of these tastemakers highlights the contrasting objective / subjective approach to their writing on fashion. Bloggers (almost always) feature in their accompanying photographs, putting themselves at the centre of the content. Articles by the fashion journalists have an image that illustrates the topic of the writing (often chosen by someone other than the writer such as art director).

It is evident that the addition of new voices to the discussion of fashion in the public domain has allowed fashion to be described in a greater variety of ways. The former authoritative, tyrannical voice found within fashion media in an era of mass communication forms only a small part of fashion commentary today. Voices from the fashion blogosphere have been described by some as providing authentic, 'real' discussions of fashion, instigating a move towards a more democratic fashion media.[7]

But have these changes to fashion communication really altered the way fashion is talked about now or have they just brought stylistic changes to fashion discourse? Now that fashion communication is exploiting technology, are the new channels and voices offering alternatives to the way notions of fashion are framed and articulated?

Fashion Discourse

'Discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment……Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But…..since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect'.[8]

Adopting Foucault's [9] approach to discourse and language offers a way of looking at the construction of fashion in today's fashion media that goes beyond just text. Cultures or fields are always made up of a range of discourses that compete for dominance. Unpacking Foucault's ideas, Wishnant[10] describes how discourses operate on several levels. Discourse creates a world; it shapes perceptions, pulls together

associations to create understanding, it organizes the way one should behave toward the object within that world. As part of creating understanding, discourse generates knowledge and 'truth' about the object. Statements made within a certain context have the power to convince people to accept them as 'true'; this may have no relation to the objective correctness of the statement. Using and participating in the discourse communicates knowledge about the person speaking - not only about the intended meaning of their language, but also information about their background and status as well as their relationship to those who they are addressing. This leads to the important dynamic of discourse and power, where engaging in a particular discourse enable certain people to 'speak the truth' or to be believed when speaking about the object, therefore discourses give these individuals' power (social and cultural) and status.

This understanding of discourse has informed the examination of contemporary fashion discourse here, acknowledging the selected fashion tastemakers as some of those who have the power to 'speak the truth' in the fashion media.

Fashion discourse – fashion media

It is possible to identify a particular feature in the writing of these tastemakers that feeds into fashion discourse in contemporary fashion media. This feature is evident in both print and digital forms and is present in the commentary of journalist and blogger alike. This feature is defined as a discussion of fashion that does not criticize or challenge; it forms part of a discourse that presents only positive visions of fashion, using terms of praise. It supports and frames fashion as useful and meaningful, as an ideal and in the everyday. This non-critical, eternally 'rose-tinted' discussion of fashion, found in the fashion media has been identified previously by those studying the field. Reponen[11] surveyed fashion writing in search of criticism in magazines, newspapers, websites, webzines and blogs. He found subjective commentaries and sound bites, rather than those who are prepared to "assess the merits and faults, then describe, classify, interpret, analyse, contextualize, elucidate and disseminate with the support of valid reason"[12]. Martin[13] describes much fashion writing as "hyperbole and congratulations", suggesting certain fashion institutions have promoted a language of fashion that contains over-statement and embellishment, taking subjective and unreasoned positions. McRobbie[14], Pernet[15] and McDowell[16] have also addressed the lack of rigor in fashion writing, questioning why commentators in similar fields such as music, film and theatre are able to engage in a critical manner when fashion cannot.

Those discussing this topic propose several reasons why objective criticism has failed to emerge in the fashion media. Some suggest personal gain and status of writers restricts what they can say or that the speed at which the modern fashion system moves does not allow time for considered and thoughtful discussion.[17] However the most common explanation for this continued situation is connected to the lack of critical distance or detachment of the writers to the industry.[18] The significance of mutually beneficial relationships of fashion writers, designers and others within the fashion industry, that have evolved cannot be ignored (and are discussed later). However the technical structural changes that have allowed new voices into the realm of fashion communication offer potential opportunities for a balanced debate to begin in the media, enabling it to operate outside of these exclusive practices. Despite these new opportunities, it would appear there has been little change to this particular fashion discourse; it is supported by voices old and new, in print and on screen. This persistent feature of fashion discourse continues to exist in fashion media, despite the difference and variety that now form such a strong feature of this field.

Here this paper offers another perspective on this issue, I propose that this purely positive, uncritical discourse that has been identified in contemporary fashion media has developed as an opposing discourse to that circulated in the general media that portrays fashion as "the soul of witlessness".[19]

Fashion discourse – general media

Gonzalez[20] cites Plato, Kant and Rousseau as early influential thinkers who have dismissed fashion by connecting it with vanity, fraudulent behavior or as a corrupting influence. This position on fashion is reflected in the children's fairy-tale of the Emperor's New Clothes by Hans Christian Andersen (1837), where an obsession with one's clothing is connected with vanity and stupidity. Breward[21] suggests that the serious study of fashion struggled to gain credibility even in academic circles until the 1960s and 1970s due to the perception of fashion as frivolous, feminine and superficial. As fashionable dress has become disconnected from indicating social class or occupation, the perception of fashion as being empty of any meaningful content, changing at the whim of social fads, has also taken hold in certain popular discourses on fashion.

Examining aspects of fashion discourse in popular media (in contrast to fashion media), it is possible to see how various views of fashion are being constructed and circulated. Discourses exist that depict fashion as frivolous, superficial, a subject devoid of content and as such a subject that does not warrant serious critical debate. This position has been evident in the general media through the placement of writing on fashion in newspapers on the 'women's pages' historically, and today it is commonly part of 'Lifestyle' sections (rather than Arts and Culture). This perspective is seen in the general media's enthusiasm to print an image of an extreme or outrageous outfit from a catwalk presentation without any discussion of context or theme, placing emphasis on the novelty and decadence of fashion. Other contributions to this discourse are found in the publication of "Worst Dressed" list or "Red Carpet Faux Pas" which continue to connect fashion with vanity and the ridiculous. This discourse is supported in the numerous reality TV shows that are centered on fashion and the fashion industry (Project Runway, Stylista, Launch My Line). These programs highlight the emotional instability and petty personality traits of the contestants, perpetuating a view of those involved in fashion as either too self-obsessed or not capable of rigorous debate about the field.

For those who understand fashion's role in society to be more meaningful, this type of discourse can be seen to problematise fashion. The popular promotion of fashion as a superficial novelty driven spectacle in the general and popular press influences the attitudes and values that society has towards notions of fashion. It is argued here that fashion media's response to this has been to fight back with a fashion discourse that asserts a purely positive perspective, an articulation of resistance to fashion discourse in mainstream media.

If the general media frames fashion as a form that changes on a whim moving from one novelty to the next, fashion writers provide a stablising function by mapping fashion's past, present and future as a way of constructing a linear progression. If the popular press fails to acknowledge meaning in fashion, fashion writers connect it with other cultural fields, identity formation and aspirational lifestyle. If fashion is portrayed in the general media as an extravagant spectacle that plays to the vain and materialistic, voices in fashion media counter by describing how fashion is actually worn day to day as well ideals of fashion.

Foucault's understanding of discourse is not purely language, but language + practice, making the distinction that it is concerned with what one says and what one does.[22] This definition allows an understanding that a discourse permits certain ways of talking, writing and conducting oneself towards the topic but also has the power to limit and restrict ways of talking and constructing knowledge about the topic. In the case of this fashion discourse, the loyalty and defense of fashion by fashion commentators has promoted an alternative attitude to the field; however at the same time this discourse has restricted the space where an open and constructive debate about fashion may have flourished.

In discussions of fashion discourse, one cannot be oblivious to the commercial drivers of fashion. It is in the interests of all employed in the fashion industry to make fashion accessible and appealing to the consumer to keep the fashion cycle moving forward. The positive construction of fashion where it is perceived as bringing meaning and identity to the individual certainly assists in legitimizing on-going consumption.

An endorsement of this discourse in the fashion industry can be described as Foucault's [23] idea of a discursive formation. This refers to sets of rules and institutions that are techniques for applying discourses. The institution of bi-annual international fashion weeks, where fashion journalists and fashion bloggers report from the front row can be seen as one such institution. The congratulatory non-critical reports published by these writers can be viewed as a technique for applying discourse. A critical report published by a journalist results in them being excluded from subsequent fashion shows, restricting the way fashion is able to be talked about in this realm.

The discursive practices or actions that happen as a result of the fashion tastemakers engaging in this discourse (and sanctioned through a fashion industry institution) are then enacted in the fashion industry and by the consumer, as the tastemakers' judgments spread through their relational networks to influence decision-making, opinions and sales.

At this point a question arises - is a rigorous critical debate about new ideas in fashion relevant or important to the fashion industry?

There are some who clearly feel it is important. McDowell[24] has written about the negative impact a lack of critique in fashion can have and the problems this holds for not only for design but also the promotion and representation of fashion. Martin[25] echoes this point, "When we acknowledge how important fashion is, how can we be dumb and toadying in the presence of its makers, purveyors and persuaders?" Nick Knight[26] founder of SHOWStudio and a innovator in his exploitation of new technologies, is emphatic in his view, "Like any other art form, fashion should be critiqued, just as theatre is, just as sports is, just as music is…Fashion deserves a strong critical forum. Not sycophancy…An art medium without a critical forum is not a healthy art medium." Influential fashion blogger and founder of the Business of Fashion Imran Amed[27], is in agreement with these views seeing this issue as part of a fashion commentators duty, "The fashion press has a responsibility to foster intelligent debate through free expression of ideas. We must responsibly report what we see, when we see it, and how we see it." Whether these voices are powerful enough to develop these sentiments into a competing discourse that can contribute to the way fashion is discussed more broadly, remains a subject for future research.

Conclusion
Foucault describes discourses as historically and culturally specific and as such discourses change over time. They break and undergo transformations depending on the conditions of their formation. As a result of breaks, discourses are able spread new rules that transform old discourses or force them to cease. The transformation that has occurred to fashion communication in recent years has been described as historically and culturally significant.[28] The exploitation of digital capabilities has enabled change, however this has not caused ruptures or transformations in the particular fashion discourses studied here. Perhaps yet more significant and far-reaching changes need to occur in this field in order for these discourses to be truly transformed.

<center>Notes</center>

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[2] A. Rocamora, 'Hypertextuality and Remediation in the Fashion Media', *Journalism Practice,* Vol 6, Iss 1, Routledge, Oxford, 2012 p. 92-106

[3] J. Craik, Fashion: *The Key Concepts,* Routledge, Oxford, 2009, p. 270

[4] C. Breward, *The Culture of Fashion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, p.308

[5] C.Horyn, Fashion Week Finale. *The New York Times, Runway Blog,* http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/fashion-week-finale-marc-jacobs/?ref=f accessed on 16/09/2011

[6] B. Grey-Yamboa, http://www.bryanboy.com accessed on 7/ 09 / 2011

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[8] S. Hall, 'The West and The Rest', *Formation of Modernity* S. Hall & B. Gieben (ed), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.291

[9] M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* 2002, Routledge, Oxford

[10] C. Wishnant, *Foucault and Discourse.* 2012 http://webs.wofford.edu/whisnantcj/his389/foucault_discourse.pdf

[11] J. Reponen, 'Fashion Criticism Today?' *Fashion Forward* A. De Witt-Paul & M. Crouch(ed). Inter-Disciplinary Press (http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing/i-d-press) 2011, p.31

[12] Ibid.

[13] R. Martin, 'Addressing the Dress', *The Crisis of Criticism*, M. Berger(ed), the New Press, New York, 1998, p.58

[14] A. McRobbie, *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry*, Routledge, London, 1998, p. 152

[15] D. Pernet, Op-Ed: Who Watches the Watchmen? http://www.businessoffashion.com/2013/03/op-ed-who-watches-the-watchmen.html . Accessed on 2 / 04 /2013

[16] C. McDowell, *The Designer Scam,* Hutchinson, London, 1994, p.143

[17] J. Reponen, 'Fashion Criticism Today?' *Fashion Forward* A. De Witt-Paul & M. Crouch(ed). Inter-Disciplinary Press (http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing/i-d-press) 2011, p. 35

[18] R. Martin, Addressing the Dress', *The Crisis of Criticism*, M. Berger(ed), the New Press, New York, 1998, p.51

[19] R. Martin, Addressing the Dress', *The Crisis of Criticism*, M. Berger(ed), the New Press, New York, 1998, p.52

[20] A. Gonzalez, 'On Fashion and Fashion Discourses', *Cultural Studies in Fashion and Beauty.*2010, Vol 1,iss 1

[21] C. Breward, 1998 'Culture, Identities, Histories: Fashioning a Cultural Approach to Dress', *Fashion Theory*, Vol 2, iss 4, 1998, p.302

[22] S. Hall, 'Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse in the Work of Representation', *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, S. Hall (ed), Sage, London, 1997,p.72

[23] M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* 2002, Routledge, Oxford

[24] C. McDowell, *The Designer Scam,* Hutchinson, London, 1994, p.144

[25] R. Martin, Addressing the Dress', *The Crisis of Criticism*, M.Berger(ed), the New Press, New York, 1998, p.70

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[27] I. Amed, Spring / Summer 2013: The Season that Was. http://www.businessoffashion.com/2012/10/springsummer-2013-the-season-that-was.html Accessed on 17/06/2013

[28] J.Robson, 'Its Digital Darling', *ES Magazine*, October 2012, p.27

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