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Influence of the Web

Leopoldina Fortunati and Manuela Farinosi

Abstract

Web 2.0 platforms have deeply changed fashion communication. Online forums and, later, blogs and social networks have become increasingly common and have achieved a pivotal role in driving new fashion trends. They represent a possibility for ordinary people to participate in the fashion scene; share their suggestions, opinions, and comments; and thus, contribute to the construction of new fashion discursivity. Whereas scholars have focused on fashion bloggers, there is little research on the antifashion communities that have developed around the bloggers themselves. To remedy this, an ethnographic study has investigated the content of some of the most active Italian Facebook pages, created to comment, criticize, nitpick, and blast the outfits posted by personal style bloggers, and has analyzed the construction of a new kind of horizontal style discourse, where everyone might become a fashion critic.

Since the late 1990s Web 2.0 platforms have enriched the landscape of fashion communication. Online forums and, later, blogs and social networks have become increasingly common and have achieved a pivotal role in discussing, communicating, promoting, and driving new fashion trends. It has been calculated that there are more than 20 million blogs on fashion in the early twenty-first century. However, fashion-related online activity is even more widespread: On many blogs that predominantly focus on other topics (such as microcelebrities), the discussion also often addresses fashion.

Web 2.0 platforms in practice represent a possibility for ordinary people to be present in the fashion scene; share suggestions with peers; express opinions, comments, and reflections; and thus, contribute to the construction of discourses about new fashion. So far scholars have focused on the analysis of forums and blogs, and since 2006 also on fashion bloggers, a world mainly dominated by women, such as Susie Bubble and the Italians Chiara Ferragni and Veronica Ferraro. (There is, however, at least one male fashion blogger: Scott Schuman, the photographer who launched the popular blog The Sartorialist.) In contrast, there is little research on the antifashion communities that exist around the bloggers themselves and have elected Facebook as the place to organize their campaigns. The role of the Web raises two important issues: the overcoming of the traditional prescriptions of fashion system, and the danger of the ridiculous. New discourses on fashion have been developing online, and they can challenge the power of fashion prescriptiveness. A study of the forums on the Web site of the most frequently read Italian women's weekly, Donna Moderna, explored the life of this broad and mainly feminine online community. Another study, on Italian antifashion bloggers, conducted by sociologists of culture and fashion scholars Leopoldina Fortunati and Manuela Farinosi, investigated the content of the most active Italian Facebook pages, created for commenting on and criticizing the outfits posted by some popular Italian bloggers. These two studies have allowed an analysis of the construction of a new kind of horizontal style discourse, where people can express their lay knowledge of the theme or in some cases even become a fashion critic.

Web 2.0 Platforms and Fashion Discourses

The discourses about fashion that Web 2.0 platforms have allowed are in a certain sense a novelty. In the pre-Web corpora of oral conversations, fashion was a marginal theme. Also, in research conducted in 2004 on the forums on the Web site of Donna Moderna, only 7 percent of the 4,287 messages analyzed concerned fashion, whereas 14.4 percent commented on news, and 13.6 percent were about sex. The viral development of online discourse about fashion since the early 2000s is paralleled by that developing around cuisine. How can this be explained? Perhaps, as the work done by the masses in global societies becomes simpler in a Marxian sense (that is, no longer requires any real expertise or know-how), the direct experience of work is transformed into words and discussions. Many scholars have called this process the "dematerialization" of reality, which means the advent for the masses of a life of secondhand experience.

Web 2.0 platforms offer different online sources of information about fashion, as well as places to discuss it, and they develop their own languages, tropes, rules, and communicative modalities, which are influenced by the traditional dress codes; in turn, the dress codes are influenced by the online conversations. These platforms represent a shift from co-present orality (face-to-face conversations) to a complex form of multimodal (written, visual, and audio) mediated communication. Online, the lack of copresence leads to a loss of control of the environment in which the communication takes place; this is compensated for by the possibility of reaching and involving large audiences. This might make early twenty-first-century fashion discourse more attractive for many people, and perhaps more "bottom up" than it has been in the past.

According to several scholars and observers, fashion blogs seem to play an especially important role in communicating, promoting, and driving new fashion trends. For example, Constance White (style director at eBay) has argued that blogs' true impact is that consumers are taking control and ownership of fashion. In this view, whereas fashion magazines and television fashion programs have always been part of the establishment of the fashion system, fashion bloggers have the mission to freely decode and interpret the new fashion collections, express their tastes and desires, and celebrate only the fashion brands they personally like. Traditional fashion media continue, however, to be perceived as playing a big role in the structure of the fashion system since they act as the transmission belt of information on fashion as well as the gatekeepers of the explanation and illustration of fashion products. In 1994 the dress scholar Jennifer Craik defined fashion as an authoritarian process driven by a recognized elite of designers who lay down the clothing possibilities for the majority of the population. In the past this rigid and hierarchical system, in which users were at the bottom and could only accept or refuse the proposals without entering into their production, could be maintained by the unidirectional communication structure of the mass media. However, the structure of the media, and hence of the fashion system, has been turned upside down by Web 2.0 platforms, which for the first time have created the possibility of gathering millions of people in a virtual space and allowing them to interact with each other.

Different ways of following a blog. Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

The discourses about fashion that have developed on the Web are ambivalent, though. Some blogs and social network pages seem to be an extension of the discourse carried out by fashion journalists and the media in general; these enhance the strength of the discourse elaborated by the fashion system. Other blogs seem to challenge the social control and discipline exercised by fashion systems in the public sphere. However, a reliable, large-scale study on fashion blogs that would analyze their predominant tendencies in the early twenty-first century is not available. Furthermore, whereas famous fashion bloggers have been studied, there is little research on normal online users.

Fashion Prescriptions and the Danger of the Ridiculous

The growing online discourse about fashion has implications for the dominion of the fashion system. According to traditional sociological thinking, the fashion system has shown, over time, a strong capacity to impose its dictates, thus controlling people's social behaviors and contributing to social cohesion. The adherence of consumers/citizens to the dictates of fashion could facilitate their reciprocal social recognition in the public space as individuals, participating in the same social order and sharing the same cultural rituals. Fashionable consumers/citizens were able to update themselves according to the rhythm of social changes, to organize the presentation of their selves in public spaces in accordance with a style compatible with shared rules, and to express their tastes and moods in an established, formal framework.

To analyze more deeply the normative role of fashion, a concept introduced by semiologists—that of the implicit contract—can be useful. Only by introducing this notion is it possible to outline the type of relation that fashion maintains with people. What kind of contract does the fashion system make with people in order to acquire this capacity to shape society? This contract is implicit and completely asymmetric: In practice, the fashion system takes for itself the exclusive right to decide unilaterally what is fashion and what is not, what is in good taste, and what can be understood as the aesthetics of clothing, and then it imposes these decisions on society. The fashion system has complete power over consumers, which is the only explanation for the arbitrariness with which the fashion system plays the role of gatekeeper over the destiny of users' style. This contract, like all other contracts, works only if the two subjects—the fashion system and consumers—agree on its terms. People have to believe and accept that those fashion products are fashionable; otherwise, the contract is broken. When people are separated from one another, the fashion system more easily imposes

its dominion. Obviously, this hierarchical and directive system could function well only in societies that expressed a similar structure. In contrast, the functioning of the fashion system becomes more problematic in societies, like the West after World War II, in which the social hierarchy has been weakened, the social contract has become much more negotiated than it was before, and the emotional heart of society has become cannier.

The work of two philosophers, Immanuel Kant and Norberto Bobbio, provides further input into an analysis of fashion's capacity to be socially prescriptive. Kant, for example, argued that the problem of fashion is an emotional one. In the book Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798), Kant stated that fashion's dominion is explained by its capacity to manipulate emotions. He explained that fashion speaks to emotions (rather than to dreams, as the usual rhetoric on fashion claims it does) in order to impose its prescriptions. The reign of fashion can dominate—he believed—because it counts on both the vanity of consumers and their insanity in allowing fashion to slavishly guide them. In other words, these emotions push people to accept the canons of beauty elaborated by the fashion system as the official beauty of the society, not good taste (of aesthetics). In short, for Kant, the dictatorship of fashion acts at the emotional level.

If Kant stresses that the dominion of fashion is built on emotions, Bobbio, a philosopher of jurisprudence, gives guidance in understanding the legal status of fashion's capacity to prescribe behaviors at social level. From a technical point of view, fashion—writes Bobbio—is a "hypothetical norm," that is, a norm that establishes "which formalities are necessary to carry out a certain act or task," involving sanctions only at the social level, not at the legal level. Hence, fashion has less compulsory force than categorical norms do in imposing such formalities, but it is no less powerful. Its sanctions can be quite terrible and are generally related to strategies of social exclusion or marginalization of those who are out of fashion. As a hypothetical norm, fashion influences and controls social behavior by recurring to persuasive communication: fascination, manipulation, and seduction. However, one major characteristic of fashion's capacity to impose its prescription is that the implicit social contract that exists between the fashion system and consumers (the ruler and the ruled) has a limited life span. People must always be willing to change their beliefs about what fashion is, in accordance with the new fashion collections. It would be problematic if people continued to think that the fashion products of the past were still fashionable.

Man reading a fashion blog. Photograph by Mercedes Burgos

Thus, it is apparent that the contract between the fashion system and people is quite fragile. This fragility is further highlighted by another philosopher: Henri Bergson. He speaks of the ridiculous as a latent dimension of fashion. Fashion, like all forms of innovation, must envision the clothes and accessories of the future as detached from the reality of the moment. This detachment, which Bergson describes as the insertion of the mechanical into the living, is the door through which the ridiculous passes, when the implicit contract between fashion and users ends or is no longer honored.

When is this implicit contract no longer honored by the consumer? This happens when consumers are no longer available to follow fashion proposals, to dream with fashion, to cooperate with the processes of changing the meaning that is attributed to the items of clothing proposed by fashion, and to accept that their personal image is mediated by the new fashion collections. In this moment, when the implicit contract between fashion and people breaks, for whatever reason, fashion loses its normative power over people's imagination and emotions. In this situation any garment may become ridiculous. Only when one deals with current fashion, suggests Bergson, is the danger of the ridiculous not as strong, because one is so used to the current fashion that the dress seems one with the wearer. Only repeated use neutralizes the latent ridiculousness of any cloth. Web 2.0 platforms introduce a novelty in this situation because they offer users a place to talk among themselves and discuss fashion. In doing so, the users create the conditions to ridicule fashion.

Web 2.0 Platforms, the Fashion System, and Antifashion Bloggers

Initially, the online discussion of fashion developed in forums that were managed by webmasters and belonged to some organization, such as online magazines or newspapers. On these Web sites, for example, in the forums of Donna Moderna that Fortunati studied in 2004, the conversation about fashion tended to remain within the canons established by the fashion system, without touching the contract with fashion. After the advent of blogs, and even more with social networks such as Facebook, the situation changed completely. The space of the blog, as well as the responsibility of what is written there, belongs only to the individual who has built it. This gives bloggers the freedom to write exactly what they think about fashion, including their idiosyncratic preferences, their judgments about what they buy, their tastes, and so on. Cate T. Corcoran, the technology editor at the fashion trade publication Women's Wear Daily, has written that "bloggers see themselves as truth tellers in a world where the truth is hard to come by."

The freedom bloggers enjoy saying exactly what they think can reorient their readers and thus influence other consumers in one direction or another. In the twenty-first century, fashion bloggers constitute a sort of producers/consumers who engage in dialogue with the fashion industry and brands. This two-way relationship presents many advantages for both the social actors involved. Bloggers' role can be beneficial for the fashion system, which in some instances has decided to involve fashion bloggers at an institutional level. In this way fashion bloggers have become another link in the chain of information about and communication of fashion products to the public, a precious voice that is often very close to a large number of possible consumers. This strategy of including the most successful fashion bloggers within the fashion system has allowed the latter to maintain its dominion at a social level, although with some adjustments.

Girls who are dressed very similarly. Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

The problem with blogs, if anything, is that only a few of them succeed in becoming a point of reference for a substantial number of people. In the majority of cases, they have remained a kind of journal where people reflect and write on fashion for a very limited audience. The sense of frustration experienced by these unpopular fashion bloggers, which derives from their marginalization, has pushed many of them to become followers of the popular fashion bloggers. As followers, they have in some cases generated new kinds of critical discourse on fashion proposals.

Thus far, scholars have mainly analyzed the dissemination of fashion communication through blogs, but there is little research on the communities that exist—in both positive and negative senses—around the famous bloggers themselves. Some of the most active Italian Facebook pages have been created to comment on, criticize, nitpick, and blast the outfits posted by personal style bloggers; Fortunati and Farinosi studied these pages with the purpose of understanding the role played by antifashion bloggers in the renegotiation of the contract between the fashion system and consumers. In social networks such as Facebook, people maintain the freedom enjoyed by bloggers but multiply the effects of blogging because the social network functions as a space in which their discourse can resonate. In this way, fashion's capacity to dictate vestimentary behaviors can encounter a serious crisis.

The members of the anti-blogger Facebook pages in fact blast the published outfits of some fashion bloggers very frequently. Hiding behind fake identities, they adopt unfair behaviors and attack the fashion bloggers for their photos, texts, outfits, and lifestyles. Often, the name of the fake identity is directly inspired by the fashion world, playing with the names of famous brands. Gratuitous and spurious insults, humiliations, affronts, and offensive statements populate the Facebook pages that Fortunati and Farinosi analyzed. The members of the antifashion bloggers' Facebook pages pelt female fashion bloggers in particular with acidic and repetitive comments. They save a photo from a blog and then upload and share it on the Facebook page with some sarcastic words of comment, giving other fans of the page the possibility to leave their own comments. In this way they expose fashion items to shame and ridicule.

Most of these criticisms are likely motivated by hate and envy of popular fashion bloggers' easy success and microcelebrity and of their collaborations with leading international fashion brands, such as Dior, Louis Vuitton, Emilio Pucci, and so on. Acts of bullying are also often present in these pages and primarily express strong resentment and defamation. However, by attacking the fashion bloggers, these people in reality are attacking the fashion system because they are ridiculing the new fashion proposals. In these Facebook pages the breaking of the contract between the fashion system and society is celebrated.

Web 2.0 platforms in general accommodate the discourse on fashion very well. On the other hand, they represent an arena where fashion proposals might be judged and often derided by a multitude of users, who perhaps do not appreciate the innovative aspects of fashion that challenge aesthetic conformism and the well-known. This can be dangerous for the fashion system because it can lead to the rejection of the contract between the fashion system and consumers. The blogs and social networks that are characterized by an attitude of rebellion against fashion prescriptions function as a huge window in which antifashion discourses can have great resonance and can catalyze a high number of followers. At the same time, they might be a place where fashion can be improved by users' criticisms and new ideas. There are many sexists, superficial, stereotyped, and affected aspects of fashion discourse that have become totally dysfunctional in postmodern society. The new landscape of grassroots communication represents an occasion for the fashion system to renew itself by listening to its customers. Web 2.0 platforms, and in particular personal style blogs, perhaps do not have the strength to subvert the fashion hegemony, but they can help democratize the relationship between the fashion system and consumers. The capacity to dictate social behaviors at a vestimentary level that has distinguished the world of fashion in the past seems to be over.

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