

Fashion and marketing: individuality vs. conformity



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Fashion & Marketing

Individuality vs. Conformity.

Section 1: Introduction

A seemingly intractable paradox underlies Westerners choice of fashion in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, the democratic and social progress made in the West in the past fifty years has led to radical revaluations of, and profound reversals of attitudes towards, issues such as gender, class, race, social stereotypes, cultural identity and so on: in short, the Western citizen of 2005 has far greater personal freedom for expression than could have been conceivable for a Westerner in 1905 or even 2005 (Craik, 1994). The modern student of Western fashion trends might therefore reasonably expect to notice in the clothing choices and styles of twenty-first Westerners ever greater diversity and individuality - to notice a kaleidoscopic and multi-coloured efflorescence of personal freedom in fabric and cloth. And, indeed, in many instances in Western society there is a profusion of individual styles mirroring newly liberated individual personalities. Yet, on the other hand, despite this potential for individuality, the fashion student notices, paradoxically, that Westerners are exhibiting an ever greater homogeneity and similarity in their clothing choice - for instance, the ubiquitous presence, amongst certain definable social groups, of trendy brands like Tommy Hilfiger, Zara and FCUK.

The principal force behind this homogeneity is argued to be (Miles, 1998 & Radford, 1998) the massive and all-consuming power of giant global fashion houses and their resources for mass branding and advertising. To many

fashion critics and scholars these hugely powerful companies have come to swamp the potential for personal and individual expression that was made possible by social changes in Europe and America in the past fifty years. In a further paradox, it was these very changes themselves, and the liberation and emancipation of consumer power and choice which they released, which provides the consumer markets and spending-power which make these huge companies possible. In other words, for the gender, class, and social revolutions of the twentieth century to happen this required the protests and emancipation of Western masses; but this very freedom itself created a mass homogeneous market that could be exploited by fashion corporations themselves made possible by these changes. In a final paradox, Rosenfeld (1997) and Davis (1993) argue that modern man is free to choose the clothes he wears and so is himself responsible for submitting himself and his individuality to temptations of mass production and consumerism that surround him.

The fascinating question before this literature review is then: *why is it that Westerners, granted at last a large measure of personal freedom for expression, 'choose' nonetheless to submit themselves to mass trends and to enslave themselves to perhaps an ever greater extent than when such freedom was not obtainable?* Of further interest is the question: how have particular cultural groups, and fashion trends, resisted mass consumerism of fashion, and gone on to use these new freedoms to establish exciting and original expressions of their personalities?

Section 2: Sources

A few words about the origin and authority of the sources used for this literature review are perhaps necessary before turning to the main themes of the review.

The principal type of source discussed in this literature review are academic books and journals; in addition, some internet sources are employed also.

The academic books referred to in this review are amongst the seminal texts in the literature of fashion and marketing, their authors world-class experts in their fields, and therefore the reliability and authority of their material is extremely high. The fashion student can have high, if not complete, confidence in his employment of these sources to illustrate his themes and arguments. Likewise, those texts from other fields in this review, such as Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) or Lacan's *Language of the Self* (Lacan, 1998), are usually included by critics and scholars in their lists of the most important works of the twentieth-century. They too then may be used by the fashion student with a high degree of trust in their authority and reliability.

A note of caution might be sounded however about the employment of internet sources in any literature review. Whereas the process of publishing work in an academic book or journal is a lengthy one, requiring considerable cost and numerous stages of scrutiny by fellow scholars and experts, thus ensuring the quality of those sources, nonetheless, the standards required for publication on the internet are often lower and less vigorous. The vast profusion material released daily on the internet requires the conscientious student to subject the internet sources he employs to greater scrutiny and doubt than might be the case with academic books or journals published in <https://assignbuster.com/fashion-and-marketing-individuality-vs-conformity/>

the traditional paper-based way. Consequently, the internet sources used in this literature review have been vigorously scrutinised and tested for their reliability in the fashion described above.

Section 3: Review

The following literature review is discussed according to the following thematic schema in five parts: (1) *The Paradox of Individuality and Conformity* , (2), *Global Trends and World Markets* , (3) *Semiotic Theories of Fashion Promotion & Visual Communication* , (4) *Popular Cultures and Distinctive Identities* , and, (5), *Sociological & Philosophical Views of Class, Gender, Social Stereotypes and Cultural Identity*.

The Paradox of Individuality and Conformity

The contemporary situation in Western fashion and personal clothing choice is one of apparently irresolvable paradox: Westerners are today endowed with ever greater personal freedoms, extending naturally to their choice of personal clothing and one would expect this freedom to lead to a plethora and profusion of individual styles and manners of dress: these freedoms should result in less conformity of style than was present in say 1905 when gender, class and social prejudices compelled and forced a person to dress in a particular way and style. Yet, despite these abundant new-found freedoms, Western clothing choice in 2005 seems to display ever greater conformity and homogeneity. That is, Westerners are 'choosing' to dress more and more alike one another - Westerners' expression of their personalities through their choice of style is showing ever greater similarities to one another. How then could this be possible? This question is discussed at the <https://assignbuster.com/fashion-and-marketing-individuality-vs-conformity/>

general level in great depth by F. Davis (1993) *Fashion, Clothing and Identity* and by Fiske (1990) in *Introduction to Communications Studies*.

Global Trends & World Markets

The most persuasive and frequently given answer to the above question is that the rise of huge fashion houses - such as Louis Vuitton, Tommy Hilfiger, Armani, Prada, Zara, amongst many others - along with their massive resources for branding and advertising, have drowned-out the recently attained freedoms of Western individuals to reflect their personalities in their choice of clothing. This point is powerfully made in D. Crane's seminal text *Fashion and the Social Agenda: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*. (Crane, 2004). Crane argues that just at the critical historical moment (the end of the 20th Century) when Westerners were finally endowed with greater personal freedoms in fashion and personality expression than ever before, that these freedoms were immediately smothered by forces such as globalization and capitalism which gave birth to vast fashion corporations whose financial resources and advertising capacity have become too great and powerful for individual expression to poke through and flower. This point is corroborated and reinforced by numerous other scholars and authorities in fashion and marketing. F. Davis (1993) in *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, L. Rosenfeld (1997) in *Clothing as Communication*, and J. Craik (1994) in *The Face of Fashion; Cultural Studies in Fashion* all endorse Crane's central premise that individual freedom of personality expression through clothing and style is suffocated by the capially fuelled force of the major fashion brands to overwhelm this expression through relentless psychological pressure, carried by advertising, to conform to the style and choice '

imposed' and 'decided' by these companies and not by individuals themselves.

M. Barnard in *Fashion as Communication* (1996) makes an interesting refinement of this basic premise by suggesting, in a further paradoxical statement, that it is the very freedom of gender, class, social status etc., of the past fifty years which has led to ever greater conformity to popular styles and to an even greater imposition of style than existed before such freedoms were possible. In other words, to echo a sentiment expressed by Nietzsche in 1888 (Nietzsche, 1888) and Freud in 1900 (Freud, 1900) human beings have natural herd instincts which are present whether people are free or not, and these instincts generate the need for leadership and imposition from one source or another. Thus, whilst before the 1960's style conformity was forced upon Westerners by gender and class stereotypes, nonetheless, after the 1960's when these stereotypes were lifted, Westerners became susceptible to a new 'authority', 'imposition' and 'leadership' in the form of vast fashion corporations whose choice of style and expression is propagated through intensive branding and advertising. According to this philosophical view, endorsed by Bruce Stella and Pamela Church Gibson (2000) in *Fashion Cultures Theories: Explorations and Analysis*, the personalities of Westerners today and their choice of expression of their personalities through clothing, is largely decided by fashion corporations and advertising companies - thus resulting in the uniformity of style and expression which is so evident from a casual glance at our high-streets today.

Semiotic Theories of Fashion Promotion & Visual Communication

A interesting example of the practice of a semiotic theory of fashion promotion is that discussed in A. Rhodes' and R. Zuloago's paper ' *A Semiotic Analysis of High Fashion Advertising* ' published in 2003. The chief motif of Rhodes' and Zuloago's work is that ' *Fashion advertising is an excellent example of identity-image producing media* ' (Rhodes & Zuloago, 2003: p8). They state at the outset of their paper that ' *The nature of the product is tied directly to identity - those objects with which we encase our bodies for public display - and fashion is acknowledged as a cultural language of style* '; a little further on they add ' *Taken as a whole, high fashion media and advertising describe a spectrum of identity, unified in general types of signifiers - young women, high status, high sexuality - and through the constant repetition and variation of images on these themes serve to create this identity spectrum.* ' (Rhodes and Zuloago, 2003, p1).

Thus, in their paper, Rhodes and Zuloago seek to define the symbiotic relationship between high fashion and the cultural and social identity of one particular social group: young, rich and sexually confident women. Rhodes and Zuloago argue that the advertising campaigns of companies like Prada, Donna Karen, Armani, Dolce Gabanna and others like them, speak so powerfully and seductively to these women, and that the images employed penetrate so deeply into their consciousness and social orientation, that they come to identify their personalities almost wholly with the product. Rhodes and Zulago recognise, nonetheless, that whilst the influence of major fashion brands over social groups like the one mentioned above is immense that these groups too, by their social characteristics and newly liberated personalities, constantly force the fashion brands to invent new styles and designs that evolve to reflect the changing consciousness of these particular

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and individualistic groups (Rhodes & Zuloago, 2003: p5). The symbiosis is nearly total; and similar relationships between major brands and other social groups are evident throughout modern Western culture.

Popular Cultures and Distinctive Identities

R. Radford points out in *Dangerous Liaison: Art, Fashion and Individualism* (1998) that the mass conformity of modern fashion style and personality expression is not of course universal, and many original and fresh styles - punk, gothic, ethnic, etc., - have arisen from the social freedoms of recent decades, both in reaction to the preceding centuries of restricted expression and also in reaction to the monotonous uniformity of the mass-branded and consumer-based style. As suggested in the last sentence, Radford distinguishes between styles which are (1) a reaction to the restrictions of former centuries, (2) those which are defiances of the modern branded uniformity, and, (3), those which are a reaction to neither, but rather are healthy and original efflorescences of cultural uniqueness and individual expression.

In the first category Radford places the astonishing growth in popularity of 'gender-liberated' products like bikinis, short-skirts and casual clothing which were, in other centuries, repressed by the authorities either because of gender prejudices or inequalities, or because of antiquated ideas about the morality or sexual imprudence of certain items and styles of clothing. To take an instance of gender discrimination cited by Radford (Radford, 1998: pp. 142-148), it was not socially or morally permissible for women in former times to wear beach attire (bikinis, swim-suits etc.,) that revealed or

celebrated anything of the sensuousness or beauty of the female figure; women were therefore universally condemned (in Western countries) to wear a single type plain, non-sexual beachwear. But since the lifting of this social prejudice and stigma, there has been a profusion of designers, from Gucci and Dolce & Gabana to Zara and BHS, who have produced modern designs which allow women to celebrate the sensuality and beauty of the female figure. Women today enjoy the same rights as men to wear what they like either to the beach, to the disco or to work; thus, in this instance, despite the domination of the fashion brands, women now have the opportunity to, *and do indeed exhibit in practice*, a greater expression of individuality of personality than was possible or permissible before the last decades.

In the second category, Radford places fashion styles like *punk* and *gothic*: styles which rebel against the conformity of modern mass-consumer culture and relish in the controversy and upsetting of convention induced by the difference of their style. Studded clothing, fluorescent coloured hair, male make-up, cross-dressing etc., are rebellions against the usual fashion paradigm and make the personality statement that some people disagree with popular sentiment and convention and express this in clothing styles that are often shocking and scandalous (Barthes, 1983).

In the third category are individualistic styles, such as ethnic, which are neither reactions to historical repressions or to modern mass conformity, but which are rather healthy flourishing of individual personality or philosophy. For instance, contemporary Western style permits a greater exhibition of ethnic clothing or pride in national dress than was acceptable fifty years ago. F. Davis argued as early as 1988 in *Clothing and Fashion Communication*
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that clothing could be a vehicle for greater racial tolerance and for multiculturalism and racial integration in modern Western society. A concomitant of this toleration is a celebration and pride in the wearing of clothes of national dress; clothes that display part of the person's personality repressed for decades.

Sociological & Philosophical Views of Class, Gender, Social Stereotypes and Cultural Identity

Jacques Lacan in *Language of the Self* (Lacan, 1997) gives a fascinating philosophical and psychological interpretation of the individuality vs. conformity paradox, filtering it the prism of class, gender and social stereotypes, to argue that human beings are essentially language-animals and can be manipulated if one finds the key to the use of this language. Lacan argues in his seminal text *Language and the Self* (1997) that the social freedoms attained by Westerners in the past half century have given them Westerners unprecedented opportunities to reflect their innermost 'self', their basic human constituency, through new cultural media such as television, the arts, and by derivation, fashion and our choice of media. Lacan argues further that the 'self' of previously repressed groups such as women, homosexuals, African-Americans and so on is now able to manifest itself in cultural forms that had previously been repressed for centuries, and which are now bursting out in the diversity of artforms prevalent in our society today. Nonetheless, through his principal scientific and philosophical investigation into the language-animal, Lacan argues that Westerners have been seduced by the clever and innovative marketing campaigns of the major fashion brands, who use slogans and images to target specific social

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groups. Thus Lacan explains the phenomenal seduction of modern Western man to the worded slogans of designer labels and celebrity endorsed products. Lacan suggests that the advertising campaigns of major fashion brands seduce the consumer's unconscious directly and that this explains the phenomenon of mass conformity to such a homogeneous type of personal expression through fashion as is evident in our society.

Section 4: Conclusion

In the final analysis, the literature of the fashion and marketing texts on the subject of individuality vs. conformity, and the influence of branding upon this relationship, reveals the following points. Firstly, that a curious and complex paradox deeply underpins the dynamics between individuality and conformity. To the one side, the liberation of women, homosexuals, formerly repressed racial groups, underprivileged classes and others, in the second half of the twentieth-century, has led to a huge mass of people in Western society who have previously unimaginable freedom to wear whatever styles and types of clothing they believe best express their individuality and uniqueness. For instance, gender prejudices removed, women can now wear trousers ; race prejudices declining, repressed groups can wear a city suit or opera tuxedo; in many other instances Westerners are free to dress as however their mood, philosophy and occupation inclines them. On the other hand, the ceaseless ascent to prominence and immense power of the great fashion houses and fashion brands has led to a blanket of homogeneity being spread over the personal expression of many Western consumers. Philosophers like Lacan, and psychologists like Freud and Nietzsche, suggest that man has an innate herd instinct that compels him to conform to the

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trends of the crowd and to seek a higher authority and leadership to decide and impose his personal expression upon him. According to this view, despite the newly attained freedom of Westerners, they have substituted for the old imposition of gender and class barriers the new authority of the mass product and the famous brand. Thus 'personal choice' and 'freedom of expression of personality' through clothing are merely illusions that do not correspond to modern reality. Furthermore, the conformity of modern Western dress is, according to D. Crane (Crane, 2004), even more intense today than in other centuries, since in 2005 particular styles and mass produced clothing items - Crane gives Levi's jeans as an example - permeate all classes and genders of society and therefore have a 'total sphere of conformity and influence'; in other centuries a particular item or style of clothing would only dominate one social group; today brands like Nike, Zara, Levi's, Armani and so on, can penetrate the personal expression of every social group from top to bottom.

Nonetheless, the flourishing of reactionary and rebellious fashions expressions such as punk and gothic, as well as the profusion of small individualistic designers and such styles as ethnic suggest that the mass produced fashion items have not and will not dominate totally and may even be forced back a little as personal expression is allowed to bloom in the new forms and clothing styles of the twenty-first century. Our final words might be these: that the question of conformity vs. individuality now hangs in a delicate balance and equilibrium, that Western society pivots at a vital moment in the history of its ability to be able to define itself. The opportunity exists for Westerners to dazzle the world with an efflorescence of new styles

of clothing that reflect the cultural diversity, racial integration, and class assimilation achieved in the past fifty years. The danger remains nonetheless that these achievements and potential expression will be swamped by the relentless march of mass consumer fashion and our seduction to it.

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