

9-2010

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Gili Korman Golander

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, gilikg@yahoo.com

noam Tractinsky

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, noamt@bgu.ac.il

Ilanit Kabessa Cohen

Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Israel, alinikbs@post.bezalel.ac.il

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Recommended Citation

Golander, Gili Korman; Tractinsky, noam; and Cohen, Ilanit Kabessa, "FASHION\TRENDS IN WEB DESIGN" (2010). *MCIS 2010 Proceedings*. 50.

<http://aisel.aisnet.org/mcis2010/50>

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FASHION\TRENDS IN WEB DESIGN

Gili Korman Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, gilikg@yahoo.com

Noam Tractinsky, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, noamt@bgu.ac.il

*Ilanit Kabessa Cohen, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design,
alinikbs@post.bezalel.ac.il, ilanit.kabessa@gmail.com*

Research in Progress

Abstract

In this paper we describe a preliminary, in-progress, research of fashion\trends in HCI. First, we present the motivation for this research, as this topic has not been methodically researched despite the accelerating pace and growing influence of fashion\trends in modern life. In order to provide appropriate theoretical background, we define and explain the fashion and trend phenomena using resources from multiple research disciplines such as trend, fashion, design research, sociology, psychology and economics. We have chosen to focus this research on web design trends; therefore we illustrate our approach with web design examples. We conclude with an outline of our research project, its goals and methods, and finally the potential implications and opportunities for future research.

Keywords: Trends, Fashion, Design, Human-Computer Interaction, Graphical User Interface, UI.

1 INTRODUCTION

Fashion is central to modern life: it drives the economy, mediates communication, influences aesthetic taste, shapes identities, defines individuals and groups, and often fulfils contrasting human needs and desires. The use of information technology (IT) to create, manipulate and disseminate designs has been a major contributor to fashion's expansion and popularization and to the accelerated pace of its lifecycle (Vejlgaard, 2007). At the same time, many aspects of HCI have been subjected to fashion-like processes (Tractinsky, 2006). In recent years HCI research went through a paradigm shift, transferring focus away from purely cognitive, usability oriented topics towards broader aspects such as User Experience (Hassenzahl, 2003), Hedonics (Diefenbach and Hassenzahl, 2008), and Aesthetics (Lavie and Tractinsky, 2004). Consequently, research on fashion and trends in HCI appears timely and beneficial.

We propose that fashion\trends have various manifestations in HCI. Within this general proposition we focus our preliminary efforts on the field of web design. To the best of our knowledge there are no systematic studies of this kind yet. We believe that the ground for such research has been laid in recent years, as the user interface technology has reached a maturity level that enables almost limitless design opportunities. Yet, the visual language of web design is relatively new and is still evolving. Thus, we are at an ideal point to start analyzing its grammar and meanings while setting the ground for future research. Such research would eventually benefit our understanding of individual and societal effects of IT.

We begin by exploring the meaning of fashion and of a related concept – trend – by taking a multidisciplinary perspective that relies on the literature on trends, fashion, and design research, as well on studies from the fields of sociology, psychology and economics. We then discuss fashion and trends in web design, elaborate on the current research framework, suggest potential research directions and implications.

2 FASHION

Fashion is a centuries-old phenomenon: the word fashion is dated back to the 14th century, deriving from the Latin word *facere* (to make), and means "a prevailing custom, usage or style" (Merriam-Webster). Fashion's key elements are modernity, adoption, change, context\time dependency, communication of social meanings, and a close affinity to style (Wilson, 1985, Davis, 1992, Barnard, 2007, Lynch and Strauss, 2007). Blumer (1969) expands fashion's scope from clothing to other domains such as arts, entertainment, medicine, management, politics and even science.

Researchers have tried to shed light on the phenomenon of fashion from a variety of social, psychological and technological perspectives (cf. Lynch and Strauss, 2007). For example, Marxist theories have claimed that fashion's function stems from capitalism's need for perpetual expansion. According to this view, fashion's alleged function is to encourage consumption, because without consumerism capitalism will collapse (Wilson, 1985). Some see fashion as a decorative or applied art form, portraying an artistic expression of the ideas of a period, while at the same time designed to be practical. Others protest that the functional aspect of fashion negates viewing it as an art form (Rhodes and Rawsthorn, 2003). A view of fashion as communication of expression sees fashion as an expression of the self, as both individuals and cultural communities use fashion to express or make 'internal' ideas and beliefs externally visible (Barnard, 2007). Fashion's communicative nature has been further acknowledged: it is referred to as a language (Davis, 1992) and as cultural negotiation of meanings (Barnard, 2007). Simmel's (1957) sociological observation is important: fashion balances the human needs for group identification and individual differentiation, simultaneously. By following fashion, social adaptation is satisfied, and at the same time, through the subtleties and changes of fashion, self-differentiation is satisfied. Blumer's Trickle-Across sociological theory (Blumer, 1969, Lynch and Strauss, 2007) views fashion as a process of collective selection from competing models, each trying to capture the most modern ideas (*Zeitgeist*). The choice of products, styles or ideas which becomes fashion is affected by changes in society's taste and concerns.

People seek the fashionable for several reasons:

- Fashion answers the human hardwired need for novelty – we are consistently motivated by it, attracted to it, adopt it, and eventually move on to something newer after a brief period of stability (Lynch and Strauss, 2007). However, to become fashionable, a new product must also contain a degree of familiarity, as fashion is often related to its immediate predecessor either by in contrast or by extension (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, the fashionable/trendy is often characterized by a mix of *novelty* and *familiarity* (Bianchi, 2002, Hekkert et al., 2003). This desired mixture is epitomized by the MAYA (Most Advanced Yet Acceptable) design principal (Hekkert et al., 2003).
- Fashion allows people to *differentiate* from the masses, while at the same time be *identified* and accepted as part of social group(s) (Bianchi, 2002, Lynch and Strauss, 2007, Simmel, 1957). Therefore, fashion eases the inherent tension between one's wish to preserve individuality and a contradictory need to signal group membership (Lynch and Strauss, 2007).
- Fashion is sometimes a means for *signaling social status* (Lynch and Strauss, 2007, Simmel, 1957). According to Conspicuous Consumption theory, fashion as expressed in extravagant displays of wealth and in elements that contain novelty would signal a person of the highest status (Lynch and Strauss, 2007).
- Fashion participates in the process of social *identity construction* (Davis, 1992). The social identity is a dynamic, constantly evolving, combination of personal attitudes and distinguishing characteristics. The process of social identity construction is affected by social pressures, and often externalizes in fashion choices and attitudes. The Material Self psychological concept views a person's material possessions as an *extension of the self* (Mannetti et al., 2002). Individuals who adopt a fashion may feel defined by it or wish to be perceived by others as fashionable (Diefenbach and Hassenzahl, 2008).
- People are after the fashionable for *pleasure*. Green and Jordan (2002) discuss four product pleasure types – physiological, psychological, social and ideological – all of which can be induced by following fashion. Bianchi (2002) proposes that fashion's typical contrast between the expected/familiar and the unexpected/novel propagates pleasure.
- Finally, *trendsetters* – influential people, preoccupied with the new and innovative, who receive public recognition and media coverage – are constantly in the process of selecting and disseminating fashionable/trendy products (Vejlgaard, 2007). At the same time, *followers* are growing more aware of such products through increased exposure to product information and to trendsetters. Given the accelerated rate of fashion/trend changes, mostly in the 20th century (Vejlgaard, 2007), people's choices are increasingly influenced by fashion.

3 TREND

Fashion is a specific current manifestation of a higher order phenomenon – the trend. Trend is a more recent concept than fashion - its meaning as "general tendency" is dated to the 19th century and first usages of the related terms "trend-setter" and "trendy" are dated to the 20th century (Online Etymology Dictionary). Vejlgaard (2007) adds that for most of the 20th century trend was used in the context of statistics and economics, referring to the direction of a curve, based on historical data. In the last third of the 20th century it became common in the fashion industry, focusing on the prediction of fashion trends. Through the fashion industry it filtered into many other domains, referring mainly to design, style and taste.

Trend is located on a spectrum, differentiated by lifespan and influence range (fig. 1). At the transient end of the spectrum is the *Fad*, a short term craze for a new or innovative product. It might gain mainstream adoption (e.g. Crocs shoes) but its lifespan is short, often less than a year. *Trend* is often social and cultural in nature. It evolves over a long period of time and its lifespan is often measured in years, so it is usually detectable only a while after its incubation. Trends signal a direction towards mainstream adoption. *Megatrend* is a major political or technological shift, affecting a large part of society (e.g. the Internet). Megatrends have a long lifespan and a lasting influence on society (Vejlgaard, 2007). Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum lies the term *Microtrend* - a small niche trend adopted by a small percent of the population, yet affecting the larger society (Penn and Zalesne, 2007). For example, post retirement workers are a growing sector in the United States, bearing huge

implications for society (Penn and Zalesne, 2007), let alone for UI requirements. At the long-term end of the spectrum is *Futurology*, a research field attempting to predict future developments in society based on past and present trends (Bell, 2003). Trend classes are related, e.g. a trend may be a manifestation of a megatrend. For example, the Nostalgia megatrend is apparent in trends such as listening to music on the move using large “old school” headphones, in the rush for vintage clothes, in a slew of new movie adaptations of childhood classics such as “Alice in Wonderland” or “Where the Wild Things are”, and in retro inspired web design (fig. 3).

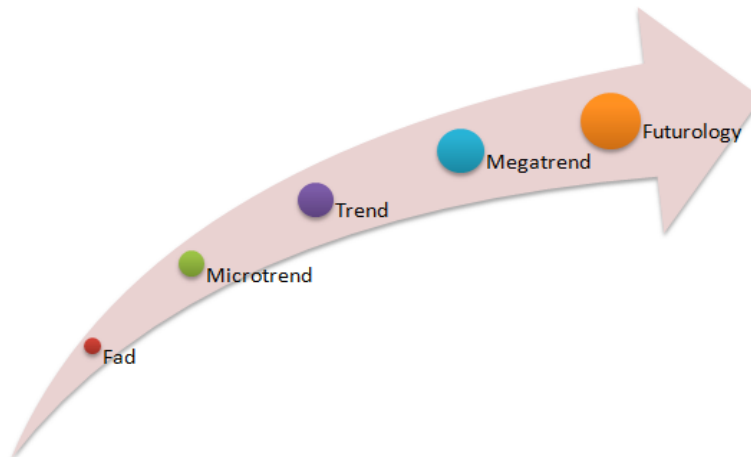


Figure 1. The Trend Spectrum

Within this spectrum, the current research focuses on the Trend class. To facilitate trend identification, observation and forecasting, Vejlgard (2007) suggests some common trend patterns:

- Trends evolve over time, and within that time frame they can be observed and forecasted.
- Trends are initiated by ‘trend creators’, a tiny group of people who invent new ideas, products or styles, and are first adopted by ‘trendsetters’, a somewhat larger group characterized by extreme openness to change and innovations in style and taste. Therefore, by observing ‘trendsetters’ one can possibly identify new trend patterns. The more ‘trendsetters’ adopt a product and the more different types of trendsetters adopt a product, the more it is likely to become a trend.
- Trends usually emerge in major cities with a large concentration of trendsetters and a strong appeal for trendsetter visitors such as New York, Tokyo, London, etc. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Silicon Valley, with its large concentration of technological trendsetters, and close proximity to the major trendsetting cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco, is the birth-place for many a technological trend.
- There is continuous product development early in the trend process, in order to keep a high level of interest in the product by trendsetters. A prolonged period of trendsetter interest in a product raises the probability of its adoption by followers.
- New trends are often a reaction to what has become mainstream or has been in the market for many years. Trendsetters will usually abandon a style when it becomes too mainstream.
- Style changes often oscillate from one end of a style axis to the other. For example, the simplicity of web 2.0 style (past-peak trend, fig. 2) versus the complexity of retro style (newer trend, fig. 3).

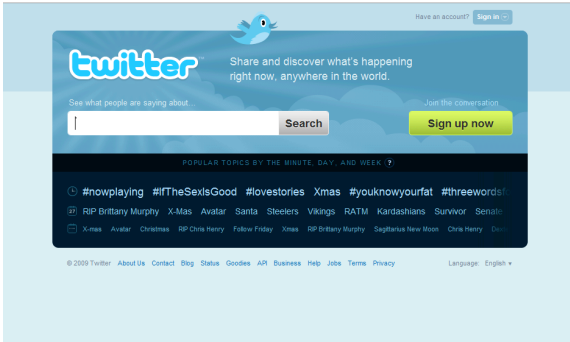


Figure 2. Web 2.0 simplicity in web page (twitter.com Dec 2009)



Figure 3. Retro complexity in web page (sensisoft.com Dec 2009)

- The product or style can be *easily copied, imitated, and manipulated*, e.g. the messy desk trend (figs. 4 and 5). Lynch and Strauss (2007) state that mimetic behavior, i.e. imitation through observing and copying, is largely responsible for spreading a new style, until it reaches the mass adoption stage and becomes fashion. Dawkins (1989) notes that some memes are better replicators than others, and therefore spread more widely in the population and last longer.



Figure 4. Messy Desk in web page (ernesthemingwaycollection.com Apr 2010)

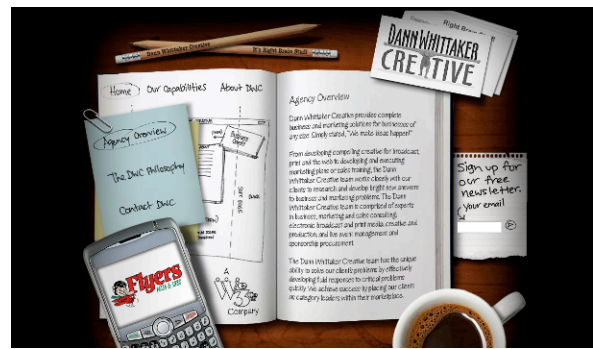


Figure 5. Messy Desk in web page (dannwhittakercreative.com Apr 2010)

- Trends often *appear in multiple industries*. For example, the glossy trend is concurrently observed in shoes, smart phones, and web pages (figs. 6,7,8) and the clean and minimal trend is concurrently observed in shoes, music players, and web pages (figs. 9,10,11)



Figure 6. Glossy shoes (melissaplasticdreams.com Dec 2009)



Figure 7. Glossy smart phones (apple.com Dec 2009)

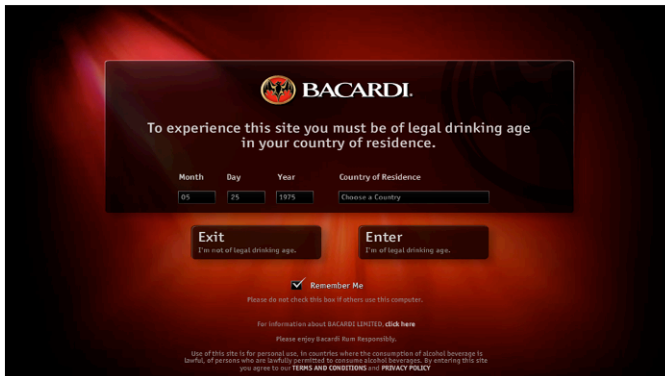


Figure 8. Glossy web page (bacardi.com Dec 2009)



Figure 9. Clean and minimal shoes (unitednude.com Dec 2009)



Figure 10. Clean and minimal music players (store.apple.com Dec 2009)

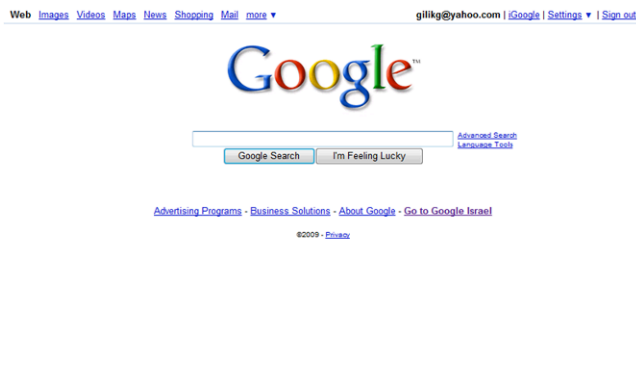


Figure 11. Clean and minimal web page (google.com Dec 2009)

The pace of changes in trends has been accelerating for some time, mostly in the last century. Factors contributing to the acceleration in the introduction of new trends may be a rise in individualism, globalization and proliferation of information (Vejlgaard, 2007). As mentioned above, much of this acceleration is also due to the increased capabilities and usage of information technology. At the same time, the increased plasticity of information technologies – especially those related to the design of interactive systems – has enabled general trends to be increasingly manifested in UI design, as demonstrated in figures 6-11 above.

4 THE PRESENT STUDY

Our objective is to study aspects of fashion/trends in HCI. Since this is a fairly wide subject, we focus this research effort on the field of web design trends, and on three research paths: establishing the premise that trends in HCI exist; investigating whether there are differences in how different adopter groups perceive design trends; and validating the research's web design trend library. To achieve these goals, we plan a three-part research program as described below.

4.1 Part 1

The purpose of this part is to *systematically document and map web design trends*. As part of this aspect of the project, we have built a library of web design trends. For each trend, the library includes many examples, alongside their visual characteristics and other attributes (such as correspondence to technological advances, positioning on style spectrums, dates, between-trend relationships etc.). The web design trends were collected by searching the internet for web design trend reviews in online design magazines and blogs. We used three criteria as preliminary evidence for the existence of a web design trend. The first criterion was met once we had sufficient corroborating evidence from multiple online sources that the trend exists. After the trends were identified we conducted additional refinement iterations to improve the coherency of each trend. Here, a second criterion had to be met, which we refer to as “trend coherence”. This criterion is conceptually similar to the idea of construct validation, namely convergence and discriminability (i.e., by finding various web sites that are designed very similarly, and which are distinguishable from other trends). The third criterion for the existence of trends required that in addition to archetypical web design samples for each trend, which were identified during the refinement iterations, other sites will be found that adhere to the principles of the trend. To date, we have classified around 50 web design trends that meet the three criteria, out of which about 30 are current and the others are faded or past-peak. These findings suggest that the pace of web design trends is accelerating exponentially, in accordance to the recorded acceleration in general fashion/trends (Vejlgaard, 2007).

The web design library also includes the dates in which the trends first appeared. Trend dating was done by combining date information from three sources: the date range of the online web design trend reviews it was found in; the web design adoption dates of the specific trend by selected websites; and

the date range in which the trend's keyword was searched online, limited to web design\development searches (using the "[Google Insights for Search](#)" tool). The product of this part of the study (i.e., the web design trend library) will serve us in the next parts of the study. In addition, by documenting these web design trends we hope to be able to share them with the HCI community and possibly lay the ground for future research and contribute to more informed UI design decisions by practitioners.

4.2 Part 2

In this part we would like to establish that *web design trends indeed behave in a manner that resembles other trend and fashion-like phenomena*. We intend to do so by measuring the perception and attitudes of people from different adopter groups towards web design trends. To define user groups we will use conceptual classifications such as Rogers' (2003) adopter classification, and Vejlgaard's (2007) trend groups. To operationalize adopter groups we will use existing scales such as the TDS-K trendsetting questionnaire (Batinic et al., 2008), the Domain Specific Innovativeness scale (Goldsmith and Hofacker, 1991), and the Centrality of Visual Product Aesthetics scale (Bloch et al., 2003). Next, we will test whether people who belong to different adopter groups will react differentially to design trends that are at various trend life-cycle stages (e.g., faded trends, past-peak trends, and current or new trends). We hypothesize that trendsetters will have a more positive attitude towards newer HCI trends, while followers will have a more positive attitude towards older trends. We are preparing an internet based experiment to reach a large and heterogeneous sample on which to test our hypothesis. While we do not consider it a problem to recruit a large sample of participants who belong to the majority groups of adopters, ensuring adequate representation of trendsetters and early adopters is a challenge. Towards this end we will make an effort to recruit people who have a high likelihood of belonging to the small adopter group of trendsetters (e.g., design practitioners and students). The stimuli for this research will be selected from the web design library, depicted in Part 1.

4.3 Part 3

A third aspect of this research relates to validation of web design trends and possibly linking them with broader cultural megatrends. The validation should check the correctness of the web design library developed in Part 1 – does it include all of the most current web design trends? In addition we would like to ascertain possible links to cultural megatrends. For example, the "offline-online mix" megatrend, which is a blurring of the boundaries between the online (virtual) world and the offline (physical) world, is manifested in Augmented Reality devices or Webkins toys, and may also be observed in web design trends such as the "Messy Desk" (figs. 4 and 5). For that end, we intend to target a global group of web design specialists. We will probe the specialists for their knowledge regarding prominent web design trends and for perceived connections to current megatrends. We plan to use the Delphi method in this part of the study.

5 SUMMARY

Bill Buxton (2007) points out that "Style and fashion are really important. This is obvious to people from consumer products or haute couture but it is not so well appreciated in the high-tech sector" (p. 50). The maturation of the IT industry and its blending with industrial, economic, societal and psychological processes call for studying its impact on all aspects of people's daily lives. We believe that in a world where computer applications are ubiquitous, populated by a technology affluent society in which fashion is a dominant and accelerated factor, the HCI community should start paying attention to fashion and trends. Structured and detailed HCI trend libraries, like the one we have constructed for web design, may allow us to identify design elements that contribute to its trendiness. Using this research, design and HCI practitioners can learn about how different groups of people perceive design trendiness, thus enabling them to adjust the design for target users. Fashion tends to be cyclical, as old styles may become fashionable again over time, albeit altered and updated. Since HCI is maturing as a design field, through HCI trend research we may be able to identify upcoming HCI trends, during their incubation period. By understanding how specific HCI trends are related to social megatrends, we may enhance our holistic vision of HCI as part of a socio-technical system.

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