



Approaches to material culture: The sociology of fashion and clothing

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Abstract

This article proposes a framework for studying material culture, such as fashionable clothing, based on an analysis of the processes that lead to the creation and attribution of symbolic value. Five types of analyses are outlined: (1) analyses of material culture as a type of text that expresses symbols and contributes to discourses and to cultural repertoires; (2) analyses of systems of cultural production in which symbolic values are attributed to material culture through the collective activities of members of culture worlds; (3) analyses of the communication of symbolic values associated with items of material culture and the processes whereby these meanings are disseminated to consumers through the media; (4) analyses of the attribution of symbolic values to material culture by consumers and of their responses to symbolic values attributed to material culture by producers of material culture or in other ways; (5) cross-national studies of symbolic values expressed in material goods and of the systems that produce them in order to reveal differences in the types of symbolic values attributed to material culture in different countries and regions. An analysis of cultural, social, and organizational influences on the production of fashionable clothing in Italy introduces three articles in this issue on this theme.

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In spite of the fact that classical theorists, such as Benjamin, Simmel, Toennies and Veblen, developed important theories about fashion, sociological studies of fashion and clothing remain underdeveloped today, largely ignored by the sociology of culture and the sociology of the arts. Much of the research on the subject is being done outside of sociology by researchers in other disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. The neglect of the study of fashion and clothing by sociologists is similar to their disinterest in the study of consumer goods in general

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(Zukin and McGuire, 2004). Both derive from negative associations attributed to consumption as a form of capitalist manipulation of the public by Marx, members of the Frankfurt School, and other Marxist authors (for a recent example of this approach; see Langman, 2003), as well as the association of consumption with women's pursuits.

Because the concept of fashion has a variety of meanings and connotations both for academics and for the general public, the term tends to obscure rather than clarify the processes that underlie the phenomenon. The concept is often used to refer to the manner in which specific forms of culture disseminate (Simmel, 1957). It is most frequently used to connote highly visible styles of clothing and, less often, other types of material or immaterial culture that are highly valued at a particular moment in time. The term is also applied to systems that produce new styles of clothing and attempt to make them desirable to the public.

Alternatively, fashion can be conceptualized as an example of a broader phenomenon, the creation and attribution of symbolic values to material culture. From this perspective, the sociology of fashion is linked to the sociology of consumption as it intersects with the sociology of material culture, and to the history and sociology of cultural production in which new interpretations of symbolic values are created and attributed to material culture. The 'object turn' in the sociology of consumption, which has its origins in anthropology (Appadurai, 1986; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) focuses on the role of objects in generating and conveying cultural meanings (Woodward, 2001), rather than macro analyses of the role and significance of consumption in Western societies. In these studies, the consumer is conceptualized as creating meanings from material goods, particularly after purchase (p. 120). According to this approach, "objects occupy a similar position to space, time, and bodies: they are foundational media through which social life is experienced (p. 130)". Consumption of material goods can be seen as an expression of certain types of symbolic values (Dolfsma, 2004, p. 356), as opposed to economic values. Material goods express values; consumption of these goods is a means for the consumer to communicate messages about the values she holds.

The study of values has been largely neglected by sociologists for several decades (Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004) and, as a result, there is little consensus about how to define, study, or interpret them.² When sociologists use the concept, they tend to assume that values are primarily associated with social statuses, such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. Values are considered to be the result of socialization and to be relatively stable and unchanging (Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004, p. 7, 21). In sociological studies, values are generally associated with people and only secondarily with material objects.

Consequently, sociologists tend to ignore the potential of the vast supply of material culture, in which we are embedded, as a medium for cultural change through its capacity to embody symbolic values and to change or reinforce those values in consumers when they acquire and use material objects. For example, clothing can be a vehicle for socialization and social control or, alternatively, for liberation from cultural constraints. The former is exemplified by the important roles that uniforms perform in education, religious organizations, and the military (Craik, 2005; McVeigh, 2000); the latter can be seen in the profusion of sub-cultural clothing styles in the past half century (De La Haye and Dingwall, 1996; Polhemus, 1994). One of the reasons that the relationship between material goods and symbolic values is understated in the sociological

² Hitlin and Piliavin (2004, p. 362) cite the following definition as encompassing many important aspects of values: "(a) concepts or beliefs, (b) about desirable end states or behaviors, (c) that transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance."

literature is that sociologists tend to conceptualize values in terms of cultural ideals such as security, conformity, and universalism, rather than as preferences for specific states of being or for self-enhancement.

Clothing as a form of material culture is especially suitable for studying the relationship between personal values and values attributed to material goods because of its close association with perceptions of the self. Clothes both affect and express our perceptions of ourselves. Ruggerone (in this issue) suggests that clothing has a special character as a material object because of its location on our bodies, thereby “acting as a filter between the person and the surrounding social world.” Values have also been interpreted as being “intimately tied to the self” and as forming “the core of one’s personal identity” (Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004, p. 382).

1. Approaches to the study of fashion and clothing as material culture

Because it is implicated in different levels of social organization, clothing as a form of material culture can be studied using many of the perspectives and theoretical approaches within the fields of the sociology of culture and cultural sociology. A partial list³ of ways of studying the phenomenon includes:

- (1) *Analyses of “meaning-making processes”, such as analyses of “texts, discourses, symbols, cognitive maps, and cultural repertoires” that are central to the study of cultural sociology, including changes in the meanings conveyed by these texts over time* (Jacobs and Spillman, 2005, p. 10). Material culture can be seen as a type of text that expresses symbols and contributes to discourses and to cultural repertoires. The question of interpreting the meanings that are attributed to clothing as a form of material culture is controversial. Although it is clear that clothing does not fit the criteria for classification as a type of language, it can be interpreted as a type of visual text, comparable to photographs and advertisements. For example, clothing worn by youth subcultures, counter cultures, metropolitan tribes, and gay cultures contributes to our understanding of how values associated with specific social identities are expressed through clothing and how perceptions of social identity by members of these groups change over time (see Bovone, this issue).
- (2) *Analyses of systems of cultural production in which symbolic values are attributed to material culture through the collective activities of personnel with a wide range of skills.* The fashion system is one type of process through which symbolic meanings are attributed to material culture. The production of fashion values, as is well known to be the case for artistic values (Becker, 1982), is a highly cooperative activity in which professionals and workers with different types of skills participate. Fashion is “the product of a chain of a great many individual decisions made by people interconnected within the various niches in the industry” (Kawamura, 2005, p. 53). Firms that produce fashionable clothing represent a particularly interesting case for the study of cultural production for two reasons: (1) the necessity to innovate by altering the symbolic values attached to styles of clothing. Several times each year new collections must be created which are expected to combine elements of previous styles with new and different ideas; and (2) the necessity to produce clothes whose symbolic values resonate with those of consumers and to resolve the perennial problem of ‘demand uncertainty’ (Dowd, 2004, p. 1). Using a model of cultural industries as composed of interrelated subsystems (Hirsch, 1972), Mora (this issue) found that the sources of and

³ This set of categories differs from analogous systems, such as Griswold’s cultural diamond (1994) and du Gay et al’s “circuit of culture” (1997) in its emphasis on the importance of material culture.

responses to innovation among the staff in several Italian clothing firms, both large and small, were not confined to personnel that were explicitly designated as innovators but included staff at all levels of the organization.

Small entrepreneurial firms are likely to have face-to-face relationships with their clients that permit them to assess their customers' attitudes and tastes as they go through the process of defining and redefining the symbolic values that their clothing styles will express (see Bovone, this issue). Large industrial firms that do not have direct contact with consumers rely on various types of "cultural intermediaries" who attempt to assess the attitudes and tastes of consumers and to provide an appropriate "semantic frame" for new products each season (see Mora, this issue). [Blaszczyk \(2000\)](#), who has studied consumer product innovation for the American mass market, refers to this process as "imagining the consumer". She shows how, during the 1920s, networks of intermediaries, including art directors, retail buyers, home economists, and magazine editors, obtained information about the market and about consumers' tastes that made it possible for large firms to develop products that met the public's needs. Success in satisfying consumers' tastes depends in part on identifying symbolic values that are in the process of changing or new values that are emerging.

Building on [Bourdieu's \(1993\)](#) discussion of the relationships between fashion designers, their assistants and associates, and cultural intermediaries, [Entwistle \(2002\)](#) develops the concept of an aesthetic economy to explain the production of fashion commodities that have a high aesthetic content and unstable or fluctuating aesthetic value. Networks are central to the operation of aesthetic economies. Creators require informal and cultural connections (with potential clients or with cultural intermediaries) in order to develop an appropriate aesthetic sensibility and to succeed in valorizing cultural goods.

The activities of clothing firms operating in the global marketplace provide important insights into how economic and cultural globalization is affecting the attribution of symbolic values to material culture. These companies produce their wares in global commodity chains in which large retail and brand-named merchandisers in advanced countries design products and set up decentralized networks of companies that manufacture them in developing countries ([Gereffi, 1994](#)). While much of the manufacturing of clothing and clothing accessories now takes place in low-wage countries, the attribution of symbolic values to these items remains in advanced countries ([Goldman and Papson, 1998](#)).

- (3) *Analyses of the communication of symbolic values and the processes whereby they are disseminated to consumers through the media.* Symbolic values are attributed in the process of communication of material culture, as well as in the process of production. In contemporary fashion, images in the media that attribute symbolic values to clothing styles have become as important as the clothes themselves. Through advertisements for their products, clothing brands transmit sets of values that imply an ideology and specific life styles. Editorial pages in fashion magazines, advertisements, catalogues, and programs on television and cable disseminate images of clothing more widely than the products they depict. The communication process in fashion magazines and fashion advertisements relies on specific and sophisticated techniques to redefine the symbolic values attached to styles of clothing, including the use of very young, very thin models, often presented in demeaning positions ([Goffman, 1976](#)). The values expressed in these types of photographs tend to be subversive and unconventional ([Crane, 2000](#)).

In this issue, Ruggeroni examines fashion photography as an example of the attribution of values associated with masculine hegemony to fashionable clothing in advertising campaigns. Photographs of women in fashion magazines are constructed as if they were

intended for the young male spectator's gaze and embody his expectations of women and of male–female relationships. The goal of her study was to understand how fashion photographers and their associates in Milan perceived the images they created and their consequences for female publics. Ruggerone found that most of these professionals were concerned with the aesthetic aspects of fashion photography and oblivious to its social consequences.

- (4) *Analyses of the attribution of symbolic values to material culture by consumers and of their responses to symbolic values attributed to material culture by producers of material culture or in other ways.* How do values attributed to material goods shape our conceptions and perceptions of ourselves and of our identities? How are values expressed through choices and uses of material goods? The values that consumers attribute to fashionable clothing have generally been characterized as those that are associated with class, life styles, or subcultures. Each of these types of consumer identities has different implications for the ways consumers perceive and use clothing.

Clothing has usually been interpreted as a means for the expression of social differentiation, particularly class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984). In the last decades of the 20th century, relatively homogenous class cultures largely disappeared in Western consumer societies and were replaced by numerous “niches”, in which consumers have quite different tastes and habits, in spite of having similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Wellner, 2003; Wasserman, 2002; Waldrop, 1994). The variety of choices in lifestyles available in contemporary society liberates the individual from tradition and enables her to make choices that create a meaningful self-identity (Giddens, 1991). According to Bovone (2003, p. 208), following Goffman (1961),

“Dress is a fundamental element in ... the moment of interaction when the actor defines which person she wishes to be, freely opts for one of her “multiple self-identifications”, or rather, decides which self-identification to favor in that particular situation.”

The third type of clothing consumer is a member of a youth subculture or a tribe, a group of young people who share cultural tastes and symbolic values, which are expressed in their clothing. In contrast to other types of consumers, members of these groups actively seek to attribute new symbolic values to clothing by altering them or by combining specific items in new ways. While in the postwar period, certain subcultures adopted specific items of clothing that constitute a specific style, with which they were closely identified (Clark, 2003), most groups in the new millennium are more likely to fit the definition of “tribes” which are eclectic in their choices, changing their appearance in response to what is happening in their lives and in their environment (see Bovone, this issue). As a result of the enormous variety of mediated styles and forms of culture in contemporary society, “post-subcultures” are more diffuse and differentiated in their tastes and less concerned with making political statements or expressions of resistance than their predecessors (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). According to one observer (Thornton, 1995, p. 12), “class is willfully obfuscated by subcultural distinctions.” Instead they are more interested in demonstrating their status as “hip” and “cool”. They are also more likely to participate in “the niche marketing of their identities” as small entrepreneurs in the fashion industry.

- (5) *Cross-national studies of symbolic values expressed in material goods in order to reveal differences in the types of symbolic values attributed to material culture in different countries and regions.* Are the values expressed by material goods an indication of prevalent values in a

particular society? Are there national differences in the types of values that are attributed to different types of material goods? The study of national differences and transnational cultures is an important part of cultural sociology that has been largely neglected, particularly in American sociology (Jacobs and Spillman, 2005, p. 3). The types of symbolic values that are attributed to clothing vary at different times in the same society and in different societies at the same time. Fashionable clothes as consumer goods become important when societies industrialize and levels of disposable income increase in the middle and working classes. The nature of the symbolic values attached to fashionable clothing depends on the cultural and political history of the country and the characteristics and variety of the ethnic groups of which it is composed. Fashion systems have distinctive characteristics in different countries, depending on the organization of the fashion industry, the nature of the clientele, and the relative influence of marginal subcultures, as well as on the role of the arts and other forms of culture in the country's heritage.

Italy is an excellent illustration of how the characteristics of fashion and of the fashion industry are shaped by a country's history and culture, the structure of its economy, and by its relationships with other countries, in this case, France and the United States. Italy's fashion system is different in a number of important ways from fashion systems in other countries, such as France, England, and the United States, but its products have been enormously successful and influential outside Italy, both in the esoteric world of high fashion as well as in the more mundane world of industrial fashion.

Janssen (this issue) examined differences among three countries, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, in the numbers of items and in the aesthetic orientation of items devoted to designer fashion in elite newspapers. Over a period of several decades, she found a large increase in fashion coverage in French newspapers and modest increases in Dutch and German newspapers. The latter occurred in response to growth in their national fashion sectors. The increase in the aesthetic orientation of fashion coverage was slight, suggesting that fashion was not being increasingly perceived as high culture. International fashion coverage became more diverse in all three countries in the past decade, in keeping with changes in the degree of globalization of fashion systems.

2. National differences among fashion systems: the case of Italy

2.1. History and context of the Italian fashion system

National fashion systems consist of a complex set of relationships between creators, their collaborators, cultural intermediaries, and consumers. Most fashion systems have evolved and expanded over time, becoming much larger and increasingly complex, but they continue to be "imprinted" by the history and culture of the countries in which they are located (McRobbie, 1998; Crane, 2000; Rantisi, 2004). The Italian fashion system is in part a legacy of the country's past (Mora, 2004). The fragmentation of the country into small city-states from the Middle Ages until the 19th century meant that each state had its own court. As a result, people living in these regions were exposed to aristocratic tastes, including the arts, interior decoration, and fashionable clothes. This situation favored the development of aesthetic appreciation on the part of the Italian population and popular recognition of the status of artists and artisans who produced aesthetic objects. Ideals of elegance and beauty were widely shared among different social classes. Most Italians believed that sartorial elegance was attainable to anyone who cultivated her taste,

regardless of her economic resources. Italian culture favored an orientation toward using clothing as a form of personal expression that expressed adhesion and conformity to codes of taste of the dominant classes rather than opposition or resistance to the dominant culture. The continuing importance of clothing in Italy is seen in the fact that, at the beginning of the 21st century, Italians are the largest consumers of clothing products in the European Union (Courault, 2004). Their consumption of clothing has not decreased as has been the case in other developed countries.

Haute couture firms existed in Italy in the 19th and early 20th centuries but they were never as prestigious or as influential as were comparable firms in France. Italian fashion magazines in the prewar period presented the styles created by French couturiers and attempted to explain to their bourgeois readers how to reproduce these styles (Mora, 2004). The development of luxury ready-to-wear fashion occurred after the Second World War, when funds from the Marshall Plan contributed to the modernization of the Italian clothing industry. At the same time, an enormous American market for stylish, Italian, ready-to-wear clothing at reasonable prices became available. A decade or so later, social and cultural changes in European societies, and in Italy in particular, such as the increasing presence of women in the labor market and the increasing visibility of young people in cities, produced new types of consumers with changing lifestyles who for the first time had sufficient income to emulate elites through consumption practices.

2.2. *The structure of the Italian fashion system*

The major characteristics of postwar Italian fashion derived from the close relationship between luxury clothing design and the clothing industry. Italian *prêt-à-porter* represented the industrialization of clothing but with a high creative and symbolic content. By the 1970s, Italian designers had associated themselves with businessmen to create companies whose products were both artistic and industrial, both elite and available to the new middle classes. Unlike Italian designers in the past, this generation of Italian fashion designers did not attempt to emulate French couture.⁴ They created a new genre, couture sportswear, that was not designed to be worn only by elites and that was heavily influenced by men's clothing styles (Milbank, 1985, p. 410). Because of the appeal of the kinds of styles they created and of close relationships with the fashion media, they reached new sectors of the market that had not existed before. Outside Italy, their brands were able to compete with those in France and the US. As a result, Italian designers were able to move from a very marginal position to a position of leadership in the international fashion world, which they have maintained ever since.⁵ The success of Italian firms has been explained in various ways.

Taplin (1989, p. 418) attributes their success to Italy's cultural history and to the aesthetic values of the consumer which included "a pervasive cultural commitment to the aesthetics of style which is a long-standing feature of Italian society". According to him, these firms represent "an institutional affirmation of the values of aesthetic primacy in many walks of life."

Courault (2004) argues that the high level of creativity in the Italian fashion system is the result of the large numbers of small, local companies, producing material and other products that are staffed with very creative artisans and highly skilled workers. The Italian fashion system

⁴ The group included Versace, Ferré, Biagotti, and Armani. Valentino who belongs to the same generation continued the older tradition of haute couture.

⁵ In 2004, seven of the top 10 European clothing manufacturers were Italian (Kunz and Garner, 2006, p. 177). In 1996, the Italian designer industry was the second largest in the world (next to the US) with \$2.3 billion in gross sales (Department of Trade and Industry (UK), 1998).

includes hundreds of thousands of very small companies along with a substantial number of very large firms.⁶ These types of companies exist both in big cities and very small towns but there is substantial variation by region in the types of products in which they specialize and in the ways in which they are organized (Bigarelli, 2000, p. 248). This diverse array of clothing businesses is closely connected to a similarly diffuse and fragmented system of distribution that includes thousands of small shops and boutiques in the provinces as well as in the cities.⁷ The system produces an enormous variety of products ranging from haute couture to products designed for small niche markets.

Courault claims that the huge supply of artisans and skilled workers is responsible for the great variety in the system's output, "an infinite diversity of products exclusively centered around creativity" (p. 7). Bigarelli (p. 249) also attributes the high level of creativity and innovation in the Italian clothing industry to the large numbers of small firms. She states:

The qualitative and quantitative flexibility, which characterizes the knitwear and clothing industry ... stems essentially from the importance of independent work and small entrepreneurs. This type of employment is the foundation and the strength of the organization of this sector in Italy.

Alternatively, Powell (1990) argues that the source of creativity in the Italian system stems from the network mode of organization. Using the example of small regional clothing firms in the Emilia-Romagna area of northern Italy, where production takes place through "extensive, collaborative subcontracting relationships with a very low degree of vertical integration" (p. 310), he points out that the people who work in these firms have skills that are applicable to a wide range of activities and that they work in organizations (p. 309):

"that are highly porous—with boundaries that are ill-defined, where work roles are vague and responsibilities overlapping and where work ties both across teams and to members of other organizations are strong."

As a result of their network mode of organization, these small firms produce large numbers of new products at remarkable speed. These kinds of relationships are typical of the Italian system in general. For example, regardless of the size of the firms, written contracts between firms and subcontractors are very rare.⁸ Orders for work to be performed are generally vague and imprecise (Bigarelli, 2000, p. 239). According to Taplin (1989, p. 411), decentralized production, based on subcontracting, provides large Italian firms with the flexibility that makes it possible for them to respond to rapid changes in trends in the international market with specialized products of high quality.

The creativity of Italy's fashion networks is related to the fact that, unlike France where high fashion organizations have deliberately had no contact with industrial fashion, Italian high fashion organizations subcontract production to small firms, thus making use of their innovative potential. Industrial firms, like Benetton, also use extensive subcontracting systems. It has been estimated that at least 70% of Benetton's total value-added is made by small artisan firms (Belussi, 1997, p. 171).

⁶ Bigarelli (2000, p. 230) states that two-thirds of the businesses in the Italian knitwear and clothing industry have between one and nine employees.

⁷ Retail distribution in Italy is extremely fragmented with 17,000 outlets per million inhabitants compared with 5000 per million in Germany and 7800 per million in France (Kunz and Garner, 2006, p. 190).

⁸ Seventy-five percent of the firms in the clothing industry are subcontractors and 60% of the employees are employed by subcontractors (Bigarelli, 2000, p. 242).

The Italian fashion system is highly fragmented but integrated, in a sense, by its system of decentralized production.

2.3. *The Italian fashion system and urban culture*

In spite of its strong presence in the global marketplace, Italian fashion has remained an urban culture in a very traditional sense of the word. There are thousands of small, fashion-related businesses in towns and cities and, for the most part, their activities have remained the way they have been for many decades. They are not part of a phenomenon that exists in some other European countries and in America where small businesses in the arts or applied arts develop products for clientele of tourists or new arrivals in a process of urban regeneration. Small fashion businesses do not purvey local street styles since these do not exist; instead they are more likely to introduce elements drawn from street styles produced in the US or in Great Britain (Polhemus, 1994) and disseminated to Italy through the music and film industries.⁹

Milan performs a very important role in urban fashion culture in Italy. The advantage of Milan over other Italian cities, such as Rome and Florence, is the presence of the whole gamut of activities in the production of fashion including the treatment and production of fabrics, such as silk and wool, tailoring, advertising, public relations, media, merchandising and distribution. Other firms in these types of businesses are located in cities in the same region. The role of Milan as an aesthetic economy is exemplified by fairs that take place frequently throughout the year. These fairs are places where people involved in creating and producing fashion meet and make contacts. These same people are also discerning consumers of everything this urban fashion system creates. In the process of consumption, they act as intermediaries between the production and consumption sides of the fashion chain and set trends which then diffuse to other social strata.

Bovone (this issue) provides a detailed example of a small aesthetic economy among local entrepreneurs in the Ticinese quarter of Milan. She argues that these entrepreneurs are strongly identified with the products they sell. The aesthetic aspects of their businesses are usually more important to them than economic returns. In many cases, direct communication with consumers, who are also family members, friends, and neighbors, replaces more formal types of cultural intermediaries. On a more formal organizational level, Bigarelli (2000, p. 235) reports that, in each of the numerous industrial regions in Northern Italy, there are hundreds of small and medium-size clothing companies that create their own collections each season. Foreign buyers find an enormous variety of products and buy directly from these companies.

2.4. *The Italian fashion system, global brands and globalization*

With one or two exceptions, postwar Italian designers do not fit Bourdieu and Delsaut (1975) description of a group of creators working in the “field of restricted production” for a small, elite, local public. Instead, these Italian designers chose to work in the “field of large-scale production”. Their customers belong to the upper classes in the largest cities in the world, but they are not identified with a particular history, culture or place. An important part of the innovative power of Italian fashion is that their customers are targeted as “citizens of the world” by these firms’ advertisements, regardless of the places where they live. These firms are global

⁹ Since street styles are closely linked to genres of popular music, the absence of indigenous street styles in Italy may reflect the characteristics of the popular music industry in Italy and the global dominance of musical genres created in the United States and Great Britain.

brands, marketing products to which they have attached clusters of meanings that develop and change over time (Arvidsson, 2005; Lash and Urry, 1994).

Extensive advertising campaigns for their globally distributed products create images which embed these products in the “imaginary globalization” that surrounds such products and which is necessary to attract consumers from all over the world (Mora, 2004). By investing enormous amounts of money in advertising, Italian fashion designers have been able to attribute to their products specific types of values that have been accepted by consumers in many different countries.

Among the industrial companies, Benetton was one of the first to create a successful international brand. Its early advertisements were very conventional but, beginning in 1989, they began to present highly ambiguous and controversial images. The company claimed that its goal was to “encourage thought and discussion about some important issues” while provoking “compassion and hopefully positive action in regard to these issues” (Hoeschmann, 1997, p. 199). Instead of selling a product, the company positioned itself as selling an image of corporate responsibility, a corporation with a social conscience (Tinic, 1997, p. 6). Its representatives argued that this was the most appropriate strategy for a corporation, which sells products in almost one hundred markets (p. 8).

The extent to which global commodity chains (Gereffi, 1994) have developed in the Italian clothing industry is controversial (Courault, 2004). The emphasis on fashion and style rather than on standardization in Italian clothing limits the profitability of manufacturing these products in global commodity chains, which are more appropriate for relatively standard items, although this is definitely occurring. Neither the buyer-driven commodity chain in which the buyers lack production facilities in their country of origin nor the manufacturer-driven commodity chain fits the Italian case. The prevalence of subcontracting to smaller firms in Italy means that firms without access to production facilities in the country are rare. Firms with extensive manufacturing facilities of their own are also rare.

Large Italian companies have been successful at finding appropriate images to characterize their products in international markets but this strategy is beyond the means of small companies. Many small and medium-size businesses are beginning to cope with the phenomenon of globalization by outsourcing their production in Asia but, with relatively limited resources, they have more difficulty than the big firms in developing the kind of international visibility that is necessary to succeed in global markets.

2.5. *The Italian fashion system and fast fashion*

Fashion systems as coherent networks of creative personnel engaged in the creation and dissemination of fashionable clothes in different countries are increasingly being challenged by two new types of firms that correspond to the global phenomenon of “fast fashion” (Segre-Reinach, 2005). The first type consists of huge firms engaged in distribution, such as H&M, Zara, and Mango that pick up trends from ready to wear fashion shows, manufacture products at low cost, partially in China, and disseminate them at enormous speed to youthful customers whose tastes and perceptions of their identities are constantly in flux. Although their products are very fashionable, these firms do not invest in design. They copy and simplify ideas from luxury fashion companies. According to Segre-Reinach (p. 48), “they base themselves on the tenet that it is all right to copy, as long as it is done quickly and well.”

The second type of firm consists of hundreds of small Chinese companies that deliberately produce fakes, such as fake copies of specific items, fake designer brands and fake cosmetics. These products are sold worldwide to a market of consumers who are avid for new trends but not

particularly concerned about quality and whose brand loyalty is superficial. Some of the Chinese companies that produce products for real brands also produce fakes.

Both of these types of companies have serious implications for the content of fashion, for its connection with a specific national culture, and for the survival of fashion systems. Segre-Reinach (p. 49) argues that fast fashion is beginning to supplant the fashion system of ready-to-wear clothing. She concludes (p. 54):

Presented until now as a ‘gated community’ *prêt-à-porter* is a mass-produced product and can now be easily copied by fast fashion, imitated by fake brands, endangered by the counterfeiting of goods and brands, and subjected to all kinds of transformations that compromise its glamour and embodiment of luxury goods.

The Italian fashion system has an intimate but highly ambivalent relationship with fast fashion and with the principal producer of fast fashion products, China (Segre-Reinach, 2005). China is the largest producer in the world of copies, fake brands, and imitation goods in the textile sector (p. 48). The country produces large numbers of fake Italian designer brands; for example, there are at least 26 fake Valentino brands (p. 49). However, Italy is the second largest producer of these types of goods. It is also pertinent that several of its most prestigious brands that are supposedly “made in Italy” are actually made in China.

For about two decades, China has been a low cost producer of goods for Italian fashion firms (and for similar firms in other European countries and in the US). It is now becoming a luxury fashion producer on its own, following the Italian model of *prêt-à-porter*. Chinese companies are producing duplicates of Italian brands that are manufactured in China and are selling these products internationally. At the same time, the market for fashion in China is developing rapidly (p. 54). Small Italian producers of “fast fashion” are selling their cheap products to the new middle class in vast new shopping malls in China. Fake Italian brands produced in China by Chinese companies are being sold in China and labeled “made in Italy.” This suggests that the Italian *prêt-à-porter* fashion system, as a set of “organizations, institutions, and individuals interacting with one another to legitimate fashion designers and their creativity” (Kawamura, 2005, p. 52), is being marginalized by these developments.

2.6. *Consequences of the Italian fashion system: economic and symbolic*

National histories and cultures contribute to the characteristics of fashion systems in different countries. The Italian fashion system performs an important role, both economically and symbolically, in Italian culture because it draws on elements that are very important in that culture: products created by artisans in small, local businesses, the emphasis on the quality and the aesthetic characteristics of cultural goods, and the importance of this type of consumption for the consumer (Mora, 2004). In the Italian fashion system, exclusivity and democratization coexist with originality and standardization in a complicated dialectic, which permits both those who occupy privileged positions and those in intermediate positions to see their personal expectations legitimized and socially recognized. There is an important heritage of artistic and aesthetic awareness that provides a major resource for the system as it moves inevitably toward greater rationalization in response to the globalization of fashion markets. In comparison with the fashion systems in France, England and the US, the Italian system is exceptionally fragmented and diverse, although all actors, ranging from creators to consumers, share a strong appreciation for elegance, luxury, and the aesthetic aspects of clothing. Pressures associated with globalization

are likely to reduce the differences between national fashion systems in the future and may even contribute to their demise.

3. Conclusion

A variety of theoretical approaches have been applied to the study of fashionable clothing, but this activity has not produced a coherent field, because scholars who have studied the subject have come from many different disciplines. By examining fashionable clothing from the perspective of the creation and attribution of symbolic value, sociologists can develop an approach that incorporates the major issues in the field: meaning, production, communication, consumption, and cross-cultural comparisons. This approach can also contribute elements that are often lacking in the field of fashion studies, such as a critical examination of the values expressed by fashionable clothing and of the implications of the ways in which symbolic values are attributed to fashion and clothing, both nationally and globally. At the same time, the study of fashionable clothing as a form of material culture can contribute to the sociology of culture and cultural sociology by providing approaches, theories, and empirical studies relating to a vast field of cultural goods, objects, and artifacts that are widely disseminated in contemporary societies. These types of studies provide valuable insights into the ways in which national differences are being maintained or are disappearing in an era of rapid economic and cultural globalization.

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Appendix A. A note on the sociology of fashion and clothing in Italy

Fashion studies in Italy do not have a long tradition, which is surprising given Italy's contribution to the production of fashion objects. Sociological studies in this field, especially those based on extensive fieldwork, began in the 1990s. Research on fashion in other disciplines related to sociology, such as history, philosophy, semiotics and marketing, preceded the legitimization of this field in Italian sociology. History has been concerned with material culture for a long time; scholars in this discipline have produced numerous histories of costume. Studies by philosophers of language and aesthetics have been critical of the values underlying contemporary fashion. The field of semiotics analyses images and claims its specific competence in the study of brands, thus encroaching on marketing studies. For example, [Semprini \(1993\)](#) has analysed Benetton's campaigns, interpreting them as a challenge to already legitimised discourses, those of information and politics, to which advertising and fashion do not usually have access. Marketing concentrates on the study of the most successful types of "made in Italy" production. As noted by [Segre in her useful introduction \(2005, p. 70\)](#):

The relevant feature of Italian fashion studies is their fragmentation . . . Individual studies on the issue of fashion and clothing belong to different disciplines with no convergence . . . in a shared field where they could meet in a fruitful comparison.

In general, the sociology of culture in Italy has neglected material culture, including not only fashion but also food and art works, in favor of more "serious" subjects: first, institutions, family, school, and religion, in which the political and ideological debates of the postwar period were

implicated; second, the major abstract issues, such as values, time, memory, and identity, which still constitute the main focus of attention for many scholars; and, finally, the culture industry, specifically the media.

Some of the earliest Italian empirical studies in the sociology of fashion were coordinated by Tassarolo (2001). From the beginnings of the 1990s onwards, she and her associates have investigated people's choices of shapes, colors, and fabrics of clothing with the aid of photographs and sophisticated statistical tools. Interviewees were requested to associate actual clothes with their clothing preferences, selecting what aspects of the self they would express through their clothes. In spite of the unusual quantitative methodology, this perspective has much in common with semiotics and social psychology.

In general, very few Italian scholars, doing research on fashion, have drawn on British cultural studies (du Gay et al., 1997) and attempted to deal with the entire circular process of meaning negotiation, combining an articulated theoretical approach with careful empirical research. Following in this direction and in that of anthropologists, such as Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai, the Centre for the Study of Fashion and Cultural Production has conducted empirical research, which provides a body of work with a coherent methodological structure-based on in-depth interviews and life stories, and a specific set of analytical categories. For example, Ruggerone (2001) constructed what she called "cultural biographies" of fashion objects in order to highlight the processes of communication involving certain clothing garments and accessories as they moved from creation to production to consumption.

The majority of the research conducted at the centre has been concerned with fashion production and its related professions in Milan, as well as other professions concerned with cultural production, such as architects, journalists, and tourism operators (Bovone, 1994). Small cultural entrepreneurs in the urban fashion circuits were interviewed with non-standard techniques in order to reveal their roles as "new cultural intermediaries" in Bourdieu's sense (1984), comparing Milan with other Italian cities (Bovone et al., 2005) and with a special focus on immigrant women as entrepreneurs (Lunghi, 2003).

New directions in Italian fashion studies are indicated by several recent conferences. The volume, *Che genere di moda? (What is the gender of fashion?)* (edited by Bovone and Ruggerone, 2006), collects the proceedings of an international conference dealing with a now classical combination in fashion studies, fashion and gender, in an attempt to present not only sociological but also philosophical, psychoanalytic, economic and artistic points of view. Other academic institutions, where fashion studies are emerging, have produced two additional anthologies, which, like the previous one, emphasize interdisciplinarity. The first anthology, from the University of Roma La Sapienza, proposes a revision of Simmel's (1957) analysis of fashion diffusion in view of the current role of the media in fashion diffusion (Abruzzese and Barile, 2001). The second one, based on a conference held at the University of Urbino, investigates from multiple perspectives the issue of the relation between ethics and images; in other words, between fashion and the values it promotes (Valli et al., 2003).

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