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# Fashion Thinking: Towards an Actionable Methodology

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## **Abstract**

Through multiple case study analysis, the authors explain what fashion thinking is and how, as a methodology, it can inform innovation for a broad range of consumer products and services. Fashion thinking includes an actionable set of principles emerging from current fashion apparel business practices. Fashion thinking is a paradigm of critical thought and creative agency utilizing technology, story, experimentation, and open-sourcing in order to add meaning and value to the functional and experiential spheres of products and services. The authors identify five distinct features of fashion thinking: its engagement with

temporal, spatial, and socially discursive dimensions, as well as the priority it places on the articulation of taste and balancing commercial goals with artistic innovations. Organizations whose goal is to be creative innovators and leaders in complex and ambiguous environments would benefit from incorporating fashion thinking into their product development and marketing cycles. Fashion thinking values flexibility, responsiveness, and open-source solutions—qualities that more sectors will need to embrace as digital technology accelerates the shift from physically-fixed products to the modular, just-in-time products and services that will define the twenty-first-century consumer landscape.

**KEYWORDS:** fashion diffusion, innovation, creative agency, feedback loop

## Introduction

*Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street; fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.*

Coco Chanel

The purpose of this article is to explain what fashion thinking is and how, as a methodology, it can inform innovation for a broad range of consumer products and services. Fashion thinking includes an actionable set of principles emerging from current fashion apparel business practices. Organizations whose goal is to be creative innovators and leaders in business environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous would benefit from incorporating fashion thinking into their product development and marketing cycles. Fashion thinking values flexibility, responsiveness, and open-source solutions—qualities that more sectors will need to embrace as digital technology accelerates the shift from physically fixed goods to the modular, just-in-time products and services that will define the twenty-first-century consumer landscape.

## Rationale and Methodology

Over the past three years, through either direct interviews or marginal observation, we have cataloged how firms from a range of sectors have incorporated ideas from the fashion realm into their operations, marketing strategy, branding platform, or design of human resources. Non-fashion apparel companies are very interested in learning from the

fashion industry for the design and branding techniques that traditional fashion firms use de rigueur. For example, chewing gum companies have consulted with fashion experts to develop their package design and luxury hotels have made dramatic organizational changes to incorporate fashion professionals into their chain of command.

The research we have conducted to date utilizes a qualitative research method; we have interviewed producers of consumer products (in the automotive, food, telecommunications, and hospitality sectors) who have taken into account the priorities of fashion thinking in order to add value to new and existing products. Our source of authority on this topic comes from our collective work as practitioners, as scholars, and as observant consumers and devotees of fashion. We first reviewed a survey of qualitative research methods (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Qualitative research is more attractive for these purposes because it lends itself to a reporting method that is rich with quotes and vignettes to illuminate points. There is dimension in qualitative research that is not yielded in quantitative statistical research (Bertolotti *et al.* 2004). The objective of positivist research is to develop an abstract representation of the world, while the focus of interpretive research is on the ways in which meaning is attached to experience (Spender and Grant 1996).

Multiple case study analysis is helpful in understanding the transfer of ideas from the fashion industry to other consumer products industries. The case is an interpretive, human construction and it is the means to understanding a particular topic or question. Bob Stake (1995) has defined the case method as disciplined common sense while L. M. Smith (1978) has defined the case as a bounded system because the case has its own territory and body that needs to be recognized. The case study method aims to make particular assertions—not generalizations. Valuable outcomes of the case study are that new questions, hypotheses, and recommendations are raised. Case studies are about experiential knowing and this study is more than a comparison of product designs; it is a study of meaning embedded in products and services.

Our data collection method was to record interviews with designers and marketing professionals at selected companies. In the interviews we did progressive focusing, building on interview questions as the research progressed. This built-in interpretive method is part of the value of the qualitative research method. The diversity in the twelve multiple cases, and over twenty interviews, contributes to understanding broader applications of the cases.

The nomenclature we have chosen, *fashion thinking*, is evocative of a popularly used term, *design thinking*. Design thinking, put forth by thought leaders such as Tim Brown of IDEO and Roger Martin of the Rotman School of Management, has proliferated throughout the business community and business literature as an innovative means to develop hybrid thinkers in organizations. Design thinking applies user-centered research methods as a creative and analytical means to frame

problems, define opportunities, and present new value propositions (Martin 2009; Pacione 2010). Brown has pointed out the ways that design as a problem-solving process offers a methodology for innovative business outcomes; Martin has outlined how the integration of the intuitive and the analytical in design thinking enables movement along a “knowledge funnel” for business innovation (Brown 2008; Martin 2009). Design thinking is one process through which brands can attain value—fashion thinking is another. The continuum of fashion extends from fashion-as-art where materiality and abstraction of form are more the focus than the end user (think of some of the work of Roberto Capucci), to highly commercialized fashion (think of fast fashion retailer Zara), where technology is used to track user’s proclivities and deliver very user-centered apparel designs. But our purpose here is not to extend design thinking’s user-centered focus or to provide an alternative to design thinking; in fact, the robust discussions about design thinking have made it possible to look at the outcomes and application of fashion apparel business models in a new light. While each provides an iterative methodology to guide a range of sectors towards innovation, fashion thinking’s contribution is distinctive in the way that it is developed along two dimensions that we explore in detail here: a temporal dimension and a spatial dimension.

### **Fashion Thinking Defined**

There is a memorable scene in the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) where fashion editor Miranda Priestly (reminiscent of *Vogue*’s own Anna Wintour) calmly and condescendingly explains to the newly hired, naive, and fashion-aloof Andy Sachs, the relevance of deliberating over the selection of three seemingly identical blue belts for a photo shoot. In one fell swoop, Miranda deconstructs the cultural, social, and economic influence of fashion that befalls all of us, no matter how much or how little we credit fashion. Fashion has a social agenda (Crane 2000), meaning that individual clothing behavior is motivated by conceptions about gender, class, and ethnicity. We propose that fashion also has an innovation agenda, one that has diffused beyond fashion apparel to a wide range of consumer products. In business environments that are increasingly complex and uncertain, we believe that fashion thinking will have a larger impact on new branding initiatives, new product innovation, and even new organizational design.

An innovation is a new idea applied to initiate or enhance a service or product (Martinez *et al.* 1998; Hivner *et al.* 2003; Troshani and Doolin 2007) and is concerned with the implementation of creative ideas (Cooper and Press 1995: 172). The fact that an innovation focuses on dimensions of identity and emotion matters in our service- and

creative-oriented economies of the twenty-first century where we have shifted away from a focus on “How can we make everyone *want this?*” to “How can we make *what people want?*” (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Florida 2002). Fashion designers have had to be ahead of the curve in developing innovative and creative modes of service and product delivery because, in truth, no one really needs another T-shirt or another pair of jeans—at least not in developed capitalist Western economies.

Fashion, a consumable cultural good, is not to be confused with costume. Historically it has been relegated to dress. It is a very particular outcome of modernity because it captures the transitory quality of the present. Fashion is mobile, fragmentary, and constitutes the charm of constant change as it simultaneously borrows from the past and projects into the future (Lehmann 2000). As an emergent system, fashion is about shifts and changes and gives meaning to the user because its inherent feedback loop links the *producers* of fashion to the *consumers* of it. This duality in fashion is both ephemeral and sublime, the product of both imitation and differentiation (Purdy 2004).

We define fashion thinking as a paradigm of critical thought and creative agency utilizing technology, story, experimentation, and open-sourcing in order to add meaning and value to the functional and experiential spheres of products and services. We identify five distinct features of fashion thinking: its engagement with temporal, spatial, and socially discursive dimensions, as well as the priority it places on the articulation of taste and balancing commercial goals with artistic innovations. This discussion on fashion thinking can be framed in terms of emergent systems; the roots of systems thinking are in complexity theory and the dynamics within the fashion value chain are complex. Others have contributed important insights about the fashion industry’s value-contribution to other sectors—for example Rigby *et al.* (2009) pointed out the “both brain” (i.e. right and left brain dominant) personnel structure of fashion firms is useful to management because it is an accessible model. Similarly, Valerie Jacobs (2011) has asserted that by borrowing practices engrained in the fashion industry, design (i.e. industrial design, graphic design, *et al.*) can “move beyond the functional and into a realm that is more visceral and meaningful to the consumer.”

Fashion thinking would best invigorate those companies with business models that rely primarily on linear thought processes and an overdeveloped appreciation for the tangible and evidence-based. Learning how to do fashion thinking will help these firms to function as gatekeepers and tastemakers because it cultivates and develops a reliance on intuition with the sole purpose of delivering meaning through a particular service or product. Delivering value based on the experiential and the aspirational has become quintessential in fashion thinking.

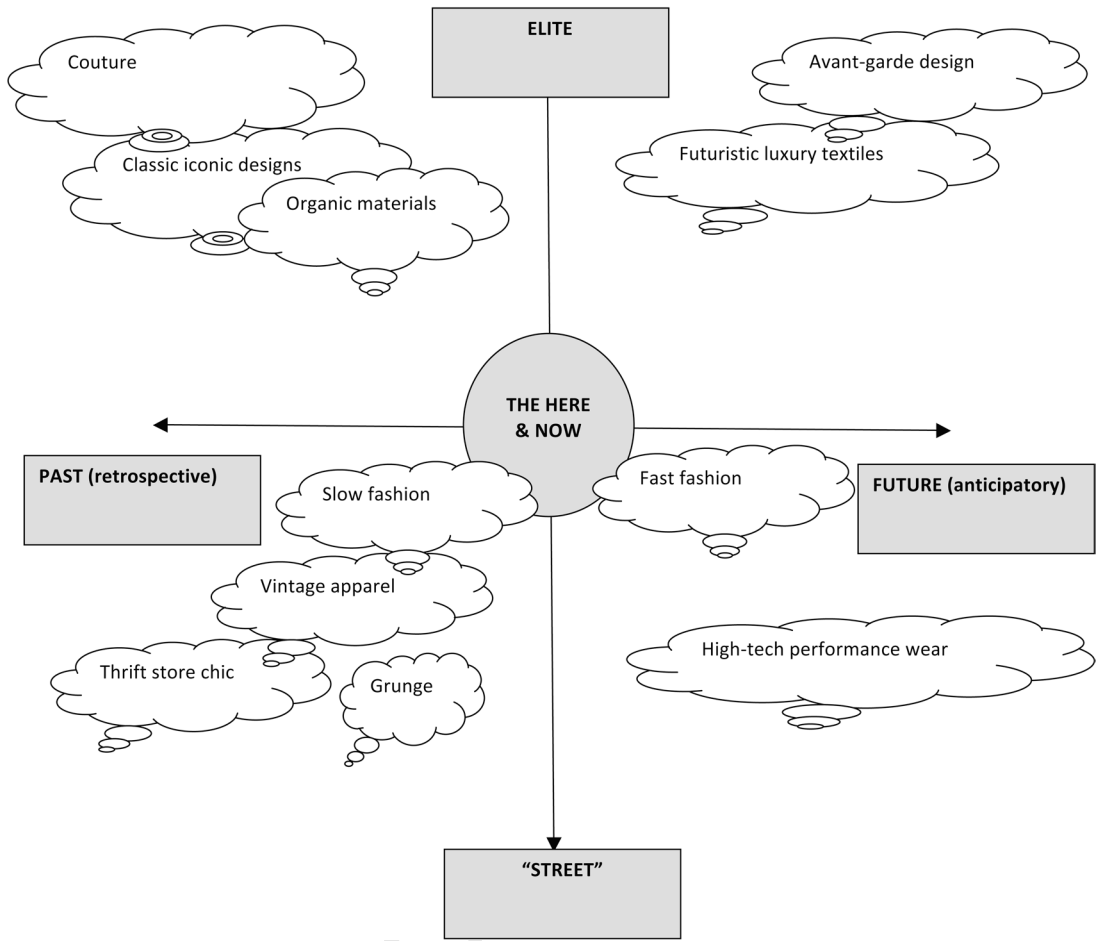
## Fashion Thinking's Relevance

While others have acknowledged fashion's usefulness in organizational leadership (Rigby *et al.* 2009) and within the design practitioners' world (Jacobs 2011), we utilize fashion thinking as a methodology that makes fashion principles actionable. Too often fashion is conflated with apparel, but if we revisit the etymology of fashion we are reminded of its function as a verb: to fashion something is to take action, to create where something did not exist before, and, in the best case scenario, to innovate. As Barry Brummett argues in his distinction between fashion and style, "fashion is always the doing of something in the present moment, making use of the resources offered to one by different styles" (Brummett 2008: 5). The powerful instrumentality of fashion thinking is something that has flown beneath the radar for centuries. One reason is because fashion is often not taken seriously (Hodge *et al.* 2006). There are three basic reasons for this attitude. The first reason has to do with the implicit gender implications: fashion is associated with "women's work" and the design leaders of major fashion firms are often gay men. Work that is embedded with female gender implications is constructed as ancillary and superfluous; at best, foundational and supportive, but certainly not spearheading "the important stuff" of life and work (Davis 1994; Crane 2000). The second reason is the schizophrenic relationship our society has with fashion: we simultaneously are infatuated with it while also denying it as weighty or relevant enough to take seriously. The third reason has to do with the hierarchy inherent in the design world. In design, architecture tops the heap followed by industrial design, graphic design, digital design, and, finally, fashion. There is only sporadic acknowledgment that this commercial art offers a unique way of merging aesthetics, engineering, and business strategy. In a complex and uncertain business environment, fashion thinking helps organizations access their tangible and intangible assets, as when ING Direct connects to its banking customers through its café (a creatively tangible asset) and its untraditional orange logo (an intangible asset).

## Characteristics of Fashion Thinking

Although some would argue that fashion is ultimately about the present moment—what is chic *now*—we believe that fashion thinking entails a sophisticated grasp of the past, present, and future. The temporal dimension of fashion thinking can never be divorced from its material circumstances, which we describe here as its spatial dimension, encompassing the luxury end of the industry and fashion praxis on the street (see Figure 1).

In its temporal dimension, fashion thinking involves a three-part methodology: (1) acknowledging and utilizing history; (2) mobilizing



**Figure 1**  
Matrix for fashion thinking.

design thinking’s user-centered approach to comprehend the present; and (3) anticipating what is next.

**The Retrospective Stance**

The historical dimension of any garment is crucial to its value and legibility in the present moment. Adept fashion designers find clever ways to incorporate signature memes from fashion’s past that will resonate with current consumers. Memes can be understood as the underlying genetic code of fashion: the memes that are replicated again and again—leopard print, Peter Pan collars, kitten heels—are the ones that survive (Dawkins 1976). Coco Chanel developed and marketed some of the

most recognizable memes in fashion history, and it was Karl Lagerfeld's challenge, when he took the reins at Chanel in 1982, to infuse the braids, the camellia, and the quilt with his own personal aesthetic (Silver 2005: 129). Lagerfeld's ability to activate those memes while crafting contemporary designs helps explain the success of the brand and its continuing relevance for customers both young and old. Raf Simons, the incoming designer at Dior, faces a similar task: his strategy is to leapfrog over the wild innovations of his predecessor, John Galliano, to the key elements of Dior's New Look, which are more consonant with Simons' subtle feminine styles (Horyn 2012). Of course these tactics are not limited to designers working within the confines of iconic fashion houses: the fact that fashion designs cannot be effectively copyright protected anywhere in the world makes it much easier for designers to plunder the historical archive and bring back to light memes that have faded from view (Hedrick 2008). Naturally, the designer must achieve the right balance: if the resulting look is "dated" the design will not succeed.

Nostalgia has always played an important role in fashion, but, except among purist vintage enthusiasts, it is usually understood and appreciated for its dialectical relationship with the present. Vintage designs inform the present and give us clues as to where things might be moving next. Fashion thinkers are *bricoleurs*—making creative use of whatever materials are available even if they had a very different or contradictory original purpose (Lévi-Strauss 1968). As a result, fashion thinking involves an intimate understanding, appreciation, and use of the archive. The curatorial dimension of fashion thinking cannot be overestimated. It takes a certain kind of skill to decide among millions of former fashion memes which ones to resurrect *now*.

### **The Now Stance**

Fashion thinking is responsive to customers' interests, needs, and desires in the present moment. This may seem obvious, but for many other industries, this attitude has not been the driving force behind product development or marketing. And the singular urgency with which fashion responds to consumer desire is hard to find in many other industry sectors—though that is changing quickly. Amazing new digital technologies have had a transformative impact on industrial age industries and many have found that they must embrace faster manufacturing cycles if they wish to survive. The imperative to deliver affordable products tailored to the needs of well-informed consumers has never been more pressing. The fashion industry has dealt with this pressure since its inception; it should be no great surprise that fashion thinking could be a powerful model for grappling with the growing demand for just-in-time manufacturing and marketing campaigns that can shift by the second.

In fact, the fashion industry has successfully harnessed technology to be responsive to consumers and to adapt to the complexity of short product life cycles—something that we believe will be a fact of life in



a growing range of industries. As Jennifer Craik has pointed out, “The history of fashion is intimately tied up with the technologies through which it can be represented, advertised and visualized” (Craik 2009: 245). Christopher Bailey, house designer for Burberry, has been at the technological forefront, broadcasting runway shows in 3D and developing 3D interactive images that give users a panoramic perception of the garments (NTDTV 2010). Many fashion insiders doubted the viability of selling luxury fashion designs online, but Bailey leapt at the opportunity, risking the ire of his biggest department store buyers by offering items for sale straight from the online stream of live runway shows. And the global fashion e-tailer Net-a-porter has proven that customers do not need to touch or try on designs before purchasing them. Appealing to women both rich and poor with little time on their hands, Net-a-porter offers (almost) immediate gratification through same-day delivery, and the luxurious gift packaging makes the arrival of merchandise a special event that can be shared with co-workers, friends, and family (Wiseman 2010).

### **The Prospective Stance**

Those who use fashion thinking have the ability to communicate not only what the situation is right now, but what is coming down the road. Fashion thinking orients itself to the future in its attempt to help consumers be slightly ahead of the curve rather than behind it. Because fashion cycles move so quickly, it is imperative that designers stay one step ahead of the competition, acknowledging not only what will sell now, but what the next trend will be. Being “on-trend” is only one aspect of succeeding in the fashion industry. Particularly in the luxury end of the market, being perceived as riding the coattails of other designers is a disaster for the reputation of the brand. Fashion thinking involves taking risks: putting into the marketplace not just the products that will sell well now, but the products that will inspire future trends.

The difficulty of achieving the right balance between serving your current customer, situating your product within a comprehensible historical context, and gesturing toward the future in an inviting way is the primary challenge of fashion thinking.

### **The Spatial Dimension**

Fashion thinking is defined by a communicative process that unfolds over vast distances and across class structures worldwide. Although the fashion industry is structured to serve customers at different price points in different geographical locations, fashion memes do not respect race, class, or national boundaries. Often, the most powerful trends straddle even the most divisive cultural boundaries, accomplishing a kind of cultural diplomacy that characterizes few other industries besides sports. Instead of being a logistical barrier to fashion thinking, spatial distances and disjunctions provide endless opportunities for fashion designers and

marketers to transcend those gaps and connect the ephemeral dots, surprising their customers with new amalgamations that would have been hard to imagine emerging from one distinct place or cultural group. A crucial aspect of fashion thinking involves harvesting the most engaging ideas from the “street” to the elite, weaving together memes from sources that do not tend to mingle with one another.

Of course one can imagine the tremendous resistance that can accompany this process. Those who define themselves by their membership in a subcultural community are often outraged when their methods of self-presentation are echoed in mainstream culture. The whole point of their affiliation with an outsider group is to define themselves against the mainstream (Hebdige 1979). In order for a like-minded cultural community (Goths or punks, for instance) to remain under the mainstream radar, they are required to reinvent themselves on a regular basis—to take their aesthetic codes in new directions that distinguish them from non-members. As they do so, of course, they generate even more potential material for fashion thinkers to plunder. But fashion thinkers who “quote” the codes of underground communities must also find a way to innovate on those codes or risk being considered too derivative or too niche for a mainstream market. Designers like Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, Rick Owens, Olivier Theyskens, and Yohji Yamamoto have all managed to “co-opt” the Goth sensibility without losing their credibility as distinctive designers among critics and customers (Steele and Park 2008).

Resistance also comes from the elite sector where patrons of *haute couture* and high fashion are concerned about distinguishing themselves from the masses. Their efforts to stay ahead of fashion trends can be undermined by clever designers who find a way to identify and exploit the ideas that suit a diverse global marketplace. American designer Tommy Hilfiger, for instance, has built a successful global brand on his ability to translate a WASPy Ivy League sensibility to urban street wear. By blurring together the codes of elite and street fashion, fashion thinkers like Hilfiger risk alienating both ends of their market. But those who succeed in developing unique and fresh takes that capture the imagination of a broad consumer base also perform an invaluable task for the high-end fashion business: fueling the fashion cycle. Once a high fashion trend becomes mainstream, luxury designers have the potentially lucrative opportunity to generate yet another appealing and exciting collection that will help trendsetters stay ahead of the curve.

Fashion thinking feeds on crowds and so it should come as no surprise that social media could be considered its “killer app.” Very few industries are optimized for immediate, substantive feedback from consumers—fashion is a rare exception. Fashion thinkers thrive when they gain access to niche cultural practices around the globe—something that is far more easily and cheaply done now through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Pinterest. Fashion design has

always been “crowd sourced” to some degree: designers at every level of the fashion spectrum acknowledge the importance of being inspired by the street. They realize that no matter how luxurious their customer base may be, they risk becoming detached from the present moment if they do not stay attuned to how the masses participate in fashion right now. The ability to constantly shift between milieu, and negotiate the tensions between the “center” and the fringe, the elite and the street, is one of the defining aspects of fashion thinking.

### **Multidimensional Feedback Loops**

Because fashion thinking acknowledges the value of the feedback loop between producers and consumers of fashion, the rise of social networking technology is a fortuitous development for fashion consumers, producers, and retailers. The business and culture of fashion has always been push-pull, where powerful designers and editors held a great deal of sway, but people on the street determined not only what to purchase, but when, where, and how to use those purchases. Their choices have always had a powerful impact on their own peer groups, but it was harder for people with no access to formal media platforms to communicate their choices back to producers and retailers. Traditional media gave fashion tastemakers an excellent platform for projecting their ideas into the world, but it was fairly difficult to connect directly with those audiences and respond quickly to their opinions and desires. Interactive media, and social media in particular, has completely changed the landscape. Push media like television, radio, magazines, and newspapers have long been instrumental to the fashion business, but social media is far more suited to the business and culture of fashion than any other previous media platform has ever been (Kaplan and Blakley 2009). Now, fashion tastemakers can more easily monitor the trends that are developing within their customer base and enter that conversation in a meaningful and timely way. Stefano Gabbana, co-founder of the Italian luxury brand Dolce & Gabbana, is a heavy Twitter user, who maintains animated conversations with his fans and friends online. By sharing with his followers photos of the things in his day-to-day life that inspire his designs—as well as sneak peeks at his latest work—he offers a window into his own creative process as well as an opportunity for fans to supply immediate feedback. Oscar de la Renta has even created a customized social media platform that takes the idea of an inspiration board to an entirely new level. “The Board” (2012) allows fans to submit ideas and suggestions to help inspire an upcoming collection. Select submissions not only appear on a website, but also on a giant flat screen in de la Renta’s office, where he can muse on these crowd-sourced ideas.

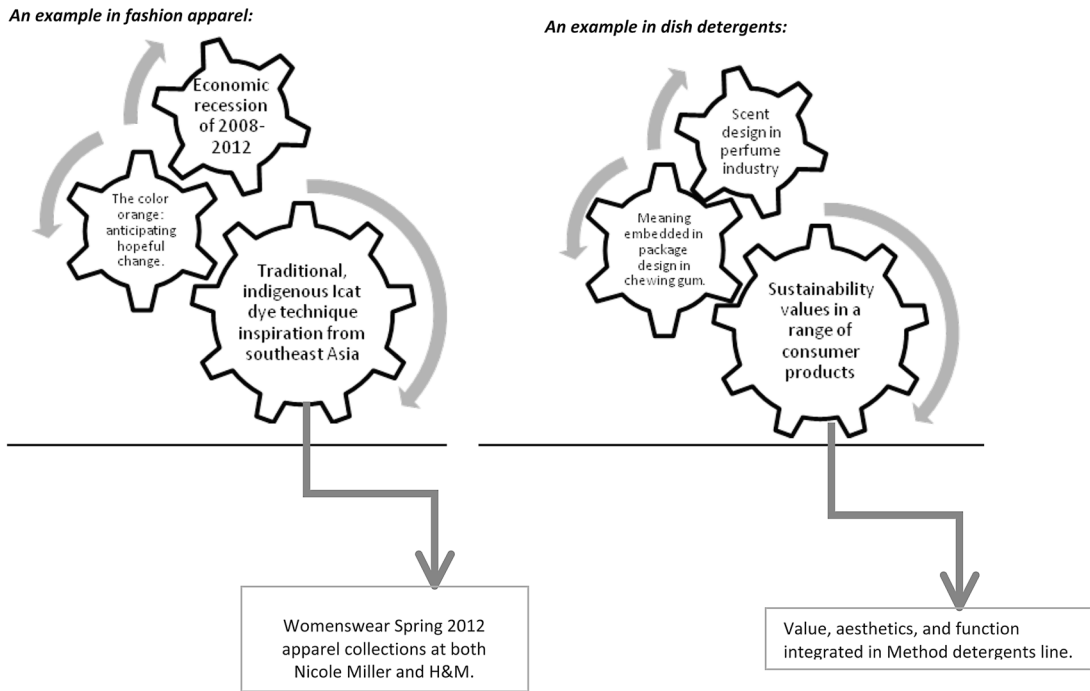
Meaning in the fashion economy is socially determined. Social networks like Pinterest, Instagram, and Polyvore more accurately reflect the logic of relationships that govern the business and culture of fashion,

making them the ideal tools for fashion thinking. Bergdorf Goodman, ALDO, and Levi's have all built creative marketing campaigns around Instagram—a photo-sharing application purchased by Facebook for one billion dollars—that use gaming dynamics, contests, and the power of global positioning systems (GPS) to carry on intimate visual conversations with their customers (Darlington 2012). As businesses around the globe struggle to understand how to harness the power of social media for their own purposes, we believe that fashion thinking could help them learn to value the radically decentralized, subjective, and granular data flows that emerge in user-generated content and mobilize that strategic intelligence to respond more quickly and effectively to the changing demands of an opinionated and highly engaged global audience.

### **Becoming a Tastemaker**

Fashion thinkers are tastemakers. The fashion industry is a taste industry, in which guidelines for determining what is good and what is terrible are based on aesthetic judgments. The process can be very informal, often happening in explicitly social contexts (both physical and virtual), among tastemakers, gatekeepers, critics, and peers, many of whom approach aesthetic objects from vastly different perspectives (Currid 2007). For upcoming designers, success usually depends upon the credibility conferred upon their work by these cultural arbiters. Some peer groups are more influential than others and there are key individuals who wield tremendous power in this vast global ecosystem. But gatekeepers like Anna Wintour only remain powerful as long as they can still process signals from the *right* peer groups and from the street, where the masses demonstrate their affinities for certain aesthetics, and a rather random assortment of fashionistas signal the direction of future trends. Tastemakers must have their ears to the ground, so to speak, but they must ultimately commit to judgment, exerting their own personal, idiosyncratic perspective on the options at hand.

Finding a way to harness the ability to decode patterns in behavior, values, and aesthetics is key to the creation of differentiated products that are both “on trend” and reflective of a particular brand. A large part of fashion thinking entails “pattern recognition”—an ability to discern meaningful clusters of information that can resolve into trends. In the realm of fashion apparel this is seen in the way that the economic recession of 2008–12 spurred the optimistic use of the color orange incorporated with traditional dye techniques from southeast Asia that become integrated into Spring 2012 womenswear fashion collections at Nicole Miller and Urban Outfitters. Concurrently, highly evolved scent design processes used in the perfume industry influence meaning embedded in the package design of other consumer products, which are then translated as a sustainability value in detergent brands such as Method (see Figure 2). Fashion thinkers embrace the radical indeterminacy of this dynamic process, using their intuition and instincts to assert



**Figure 2**  
Pattern recognition in fashion thinking.

their distinct aesthetic in the marketplace. We believe that using fashion thinking to develop a self-consciousness about taste will help firms in other industries to think and operate more like gatekeepers rather than supplicants looking for validation. As Virginia Postrel argues in *The Substance of Style*, “Fashion...applies not just to clothing and related products but to anything whose aesthetic form evolves continuously” (2003: 79). Fashion thinking is the method of choice for companies in a wide range of industries that are concerned about delivering meaning and a certain appealing *je ne sais quoi* through a particular service or product with an aesthetic dimension. Cultivating the ability to recognize the intangible variables that add value to products is going to become an even more crucial element of the design, production, marketing, and distribution of goods in a twenty-first-century economy.

### **Making the Artistic Commercial (and vice versa)**

Like most sectors of the entertainment industry—television, film, music, games, publishing—fashion is a commercial art. Huge teams of talented and creative people generate the material that composes our global popular culture. We realize that commercial culture is not developed in an art-for-art’s-sake environment, but without artistry and craft (or

fascinating raw material, in the case of reality television), those products are unlikely to be profitable. The fashion industry (which some might very well describe as an entertainment industry itself) also grapples with these often conflicting goals: to make something unexpected that will sell. Novel, fresh, and surprising new designs are at the core of the marketability of most fashion items: if the new product is barely distinguishable from its predecessor, it will probably be harder to sell. This built-in incentive to take risks and to significantly change products over the course of time is one of the more invigorating aspects of the fashion industry. Unlike many other types of consumer goods (toilet paper and cat litter, for instance) novelty and surprise are practical elements of product development in fashion—not simply empty marketing ploys. Fashion thinking seamlessly encompasses both bottom-line profitability goals as well as overtly fanciful artistry. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, we believe that all industries will be expected to be more innovative and take more creative risks in order to compete for the attention of customers, who expect to be entertained and delighted, even by the most utilitarian purchases.

### **Examples of Fashion Thinking at Work**

In today's volatile competitive market environment, embedding meaning into products and services has become one way for businesses to distinguish themselves among their competitors. Concurrently, the demand for meaningful consumption is growing as consumers seek new dimensions of experience to counter traditional sources of meaning that have lost their authority.

Fashion evokes meaning through aspirational and nostalgic experiences as seen in avant-garde design, couture, vintage apparel, and high-tech performance wear. Fashion thinking, through its spatial and temporal dimensions, is a vehicle to channel meaning (see Figure 1).

Threadless is a company that operates as a co-design community, collecting ideas for t-shirt graphics from its community of users and then the Threadless user-community votes on the best print designs which are ultimately produced (Wu 2010). Threadless was founded by entrepreneurs who do not have a background in fashion but use the open-source method as a way to develop cool graphic tees based on users' creativity and demand. As such, it is an example of the spatial dimension from fashion thinking at work in fashion *apparel*. It is also a great case of fashion thinking's feedback loop, resulting from the open-source methodology of idea-generation, a system from the fashion apparel realm that is used to observe trends and collate diverse ideas to deliver meaningful products. As the community of users vote on user-generated designs, the feedback loop between anticipation of future trends and the here-and-now is shortened. At Threadless, the feedback loop works

something like this: new graphics for tees are posted on the Threadless website; users vote for their favorites; those tees go into production accompanied by lots of positive commentary from users; producers of the tees may incorporate suggestions into the design; more users are compelled to post their graphic logo suggestions; multiple versions of the tees are posted, and more and diverse users engage in the process of co-creation through their likes and dislikes.

In this instance, we see how fashion thinking engages in cultural production. The retrospective stance allows design generators to view what has come before, the now stance generates current design ideas from actual users, and the prospective stance provides ideas to both the user community and to outsiders browsing the website about what could come next. This make-to-order (versus make-to-stock model) leads to lower inventory management costs and distribution costs. Threadless has had offers to merge with big box retailers but has refused because the ethos of the user-community and their contribution to that cultural production would be compromised.

Now, here are four examples of fashion thinking's influence on consumer products beyond apparel.

#### **HOSPITALITY: The W Hotel**

Commercial hospitality has become a medium for people to act out their multiple selves and desired socioeconomic roles because consumption defines a person's position in society (Bourdieu 1984). The new luxury landscape now dictates that contemporary consumption of commercial hospitality translates into socioeconomic expressions of desire, personality, and perception (Corrigan 1997; Gillespie and Morrison 2001; Luxury Institute 2009). The emphasis on experiential service delivery helps guests to connect emotionally to the hotel brand and have meaningful experiences. Through fashion thinking, hotels move beyond being a restful night-stop to being tastemakers. A great example of this is the W Hotel.

In February 2010, The W Hotel announced its hiring of Amanda Ross, a stylist for the likes of Elie Tahari and Dennis Basso fashion houses, to fill the role of a newly created position of Global Fashion Director (Schweiger 2010). In that position she would develop the hotel's global fashion perspective. The W's fashion director is responsible for a range of activities, inclusive of selecting uniforms for wait-staff (who are referred to as "stylists") to merchandising the hotel and telling its "story." Scenography, a technique drawn from the world of theater and used regularly among fashion retailers such as Anthropologie, is a methodology that hoteliers of the W's milieu employ to set the "stage" for customers. The goal of these stories is to be a service delivery tool for employees to anticipate visitors' needs and provide experiential services in the now stance of fashion thinking. The hospitality industry has traditionally assessed itself based on metrics of efficiency and quality

control; the W Hotel acknowledges that exceptional service entails a responsiveness and savvy honed in the world of fashion.

That a hotel would even have a *fashion* perspective is significant because it demonstrates some forward thinking on the part of the chain, anticipating (that temporal dimension in fashion thinking) a focus on new details to remain competitive, brought to the fore by a fashion stylist. Those details range from staff uniforms to forging strategic alliances with iconic figures in popular culture. In that tactical hiring decision, the W disrupted its traditional organizational design and narrowed the chasm between the catwalk and a hotel hallway, where hoteliers have the opportunity to create an appealing stage for their guests' fantasies of self-presentation. Fashion has always been concerned with expressing lifestyle because it is not just about clothing; it affects living spaces, furniture, even brand messaging. The feedback loop in fashion thinking links the producers and the consumers, and that is tantamount to the innovative approach the W has adopted.

Integrating a professional fashion stylist's perspective into the operations and management of the W Hotel was also innovative because by engaging in fashion thinking, story became more palpable. Each property tells a story through the stylized and sensory-filled staged environment that enhances the customer's experience and delivers more meaning. Luxury hotels are proficient in manipulating the semiotics of elitism, design, fashion, and hospitality through explicit and implicit symbols and signifiers (Corrigan 1997; Gillespie and Morrison 2001). Hotel consumption is a means for individuals (the clients of the hotel) to express how connected they are to a particular lifestyle, a way to express group identity, and in postmodern society, it is one method of living out multiple identities. The explicit hiring of a fashion expert was, from a fashion thinking perspective, an innovative way for the W to be gatekeeper to the construction of its clients' multiple identities.

#### **FOOD: MarieBelle Chocolates and New Tree Chocolates**

The food industry utilizes package design for market distinction and in product placement. The boutique chocolates brands have elevated that to a new level by using fashion thinking primarily in the temporal dimension, utilizing the now stance. Our first example of that phenomenon is MarieBelle Chocolates. Upon graduating from the Fashion Institute of Technology as a textile designer, Maribel Lieberman shared a small storefront on the Lower East Side of New York City with a friend where Lieberman sold chocolates and the friend sold sunglasses. Lieberman applied textile screen-printing techniques to the surface of the chocolates, transforming food into a fashion accessory. This demonstration of a *bricoleur* at work points out the resourcefulness that makes fashion thinking so valuable: Lieberman continues to apply that same screen-printing technique to her chocolate designs, and the layout and ambience of the shop is like that of an upscale and intimate clothing



boutique. The MarieBelle “pin-up girl chocolates collection” is a fashion thinking concept that merges nostalgia, fashion, and sensuality into the chocolate. In this collection, each chocolate bar is wrapped in artistic renderings of 1940’s pinup glamour girls in provocative poses, ready to be unwrapped. In interviews, Lieberman has pointed out that her background in fashion influenced her sensibility to color, texture, silhouette, and oriented her to maximize the retail service delivery model to one that goes beyond the functional, to designing experiences for customers. Lieberman also looks to a range of cultural sources, both historical and contemporary, for inspiration in designing chocolate collections in order to anticipate the new. In this way, her product development method incorporates the temporal *and* spatial dimension of fashion thinking. With this integration of fashion, art, and retail design, Lieberman elevates a food commodity—chocolate—to a commercial art.

Our second example in the boutique chocolates realm is New Tree chocolates where fashion thinking is epitomized in the package design: the package is the dress and adornment for the food. The use of color and the provocative names assigned to each couture-designed chocolate bar are reminiscent of the names for a fashion clothing collection or perfume: “Sexy,” “Pleasure,” “Eternity” are names that are a far cry from the experience one might have biting into a proletariat KitKat bar. In New Tree chocolates, the emotional connection hinges on the chocolate, dressed in alluring packaging, granting customers both an emotional and a fashionable experience. By engaging in fashion thinking, New Tree becomes a tastemaker among the consumers as well as among its competitors in the chocolates industry.

In both these examples we observe fashion thinking’s affirmation that beauty and the sensorial experience resonates with consumers. Fashion is an especially compelling innovation source today because as a society we are shifting away from acquiring *things* to acquiring *experiences*. Just as fashion designers are interpreters, these boutique chocolate companies interpret new ways of envisioning and translating meaning for consumers through fashion thinking.

#### **AUTOMOTIVE: GM and Dana Buchman**

Cross-fertilization between fashion and the automotive sector is historical. Fashion’s relevance lies in the fact that fashion is personal; both clothing and cars are extensions of personality and are means of expression. The shorter product development cycle and quick response norms in fashion alert the automotive sector to value the temporal dimension in fashion thinking and to anticipate what may come.

As in the fashion industry, the automotive industry utilizes couture lines, one-off prototypes, and customization to tantalize consumers who have become fashion savvy and now expect their cars to provide the *frisson* of a fashion experience as well. This is the case whether referencing the customizable BMW Mini Coopers or the alliance between

General Motors (GM) and Dana Buchman. Prestige is a factor in the case of GM and Buchman, but not at the expense of accessibility: here, a fashion thinker plays the role of *gatekeeper* while using fashion thinking as a *gateway*, making a timely luxury experience accessible through the purchase of a utilitarian transportation device.

Some ten years ago fashion designer Dana Buchman happened to be in a color trend forecasting meeting where Chris Webb, design director at GM, was in attendance. They soon realized that Buchman and GM targeted the same market demographic and that it would make great sense for them to partner and design a one-off car to debut at New York Fashion Week in 2007. Buchman incorporated her fashion design research methodology to enhance the Cadillac SRX Sport's interior utilizing quilted fabric constructions, silk fibers, and colorways that mirrored those she had integrated into her concurrent clothing collection. While the automotive and fashion sectors cannot compete in the temporal dimension given their differentiated timelines, this case shows how fashion thinking brought a meeting of the minds among tastemakers in the spatial dimension; the elite borrowed from the elite to produce a more innovative car that resonated with the crowds on the ground in an authentic way.

#### **MOBILE COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY: Hewlett Packard and Vivienne Tam**

Our research revealed that fashion is an element consumers say they want in their technology, including in cell phones and computers. Technology has become personal, personable, and often perceived as an extension of ourselves; thus, it makes complete sense that as technology proliferates among users, the manufacturers of mobile technologies have sought creative ways to distinguish themselves from their competitors through fashion thinking. It was not long ago that consumers were impressed when Apple broke away from the black silhouette of the Blackberry to offer the iPod in white; a myriad of colors followed soon thereafter. Examples of the mergers between fashion and technology are seen not only in the array of colors in which iPods are offered but also in bejeweled Bluetooth earpieces and Swarovski crystal cell phone cases. Technology is wearable. Most recently, the fashion brand Rag and Bone partnered with Samsung and AT&T for the launch of the Samsung Galaxy Note during the New York Fashion Week in February 2012. These alliances, as in the GM and Dana Buchman case, are mutually beneficial. In this final example, as in the boutique chocolates example, fashion thinking is the methodology to help a tangible object—a chocolate bar or a netbook—once differentiated from the self, morph into a personable accessory, and an extension of the self. Fashion thinking makes the thing an amalgamation of the symbol, the signifier, and the signified.

The transitory nature of fashion merges well with technology's rapid launches of new editions. Hewlett Packard has now twice collaborated with fashion designer Vivienne Tam for two launches of a Netbook wrapped in one of Tam's print motifs. They first entered a partnership in 2008 with the Peony motif Netbook, and then again in 2010 with the Butterfly motif. The HP/Tam digital 2010 clutch was aligned with Tam's 2010 Spring collection, both sporting the butterfly motif in fabricated print design in Tam's clothing collection and in hard line packaging in the HP Netbook. Portable technology was enhanced by Tam's fashion vision, presenting an appealing duality: was it a laptop or a clutch? Was it a means for functional communication, or an extension of one's personality? Through fashion thinking, fashion references are embedded in the technology and bring sensorial experience to the fore; beauty helps to make an experience out of objects. Consumers needs for experiential products dictate such innovations.

### **Conclusion**

The effort to incorporate past, present, and future into a design methodology is no mean feat. Fashion thinking that dwells solely in the past risks being dated, but if it is only futuristic, it is no longer relevant: such is the tightrope that fashion thinking walks. The fact that fashion, by definition, must be constantly present and "of the now" is what makes it unique and fundamentally appealing to any business that hopes to remain relevant in a fast-changing marketplace. The spatial dimension of fashion thinking, which involves harvesting the most engaging ideas from the "street" to the elite, makes fashion thinking especially suitable to the complex economy of social media, where crowds share their preferences and commercial interests attempt to provide supply for the demand. Fashion thinking is in a position to thrive in the world of Web 3.0 and we believe that strategies that have emerged from the fashion industry will prove helpful to industries whose products must become capable of customization and be more modular while also resonating with meaning for the consumer.

Fashion thinking would not work as well for brands whose products and services are valuable precisely because they resist change. Johnnie Walker whiskey, Weber grills, and Allen Edmonds shoes might be the least interested in using fashion thinking for product development, but we believe these are the exceptions that prove the rule: the vast majority of companies do not have the luxury of refusing to change. But even among these tradition-driven brands, we believe fashion thinking would serve them well in their efforts to market these iconic, classic products to a constantly shifting, globally networked customer. Absolut Vodka, for instance, has mobilized fashion thinking in its effort to remain relevant

to its targeted consumers by cleverly reiterating itself through shifts in flavor and image, without losing sight of its iconic minimalism.

If you take a look at the current state of the media industries, it becomes quite clear that the time is ripe to turn to the fashion industry for a new paradigm of critical thought and creative agency. Unlike music, publishing, and film, the fashion industry has managed to thrive in the new digital marketplace. One key to the fashion industry's success is the lack of copyright and patent protection, enabling the free flow of ideas and shorter production cycles (Bollier and Racine 2006; Blakley 2010a). It is common practice for designers to pore over vintage magazines and patterns and visit museum archives in order to find inspiration for the next season's look, cherry-picking design elements that feel fresh and in line with the current *zeitgeist*. It is a refreshingly open process unhindered by the types of legal restrictions that constrain and contort the products that emerge from the music, film, and publishing industries. The knock-off culture that this legal situation has generated we believe spurs innovation rather than squelching it. The designers who have rallied behind the Council of Fashion Designers of America in their effort to secure copyright protection for a wide range of fashion designs have lost sight of the trade-offs that legal protection requires. Of course it would be nice to have control over your own designs, and have the option to stop people from copying your work, but it means that every other designer would also have that power, generating the kind of legal obstacle course that stymies artists in creative industries with strong intellectual property protections (Blakley 2010b). One reason the fashion industry offers an appropriate model for innovation in the twenty-first century is because it has developed sophisticated methods to monetize its creative output without depending on copyright or patent protections. Industries whose business model depends on monetizing copies of creative work (DVDs, CDs, books, etc.) are discovering that consumers are not willing to pay for copies that they can make for free with mainstream technology. Of course there is a distinct difference between the amount of labor necessary to duplicate digital files compared to physical wares, but the line between the physical and the digital is beginning to blur in some surprising new ways. As 3D printing becomes more sophisticated and cost-effective, it will impact business models and creative processes in every imaginable industry. Much like the music labels, for instance, manufacturers of consumer goods will find themselves generating products that are so easily replicated they can no longer monopolize the manufacture of copies (Weinberg 2010). 3D printing is precisely the type of disruptive technology that fashion thinking embraces rather than abhors. While many businesses will respond to this new technology with demands to expand intellectual property protection—effectively artificially resuscitating inefficient business models—fashion thinkers will be able to capitalize on new opportunities to provide the types of creative templates for customization

that consumers will crave. Above all else, fashion thinkers know how to create products that people desire and wish to copy.

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