

Shifting Paradigms

Impact of Technology on the diffusion of trends

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Abstract

Since the very first studies on fashion and consumption, fashion has been conceived as a very specific pattern of imitation imbricated with Modern societies, bourgeoisie and the new models of conspicuous consumption ignited by the industrial revolution. Fashion was perceived as a trickle-down system originated by the elites and subsequently adopted by the lower classes. It is only in the second half of the XX Century that intellectuals such as Ted Polhemus, suggest alternative models in order to explain the diffusion of trends such as the bubble-up model. This essay aims to update the theory of the trickle-down diffusion of trends and re-consider it as the most suitable model hitherto. Moreover, it will be analysed a fundamental question: what is happening to the diffusion of trends in the era of mechanisation, over-production and increased speed? And what will it happen in the near future? The impact of such innovations is not to be overlooked as they exert considerable pressure over the fashion business by re-directing the individual choices of contemporary clients. The aim of this essay is precisely to get closer to try an explanation of these evolutions.

Keywords: Fashion; Sales-data; Trends; Trickle-down; Bubble-up.

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Intro

The aim of this article is to reflect upon how the increasing use of certain technologies can impact the diffusion of trends within the fashion system, especially, but not limited to, sales-data analysis technology. In order to do so, this article will focus on two distinct areas: it will critically analyse several models of trend diffusion that have been proposed by scholars and trend forecasters, and it will speculate on the possible disruptions that the employment of certain technologies can cause to the traditional ways in which trends spread.

This article will try to demonstrate that trends tend to mostly follow a trickle-down movement, even if views expressed by Simmel and Veblen during the late XIX Century on this matter require to be updated. As the article will demonstrate, in most cases, what seems to be a bubble-up model in recent fashion, is actually a trickle-down in disguise. It is important to specify, however, that alternative suggestions to the trickle-down model, such as “bubble-up” or “trickle-across”, should not be entirely dismissed, because they occupy a rather ancillary position and, contrary to what has been suggested by Ted Polhemus and other scholars, these models are more suited to explain the “exceptions” rather than establishing a new norm, even in our highly fragmented post-modern times. Even though the trickle-down model has often been dismissed as the epitome of elitism and snobbery, it still remains an exceptionally useful tool in order to understand a system so deeply imbricated with capitalism and consumerism, such as fashion.

By examining the use of sales-data and some recent sales and marketing innovations, it will be argued that we are on the verge of an inversion in the diffusion of trends. Fashion brands are increasingly paying attention to their customer’s desires and needs, rather than venturing in proposing new items and possibly suggesting “new” desires to their clients. *Business of Fashion* and other prominent platforms have recently highlighted how we are moving away from a system in which brands propose new styles, to a system where brands simply replenish the shelves of their stores with styles that are already re-quested by the market.

These seismic shifts, as this study will explain, are not without reasons. In fact, in some cases, they are even driven by highly ethical aims, such as reducing waste and minimising loss, in accordance with the necessity of putting sustainable strategies in place. The implications of these phenomena can be potentially disruptive for the fashion system and its ability to foster innovation and productivity. It seems, however, that an extensive theoretical reflection upon the potential influence of Technology on the diffusion of trends has not been formulated yet. For all these reasons, it is important, if not urgent, to study such changes and attempt an early understanding of their consequences.

Technology and innovations in fashion

One of the brands which based its recent success on understanding Millennials, and probably the first one to explore such potential, is certainly Gucci. Amongst the strategies that the brand is known to use is the so-called “reverse mentoring” (*The State of Fashion*, 2019), this strategy consists in having a certain amount of young collaborators who help the brand in refining its products to better suit their taste. In other words the brand is told, to some extent, *by its clients* what to create, rather than simply proposing a brand new style *to its clients*. This resonates with other similar strategies that are increasingly taking hold in fashion also in relation to technological advancements.

According to *Business of Fashion*, fashion is moving from a system where styles and goods are “pushed” into the market, based on forecasts and designer insights, to a system where styles are “pulled” into the market, based on actual demand. Central to this process is the analysis of sales data, as well as social media data. By doing so, not only sales are kept under observation, but also the traffic on the brands’ social media in order to detect a potential increase or decrease of interest in certain products. Fashion, according to *BoF* and McKinsey & Co, will increasingly resemble the “Supermarket model, by which inventory is only replenished once consumed” (*The State of Fashion*, 2019:83).

Throughout the same article is indicated that strategies such as near-shoring, analytics and new technologies — for instance, techniques which allow the creation of a small amount of personalised goods for specific clients — are the solution for problems such as the cumbersome design and production process, which alone would traditionally take one year. The result is that fashion brands are increasingly investing in these technologies and even founding start-ups which are devoted to the task.

The analysis of data, especially POS (point-of-sale) data, is not new in fashion and has in fact been used for many years by retailers, trends forecasters and merchandisers. Some brands such as Zara and Asos, base most of their success on savvy data analysis: these brands tend to produce only the styles they can sell. It might be suggested that even in these cases there seems to be some overproduction, but it is more related to the single units produced rather than the styles themselves. Intercepting in a more exact way the amount of units to produce seems to be the next frontier.

There are mainly two reasons why sales data are becoming and will arguably become more relevant in the future: the first is that technology is increasingly pervasive; the second reason is that although the world of fashion is becoming faster and faster, businesses are required more than ever to maximise profits. In a world ruled by social media, the degree of obsolescence of a trend is also speeding up and the lifecycle of a product, destined to reduce. Brands are once again caught in a conflicting situation: on the one hand they are required to increase sales, on the other they have lesser and lesser time to devote to design, creativity and innovation. It comes with no surprise that designers tend to chase sales data in order to minimise loss.

There is a third fundamental reason that encourages brands to rely on the relative security provided by sales data, which is the need not to overproduce for environmental reasons. If it is not advisable anymore for brands to organise massive seasonal sales and distribute their overstock through outlets, as this would diminish their reputation, it should also be clear that the strategy so far used by some luxury brands, namely to destroy the unsold stock is also increasingly being perceived as controversial. Some luxury brands that claimed to destroy their overstock have been heavily criticised by their customers. It happened to Burberry when Riccardo Tisci declared that it was common practice for the brand to burn unsold goods (Paton, 2018). In order to avoid dealing with unsold stock brand will be required to minimise the amount of items produced. It is logical to presume that the need for keeping a sustainable image by reducing carbon-emissions will increasingly encourage designers to base their offering on the analysis of data.

Today styles proliferate and are utterly fragmented. Brands are experiencing a sort of schizophrenia: on one hand they overproduce (some brands present four collections plus several capsule collections every year) and prolong the shelf life of a collection in order to maximise sales to tourists, on the other hand, there is a tension towards limiting production, not only for sustainability reasons — often used as the marketing justification — but also in order to minimise loss. According to Camurati (Mffashion, 2020) over the next year store managers and social media managers will become more and more central in determining customer's preferences in terms of style. In other words, gathering data and sensing the direction of the market, both in-store and online, will dictate how and what the companies will design.

All the above-mentioned strategies represent a radical change compared to the past, the implications of which are yet to be understood. If we are moving towards an economy in which brands will only chase (and produce) what their clients are already inclined to buy, not only the business models are on the verge of being radically restructured, but there will also be an evolution, from a sociological point of view, in the way in which trends will be created and spread.

Models of trends diffusion

There is a certain agreement today amongst trend forecasters and fashion scholars on the fact that trends can originate and spread following several possible models and that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive: trends can follow a *trickle-down* movement, they can *bubble-up* from the streets to the runway shows, or they can appear simultaneously in different echelons of society and different geographies

(*trickle-across*) as our information technology has become fragmented and fast (Kim, E. Fiore, A. Kim H., 2013).

The trickle-down model, which was firstly introduced during the late XIX Century by Thorstein Veblen (1973) and Georg Simmel (1905), has been heavily criticised from the 70s onwards, in and outside of academia as it will be discussed later on, and yet no other model has been able to provide a more general and accurate explanation of how and why fashion generates trends. Both Simmel and Veblen, conceive fashion as a movement that falls from above and it is subsequently copied by the masses in a process of imitation. But whilst for the economist Veblen such model could be explained mainly in terms of consumption and economy, it is with Simmel that the theorisation of trickle-down acquires more nuanced sociological implications. According to Simmel fashion (and the movement of trends) is to be seen as a process of imitation and differentiation that can be applied to clothes as well as any other object of consumption. For him, in our modern and capitalistic societies, individuals are entangled in a contradictory phenomenon: on the one hand they want to be part of a given social group (usually the one right above theirs), on the other hand, they want to differentiate themselves from other social groups. Fashion, for Simmel, is very much about “affiliation” to a certain group and “differentiation” from other social groups. Like for Veblen, in Simmel’s view, novelty is started by the upper classes and subsequently copied by the lower classes in an attempt to assimilate themselves with the classes above, however, once a style is adopted by the lower classes, the upper classes move towards another style and the cycle re-starts, hence the constant novelty of fashion. For Simmel, economic reasons can not be the only ones and trends change also to respond to different social needs such as, for instance, finding the balance between individuality and conformity. It is important to keep in mind that both scholars stemmed from the Victorian society and their theories reflected the rigidity of the social structures of the late XIX Century, however, it would be wrong — as this essay aims to demonstrate — to conceive these theories as outdated and inapplicable to our contemporaneity. One interesting addition to Simmel and Veblen’s suggestions on the pursuit of the “new” comes from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2010). Bourdieu claims that all forms of capital, including the symbolic capital that fashion is able to carry, are subject to inflation: for anything to have a value, it is mandatory that a limited amount of people possess it. However, if something is possessed by many people the value decreases. This helps explaining why fashion’s turnaround is so fast: it needs constant change in order to avoid inflation and losing symbolic value.

The “Bubble-up model” as proposed by anthropologist Polhemus (1994) towards the end of the XX Century, notices how some styles which become at a given moment dominant in society originate from the streets and especially, as Polhemus pointed out, from subcultures. For him, as well as other writers, this model is better suited to explain how trends are originated and spread in a world that stopped being modern and became post-modern.

Stemming from a different point of view, Philosopher Lars Svendsen arrives to a similar conclusion when pointing out (2006:43) that the suit is an example of a garment which rather than trickling down from above, trickled up from the lower echelons of society. Up until the French revolution, the suit was in fact a garment commonly adopted by the middle class but was subsequently welcomed also amongst the upper classes. It could be argued, however, that it is not exactly correct to say that the garment moved from the middle to the upper classes. The reason why the so-called upper classes started wearing a middle-class garment was that the bourgeoisie itself became the ruling class and therefore moved upwards. When the bourgeoisie became the ruling class, after the French Revolution, it carried on wearing the same type of garment as before, but was now in a higher position. It is tempting to say that, the suit remained where it always was, it was instead the bourgeoisie itself which climbed the social ladder imposing a new aesthetic and therefore re-confirming the general trickle-down principle that the taste of a given society coincides with the taste of its ruling class. In other words, rather than providing an example that challenges the trickle-down theory, Svendsen demonstrated its pervasiveness.

Another reason that has often been advocated for the explanation of fashion’s hunger for change is the idea that fashion embodies and follows the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. Sociologist Herbert Blumer, for instance, tried to imagine a model whereby the collective choices that underpin the trend movements

respond to specific needs of being “in fashion”, rather than chasing emulation and differentiation, as suggested by Simmel (Blumer, 1969). One interesting aspect of Blumer’s analysis is that it updates the concept of the elite. If for Simmel the elites who originate fashion were the upper classes, for Blumer these elites are the fashionistas themselves, what a modern trends forecaster might call “the innovators” or “trendsetters”. However, the pyramidal model of fashion and its diffusion remains in place even in this case, what changes is just the description of the elites.

Relating to Blumer’s proposition that fashion changes by following the mood and the spirit of the time, Svendsen proposed an interesting critique. For him, any model based on the *zeitgeist* is rather problematic as there seems to be no direct correspondence between relevant historical events such as the fall of the Berlin wall or the war that followed the Twin tower’s attack on 11th of September 2001 and the contemporary fashion collections. It is undeniable that some influence of historical events over fashion collections is visible, yet, they do not seem to be overwhelming. The *zeitgeist*, then, can not be seen as the most important force operating in fashion change.

As anticipated above, these sceptical approaches rest upon the assumption that today trends are generated and spread in various ways and, at first glance, it appears evident that some trends come from the streets and then trickle up, whilst others appear simultaneously in different strata of society as an effect of the higher speed at which ideas circulate on social media.

All these models of trends-diffusion seem to be at work simultaneously and trend forecasters trace all possible paths in order to understand the next possible developments. It is also evident that, compared to the Victorian society which Veblen and Simmel described and analysed, today, we are witnessing some radical changes as higher social mobility, re-definition of genders and classes, a certain democratisation of education and access to commodities, have helped in re-shaping society. However, it can be argued that rather than being outdated, the trickle-down model is still ruling in disguise. Styles continue to spread falling from above, and it is only because of the contemporary creative frenzy that designers take inspiration from sources such as the streets and subcultures. In any case, it is not until these looks appear on the catwalks, are worn by influential trendsetters, or are featured in relevant magazines or platforms that they become “fashionable”.

In order to explain the reasons why trendsetters tend to be found amongst the upper classes, or are part of a certain elite, sociologist Henrik Vejgaard, author of books such as *Anatomy of a Trend* (2012), looked at the Hierarchy of Needs conceptualised by psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954). Maslow, divided needs into several categories, starting from the basic “physiological” and “safety needs” to the “aesthetic” and “self-actualisation needs”. For Maslow, human beings do not satisfy all needs at once but start from the lower echelons of the Hierarchy of Needs, namely from the ones which have to be fulfilled in order to survive, and only progressively come to satisfy the other needs, the ones which are not essential for survival. Vejgaard suggests that “consumers are more preoccupied with style and taste when they are well-off because then they are at the top of the hierarchy of needs” (2012:23). In other words it is the wealthiest people who invest more on aesthetic needs, therefore they tend to be ahead and copied by others.

Trend experts, and Vejgaard amongst them, divide the pyramid of trends diffusion in several segments, each representing a different percentage of individuals. Different trend experts may apply a slightly different graph, calling the demographic segments in a different way, however in all these cases the pyramid of trend-diffusion can be seen, to some extent, as an evolution of the trickle-down principle as proposed by Simmel. At the top of the pyramid are usually placed the trend-creators, an extremely small percentage of people who firstly conceive the idea, they are then followed by the elite of trendsetters, these are also a small percentage of early adopters and can have a decisive influence on the masses. A characteristic of trendsetters, is the fact that they consume far more than the average individual (Vejgaard 2012:151–2), and it can be argued that they correspond today to what Veblen in his description indicated as the upper-classes who show their privileged status through what he called *conspicuous waste* and *conspicuous consumption*.

In the modern trend-diffusion pyramid, trendsetters are in turn followed by the early majority and then

the mainstreamers. Usually, the mainstreamers, in this type of graphs, are also the beginning of a reversed pyramid which signals how a trend, after reaching a certain diffusion, is adopted by lesser and lesser people until fades away (late majority, laggards and anti-innovators). The overall graph then resembles a diamond created by two reversed pyramids.

Against Vejlgaard's suggestion could be argued that some trend creators who, for instance, operated in subcultures such as punks or skinheads, have had a fundamental role in initiating certain trends, despite they were not wealthy or privileged in any meaningful way. This would implicitly underpin the belief in a sort of trickle-up phenomenon; however such critique would not be entirely correct for at least two reasons: first of all because, as we will try to explain, *trend creators* are not as essential as *trendsetters* in popularising a certain fashion: it is not who introduces an innovation that creates the trend, but who functions as the vessel that brings it to the masses and makes that given innovation desirable. The second reason is that even if subcultures can be a fundamental hub for creativity and a source of innovations, they act very much as anti-fashion rather than fashion (Polhemus, 2011). In other words, they tend to be faithful to a certain style, rather than craving fast change as fashion is compelled to do by its very nature.

It is this article's belief that the trickle-down effect in contemporary society has been updated rather than discarded and most declarations of death of such model in favour, for instance, of a bubble-up movement, appear to be far too precocious if not optimistic.

Trickle-down re-loaded.

The bubble-up model, as theorised by anthropologist Ted Polhemus and hardly questioned hitherto, presents several contentious areas. The concept was discussed in his notorious book *Streetstyle* (1994). The author starts by opposing the trickle-down model, exemplified by the diffusion of Dior's *New Look* in 1947, to the bubble-up of several street styles that have been subsequently adopted by the upper echelons of fashion, such as for instance the leather jacket. For Polhemus, the diffusion of the *New Look* represents an old model which rests on the deceitful assumption that only the upper classes can generate new things and things of value (1994:19), in other words, for Polhemus this old fashion regime believes that novelties can only be proposed by the mind of masters such as Christian Dior. Later on the anthropologist salutes the bubble up model as a system which establishes a "creative democracy" (1994: 20) and proves that stylistic novelties can also come from the lesser privileged, famous or powerful. Both of these assumptions can be questioned. If it is undeniable that Dior's New look became popular by trickling down from above — from the couturier to the masses, that is — it is not correct to say that it was an "original" creation of Mr Dior. Not only the *New Look*, notwithstanding its name, was a re-proposition of a Victorian silhouette, but there had already been a failed attempt of proposing a very similar silhouette in 1939 when Christobal Balenciaga created the Infanta-gown with little commercial success. As it will be demonstrated later on, it is not entirely relevant for the diffusion of trends where novelties come from, it only matters *who* makes them popular and the moment in time when this happens. The second point made by Polhemus, namely that some new trends expand and trickle up from the streets, seems an anamorphic distortion. Even in this case, the focus should not be given to what the item is or who creates it first, but *who* manages to popularise it, *why* and *when*.

In 2002 a series of images of British Soap opera actress Danniella Westbrook dressed head-to-toe in Burberry were published by several British Tabloids. Westbrook did not embody the type of demographic that a luxury brand wanted to be associated with, and signalled that the excessive popularity and exposure of the brand was getting out of hand. The infamous pictures generated a sort of viral phenomenon *ante litteram*, far before social media changed the speed of diffusion of images. This single episode can be said to have profoundly shaken the business structure of the brand, its style and its offering. After the images were published, the brand stopped the production of recognisable entry price items and reduced the use of their traditional check. Furthermore, they found ways for contrasting low-cost copycats of their products by introducing catwalk-to-consumer collections and, by doing so, the garments hit the stores before copycats were created. What happened in the early 2000s was clear: logos

and branded items were not trendy anymore and they started to signify what in English is referred to, in a derogatory way, as “Chav”.

“Chavs” are commonly conceived as individuals from lower social classes who wear recognisable garments, logos and visible jewellery. When Burberry realised that it was being perceived as a Chav-Brand, took immediate action in order to change this perception (Mallevais, 2011; Shannon, 2017). During the 2000s and the early 2010s, no brand who wanted to position itself amongst the highest echelons of the fashion pyramid would have wanted to make extensive use of visible logos, precisely in order to avoid the association with the previously mentioned “chav” culture. However, trends tend to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary and sometimes elements which are perceived as new are nothing but re-propositions of old styles which have fallen into oblivion, appearing new, if not innovative, when brought back. This happened to logos as well. During the second half of the 2010s logos became coveted again and the elements of clothing that were seen as bad taste and “Chavvy” ten years back, started becoming trendy once more. Why?

Since 2014 some brands such as Vetements, Gucci, Gosha Rubchinsky and later on Balenciaga (when Demna Gvasalia was appointed, in 2015) started proposing these styling elements in their collection. The above-mentioned designers, amongst others, were in fact digging deliberately into what was then perceived as bad taste, as fashion often does, in order to create newness. However, it is interesting to note that it was not until the culture of logos and recognisable items was brought back into fashion by some innovators and major brands, that the trend started once again.

Notwithstanding the fact that, at first glance, this example seems to reinforce the belief in the bubble up model suggested by Polhemus, namely that some trends start from the streets and climb little by little to the top of the pyramid, at a more careful analysis, the opposite theory appears to be more suited. The logo culture, in fact, did not become a trend even if it carried on being adopted by large numbers of young boys and girls in the streets; it only became trendy when it was christened by some innovators and designers at the top of the fashion ladder. In other words, it was not until brands such as Gucci, Vetements and Balenciaga, put these styles back in the catwalks, that the chav-style returned to be considered desirable by the upper echelons of fashion consumers and finally became a trend.

The logo culture went from being considered “bad taste” to becoming trendy and coveted in less than 15 years, but in order for this to happen two requirements needed to be fulfilled: the style needed to be out of fashion for a period of time, and a small but influential amount of trendsetters had to adopt it, legitimising fashion victims or aspiring fashion victims to wear it without feeling that a “sin” was being committed.

Fashion, as we conceive it today, is created by the unique cooperation between the designs that are offered by certain businesses, and a more or less spontaneous process of selection operated by the recipients these offers. It can not be reduced to the runway shows but equally it can not be conceived as something singlehandedly decided by the masses. This essay’s suggestion is that when trends originate and spread freely in society, namely when they follow a spontaneous diffusion, they tend to mimic a pyramidal process where there is an elite who originates the trend (the upper classes in Simmel and Veblen’s descriptions, or the fashion innovators according to Blumer), and only afterwards the trends take hold, chasing the impossible aim to encompass the entire society, before being discarded in favour of new trends. Even when it seems that an innovation originates from the streets it is not until an elite consecrates it that such innovation becomes “a fashionable trend”. The implication of what written above is that the bubble up model is *per se* incompatible with the way in which trends tend to emerge, and therefore is a much rarer occurrence than commonly thought. In most cases the diffusion of trends follows a trickle-down movement, even if it needs to be noted that, throughout history, what changes is the type of elite that ignites the new trends.

To claim that trends bubble up from the streets, subcultures or from the masses — for instance a baseball hat with a visible logo — implies that all the focus is given to the item itself, and it might be true that the baseball hat was widely used in the streets before it became a trend, but this idea contains the potential for its own subversion. In fact, the paradigm changes if the focus is shifted from the *object* to the *process*,

in other words if instead of looking at the hat one investigates the individuals who popularise the item and make it become “trendy”. The baseball hat might have widely been used before, but would it be correct to claim that it was a trend? And when it finally became trendy, who started the process and changed the perception of the item amongst fashion consumers?

The shift of focus from the *creator* to the *process* that ignites a trend is, to some extent, a prerogative of creativity in the XX Century, an era that witnessed a crises of the very concept of authenticity. To give focus to the item and the “original” creator, as Polhemus seems to do, rather than the process involved in its popularisation, would be akin to considering the author of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* the firm which created the Brillo soap, or to see as the author of Duchamp’s *Fountain* the firm which produced the urinal, without considering the fact that what was essential in both these cases was the environment where they were placed, and ultimately, even in this case, the process that infused them with specific meanings. It can be argued, however, that the spontaneity of this model of trends diffusion can be influenced and even disrupted by several factors, the most prominent of which can be identified today in technology. The way in which sales-data are gathered and used by practitioners can, to some extent, determine what type of garments will be produced.

Impact of technology on trends

This article started from the assumption that the trickle-down effect remains hitherto the most reliable model in order to explain the diffusion of trends in societies where being dressed is mostly influenced by fashion. It has also been claimed that such model is more pervasive than it might seem at first. However, in order to have a trickle-down system there needs to be first and foremost an elite of people who create new covetable products and a certain amount of trendsetters who popularise these styles. The question is whether brands will succumb to sales data and other similar strategies in order to secure sales or if they will carry on innovating and, therefore, risking to be left with unsold stock.

As indicated above, trying to produce only what a brand can sell, and only what customers actually desire, presents both, advantages and disadvantages. There is a clear environmental advantage as it can generate a virtuous circle in terms of sustainability, since it limits waste, and also allows brands to avoid devoting financial resources to the design and production of unsuccessful styles. Furthermore, it increases profitability for businesses since products are sent into production as soon as the data show what the market requires.

A potential disadvantage of such change, however, is that, as indicated above, the fashion system in order to exist requires a certain amount of new styles being proposed to the market and subsequently a process of selection of these styles operated by the market itself. With this new system the first part of the process would be significantly weakened. Producing a certain amount of unsuccessful styles has always been vital for the fashion system to exist, and in fact “failure” itself should be regarded as an essential part of the process, as it helps further improvements and facilitates the selection process.

The impact that these shifts might have over the diffusion of trends is not to be underestimated. To say that styles are pulled into the market by customers’ demands means that, for the first time, trends are *truly* imposed by the streets in a structural way. As seen, even when street styles seem to bubble up from the streets, it is required the intervention of a designer, a trendsetter, or an influencer who sits at the top of the fashion pyramid in order for that style to become a trend. This mediated intervention might, however, become obsolete if not irrelevant, if the fashion system responds to an immediate demand. In this instance, more than ever before, the trickle-down pyramid might be disrupted in favour of a completely different and new model. It is possible to speculate that a system where goods are simply pulled into the market by consumers will impose a sort unprecedented bubble-up effect. Since the streets, in other words the base of the pyramid, will dictate production.

The speed imposed over the fashion system by the social media acts, amongst other things, as a limit to creativity. An interesting point of view regarding this matter comes from trend forecaster Li Edelkoort, who created a provocative *Anti-Fashion Manifesto* (Edelkoort, 2015; Frisa, 2015; Cordero, 2016),

openly opposing some of the new evolutions within the fashion system. Edelkoort suggests that, in a world dominated by the logics of speed, marketing and profit, designers are given lesser and lesser time to design. According to the Dutch trends forecaster, fashion appears today *old-fashioned* and, following the marketing and profit imperatives, it is becoming a parody of what it used to be, unable to value the quality of products and to propose true “innovation”. The result of this, Edelkoort says, is that the fashion industries that produce high-quality clothes, shoes and textiles are highly jeopardised and, because of this, a significant amount of know-how is becoming neglected, hence it may be lost.

Edelkoort, however, imagines a way out when she suggests that brands that rely on couture and tailoring, if protected, are the ones which will most likely push innovation forward in the future, as they can use Couture itself as a laboratory out of which thoroughly conceived novelty can emerge. Both, couture and tailoring, require a certain amount of time in order to be created, furthermore, the production of such innovative and exclusive pieces demands manufacturing skills and financial resources.

It is interesting to note, however, that this suggestion by Edelkoort seems to re-establish to some extent and in a revised way, the primacy of the trickle-down principle, not only as a descriptive model, but also as a hope for fashion itself.

There is some irony in the fact that the current threat to the trickle-down effect — in other words the real (and most impactful) bubble-up model — is not to be found in the fringes of society or in subcultures, as suggested by many scholars in the past, but emerges from a far more prosaic dynamic: brands which abide by sales data and chase secure profits. It is also interesting that in this case the bubble-up does not signify “creative democracy” as suggested by Polhemus, but rather the crisis of creativity itself, and the old-fashioned pyramidal model, considered for a long time anti-democratic and elitist, is starting to be hailed as the source of innovation and even something to be guarded.

Conclusions

This essay started by highlighting some critiques that have been advanced throughout the second half of the XX Century to the trickle-down effect and its elitism, and ended by suggesting that the trickle-down effect has not only been inevitable so far, but that should also be respected and, to some extent, protected. Yes, it does embed a certain elitism, and yes, it does presuppose a society divided into segments which even today loosely resemble the hierarchy of social classes, and yet it is this system which puts couture and trendsetters at the top of the chain that has granted the constant pursuit of innovation, quality and the blossoming of the fashion business to an unprecedented degree. Interestingly enough, the dismantling of this system by securing predictable sales does not coincide with a democratisation of fashion, luxury and creativity, but rather a reduction of it.

Technological revolutions are known to be extremely impactful for individuals as they have the power to change the very concept of subjectivity, habits and tastes. It would be impossible to conceive an individual from the XIX or XX Century without taking in consideration the deeply impactful technological advancements that have shaped new ways of life and even new tastes. Without the invention of trains, it would be hard to conceive futurism, and without the scientific findings of Sigmund Freud it would be hardly possible to imagine the emergence of surrealism in art. Even in regards to Fashion it has often been argued that without Ford and his new standardised way of producing cars, even the simplicity of the Little Black Dress, firstly introduced by Chanel in the Twenties, would have been inconceivable, and certainly would have hardly become a stable feature in contemporary women’s wardrobes.

The impact of what discussed in this article is comparable to the previous examples but it is made even more worthy of an immediate understanding because of the unprecedented speed at which these changes happen. My hope is not to have provided the right answers, it would be too cumbersome and ambitious. However, I would be satisfied if at least I managed to identify a new set of questions, and if I was able, with this essay, to draw the attention on what I consider contentious areas within the theories of the diffusion of trends.

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