Fashion as System or Action Net in ‘Fashion in All Things’
--- A Case in Color Design of Mobile Phones

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Abstract
Contemporary fashion has permeated into all things in life beyond clothes. Recently, fashion theories take on interests in organization and system. Kawamura proposes a fashion system through which clothing is transformed into the idea of fashion. Can this fashion system be used to analyze other things in fashion? We present a study using mobile phone, one of the most intimate gadgets to people, as a way to approach ‘fashion in all things’. We chose the color as a way to study the fashion aspect in mobile design. Through the empirical study, we find that the decision making of color in mobile industry is a collective process. It is greatly influenced by technology, materials, consumer lifestyle and trend. The trendy colors in mobile design are not defined by certain cultural or social institutions, but formulated by actions conducted by various actors in certain social context. Our study shows that fashion can embrace more than Kawamura’s system, e.g. the action net of color design in mobile technology. Although mobile design shares some similarities with clothing fashion, the concept of fashion-ology is very Parisian and deals with only clothing. It is not fully applicable to mobile industry. If we want to use a fashion system that can apply to fashion in all things, we should revisit the theory to reveal the general characteristics of the fashion world or build smaller theory for each category.

Key Words: fashion system, fashion in all things, action net theory, mobile phone design, color

1. ‘Fashion in All Things’
In fashion theory, little has been done on ‘fashion in all things’. In 1993, Estelle Ellis delivered a speech titled ‘what is fashion’ in the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, drawing public attention to a new concept of fashion in contemporary era. She perceived fashion in anthropological terms, that is, as a cultural force that drew sustenance from social customs, group psychology, material life, economic institution, and other types of human interaction and in term, influence them. Fashion is seen as a causal agent that has constantly reshaped all material things, from the fabric environment which surrounds our bodies to the nature of design to architecture. It is always moving, and recontouring ‘daily living, whether in the home, office, institution, or community’. For her, fashion
reached beyond apparel. She generalizes the notion to a wider level which includes more things in lifestyle. Her speech can be seen as a first attempt to theorize ‘fashion in all things’.

2. Fashion in Organizational Theory

Recently, there is an increasing interest in applying organizational theory to fashion study. Kawamura suggests a fashion-ology and argues that fashion is a kind of institutional subculture with specific functions and creates stratification within the system among the insider designers. She suggests that there is a ‘fashion system’, which means institutional and cultural arrangements that cause particular cultural objects to be adorned in a specific way. This is the modern system that began from the year 1868 with the institutionalization of fashion. She attempts to uncover the social context of the institutional development of fashion.

The fashion system by Kawamura has the following features: First, she has employed the structural functional perspective which leads to three aspects of fashion-ology: production, diffusion and consumption. Second, different institutions and organizations have specific functions. She argues that a system is composed of subsystems or institutions. She thinks this method can be applicable to the institutions of fashion that are found in cities where fashion culture is found, such as fashion shows. Third, individual designer needs legitimization to enter fashion world; this is also Parisian system as the legitimization is completed through recognition by Paris authority. For the designers, ‘they need to come to one of the fashion cities where the system is in place’. This means the institutions are preexisted with specific functions. The designers only need to go into the system. The collective actions by individuals are conducted according to the conventions and rules of the institutional arrangement within the social structure.

It is much influenced by Functionalism which has a special emphasis on function, interdependence, and consensus. Institutions and structures exist in the society as a whole. The parts in a system usually work together in an orderly manner without great conflict. Inequality is necessary to maintain order. Structures, interconnections exist within and among these structures, and individuals and groups are constrained by the structures.

3. Action Net Theory

There is another view in organizational theory. Barbara Czamiawska suggests an action net to establish a constructionist perspective in organizing theory. Action net aims to discover how collective actions are tested, repeated or dropped, connected with connections dissolving or stabilized and actors forming as a result. Czamiawska is very much influenced by Bruno Latour’s Actor-network theory which highlights that the connections create actors. He argues that actors are defining each other and existing in the interrelations. Traditionally, actors are seen to forge connections, in this way, build a network. However, action net challenges
and reverts the assumption, suggesting that ‘connections between and among actions, when stabilized, are used to construct identities of actors’.

4. Color Design - a Case on Mobile Fashion

We have already reviewed the relation between mobile phone and fashion in our previous study. The relation between mobile phones and fashion is obvious in both sociology and industry. On the one hand, mobile phone is seen as a fashionable item as it can represent people’s personality and taste; on the other hand, fashion has become an important marketing strategy to offer more choices and accesses to different people. Thus we see that mobile phones as a practical and proper example to analyze ‘fashion in all things’.

We choose color as a way to approach fashion system in mobile design. On the one hand, color is a universal feature for any consumer goods. Color plays a major role in positioning apparel products by attracting attention, establishing the image of the product and the brand, and evoking symbolic associations. It exists in other product categories besides clothing. Therefore, color is representative to study ‘fashion in all things’. On the other hand, color is a significant aspect of fashion. In fashion production, color forecasting is usually the initial point even before the first step of practice. Color forecasters provide information for designers, textile manufacturers etc. who need this service as ‘a gauge of mass taste’.

The study includes eight qualitative interviews with both designers from international mobile companies and trend analysts from fashion houses. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Each interview typically lasted about one hour. The interviews were informed by introduction of the project and some questions that were sent to the interviewees in advance.

We have studied the interview transcripts and got some interesting points to discuss. The transcripts discuss how the color is decided or designed in trend agencies as well as mobile companies, the relationship between color and material, and the impact of consumer segmentation. We try to make sense of the quotations and figure out the inner logic of color decision and implications to fashion system.

5. Fashion as Action Net

Drawn upon the theoretical background and through analyzing the empirical materials, we have come to two arguments here. First, if we say organization or mechanism in formulation of fashion, it is actually more complex than a role functional system. On the first level, it is a collective activity that involves many people. For example, Maryelle from Carlin trend agency in Paris talked about how the analysts study trends:

We have brainstorming in all the departments, with all the creative persons. They are all exchanging their ideas about what they saw in their professional life and personal life... It’s very astonishing, because each season they do have the same feeling about revolution for fashion for colors. When we have some common points, we know there is a big inclusion with trends.
When the well-trained specialists find out something, which is inspired by daily life, in common, it means that they have found the emerging trends. This is not one person’s decision, not a role or a mechanism that makes the decision, but a collective work with different insiders involved in. This brainstorming activity tells that it is through the actions (search ideas from life, find something in common etc.) that trends are formulated.

On the second level, color is decided by many factors, economy, trends, lifestyle, materials, and target consumers. For example: Grace Boicel, senior design manager from Nokia, talked about how mobile industry adopts fashion trends:

I think with amount of research we do globally. So we need to check fashion trends that we are on the same direction...All of these materials that I was talking about going out to people, check people’s life, understand how they live, what they like, all bigger trends, economy, all these inferences similar to what they do as well, in trend books. We also check with trend agencies as well. We would have research team that does even bigger research than trend agencies because they look at more catwalks and these things, we would have agencies that go out and ask influential leaders in the world what they believe. It’s different kind of research we do. And also we look at what kind of material is coming what kind of technology on the go. That’s also trends. So, all of these things are influencing us to make a decision.

We could see that mobile design is a complex process. She did admit that mobile design was influenced by fashion trends, but also by economy, technology and what happens in the world.

Another point has been frequently mentioned by the interviewees, that is, the dependence on materials in color design. Meri Laine, Senior Design Manager from Nokia, said:

…it’s the matter of materials. Cloth and fabric are changing continuously like how you use it and so on. But then plastic or metal this kind of hard material, they have similar prints or outlines all the time, so maybe comparing into something like architecture for example, so you can get some profile when you look at it from certain angles.
Yanqing Zhang and Oskar Juhlin

She pointed out the difference of the materials used in clothes making and in phone manufacturing. She has distinguished soft material and hard material between fashion and mobile phone. The materials used in the phones differ from the materials used in clothing production, that is, fabrics, which should be softer. It is usually the material that decides which colors can be used to the phone, since certain materials can only have certain colors.

Second, we argue that it is the action that matters and defines what fashion is. The mobile design case suggests that firstly, there is no star designer system which should be legitimized by Parisian authority. Designers in mobile industry are often less known by the public than fashion designers. Secondly, there is no Parisian authority which sits high above in a pyramid of a hierarchy. Fashion is undoubtedly originated in Paris and the Parisian style is still of great importance nowadays. The earliest and biggest mobile phone company Nokia is from Finland. The current mobile business giants are from the US, Germany, South Korea etc. Mobile phone business has a worldwide market and the consumption of mobile phones is related to various cultural backgrounds.

Mobile fashion production suggests that the formulation of fashion ideal is not structural-functional. It is not defined by the functions of certain institutions, but more by actions in the process. For instance, Jeanna Kimbré, who was the Head of Color and Material Design at Sony Ericsson provided us with a description of a meeting in which she tried to present a new product to a specific phone operator.

If you come to a customer [customer here means a phone operators such as TeliaSonera or Vodafone], you can count on there being fifteen men in their 40’s dressed in suits, all dark blue. Or you know, they have a specific style. If you cannot describe the customers’ lifestyles, or what does trigger them, everything from how they live to products, then you cannot validate why we have selected specific colors and specific materials. When we enter, we have to start a bit from the beginning, that is to put facts how it changes ways in which people buy etc… Because I, who can be really tired about this think like this: I don’t care about your own feeling, because you are not the end consumer! And if you tell that, and support it and tell them why you say so, “You know I have been in this game too long to be polite.” You can do it in a funny way and try to tell them as well that I am not either the end consumer. I am also fifteen years older than them. But my job is to try to understand them. And that is what decides if I am a professional or not. And that is the difference. But that is what we describe to them, to get through the filter so to say.”
This is a very detailed description of how she sold the product to the ‘filter’ persons who were in between mobile producers and consumers, playing an important role in making the products more accessible to public. The process was performative and active.

This example could be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, the quote reveals different roles in the system. There are phone manufacturers, people who control phone networks, and end users. The meeting is set up to introduce the product to people who control the phone networks and sell the phones to end-consumers. On the other hand, the meeting can be seen as part of an action network. The colours come to the fore as part of Kimbré’s attempt to convince or persuade the other participants that she is the best to understand the end consumers. How does she do it? She does that by distancing them further away from the end customer than she is. She does it through providing concrete details of their lives. She does it by aligning the design object with the detailed. She does it through distancing herself from the customers, and rejoining the group at the meeting.

Of course the people she refers to in the quote are more powerful than other in the business, and we need to account for their roles, their functions, in the organizational setting. But their power is derived from the ways in which they pursue that power. ‘Fashion in all things’ therefore implies not only to look at various artefacts, but in doing so we need to ask ourselves for the practical details in which that is done, such as the ways in which a meeting decides on the colour for a particular market.

6. **Conclusion**

This paper studied the fashion system rhetoric in the circumstance of ‘fashion in all things’, through empirical study of interviews in mobile and fashion industries. Kawamura’s fashion-ology investigates the social context of institutionalized fashion development, including the collective work of all people involved in the process; as well as star designer systems in which the legitimization of designers by Parisian authority is of great importance. It can be problematic to analyze ‘fashion in all things’ in general by applying the theory directly, since the clothing system is not adaptable to other fashion items. It requires modification and adaptation to analyze other forms of fashion. Otherwise it should build smaller theory for each category. We argue that fashion as action net will make more sense in studying ‘fashion in all things’. The empirical study shows that color design is a collective network and moving process rather than a functional institution. The decision making of color contains defining actions in corporation with many branches or agencies.
Notes

8 Ibid, 175,163.
9 Ibid, 19.
13 The interviewees include: Erik Ahlgen SonyEricsson Manager, Industrial design, Niilo Alfthan, Portfolio Designer from Nokia Design research; Grace Boicel, Senior design manager from Nokia;Jeanna Kimbre, Manager in Colour and Material from Sony Ericsson; Louise Klarsten, fashion consultant and Color House CEO; Meri Laine, Senior Design Manager from Nokia; Andrea Rosengren, Interaction Designer from Oceans Observations; Maryelle, Senior Marketing project manager from Carlin trend agency

Bibliography

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