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On standing out and fitting in

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ABSTRACT

Two basic sociological processes with particular relevance to global fashion marketing and consumption are attempting to stand out or to fit in. These processes operate not only among face-to-face peers but online as well. And in some cases, users of social media, as well as marketers, are able to take advantage of the dynamics between those attempting to stand out and those attempting to fit in. In this note, I analyze various ways in which these dynamics operate as well as some of the cultural differences in the tendency toward each trait. I conclude that across cultures the interplay of standing out and fitting in is a basic engine of the fashion process.

众不同和跟随大

与全球时尚营销和消费特别相关的两个基本社会学现象即为与众不同和跟随大众。这些过程不仅在线下面对面运作，并且可以在线运行。在某些情况下，社交媒体用户和营销人员能够利用那些想要与众不同和想要跟随大众的人之间的动态关系。在这篇笔记中，我分析了这些动态的各种运作方式，以及倾向于每种特征的一些文化差异。我的结论是，在不同的文化中，与众不同和跟随大众的相互作用是时尚过程的一个基本引擎。

本文还讨论了一些相关的过程和现象，涉及到脱颖而出和适应。包括名人模仿、服装作为语言、服装编码、共同构建自我、从众、炫耀性消费、酷消费、仿冒品、文化、约会和连接应用、个性化电子产品、乐团、时尚、性别、个人主义、有影响力的人、角色扮演、领先的奢侈品、标识、网红、相互强化、大众化奢侈品、声誉管理、品牌化、自拍和社交媒体。

本文简要介绍了非洲，印度，中东，韩国，日本，中国和西方的这些过程。尽管存在一些文化差异，但在所有文化中都存在与众不同和跟随大众之间的紧张关系。这种紧张是时尚的基本驱动力。

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1. Introduction

The very notion of fashion involves attention to what other people are wearing and consuming. To be fashionable means to be responsive to trends in what is current, leading edge, popular, or touted as the next new thing. It is seldom, if ever, a totally unique act set apart from the fashion system and what other people are buying.

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Some have suggested that clothing is a language (e.g., Lurie, 1981). But, as McCracken (1988) points out, if clothing is a language, in order to be meaningfully interpreted by others it must draw on symbols and structures that are well understood by these others. Clothing, therefore, does not have the flexibility of language. We cannot mix different pieces of clothing from different meaning systems if we wish to be understood. Skate boarding in a brown tutu wearing a green top hat and red ski boots would certainly stand out as unique, but no one would know quite what to make of it. The admired fashion innovator may be the first to adopt a new fashion look, but they are not free to mix and match at will without regard to fashion conventions. Likewise, fashion designers are able to push the edge of design, colors, and fabrics, but they must not stray too far from the convention if they wish to sell. Nevertheless, within the flexible bounds of fashion, producers and consumers are able to stand out or fit in through the ensembles they create or purchase. In this brief note, I wish to explore these differences in conformity as well as consider how we may use the resources of fashion to make a statement about our selves. My focus is consumers and fashion wear.

2. Standing out versus fitting in

One motive that affects fashion choices is the desire to stand out. Lipovetsky (1994) traces the desire to stand out to the courts of Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. But it is surely much older than this. It certainly exists with the rise of cities, but chiefly extravagance is likely far older. This is often referred to as uniqueness motivation (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). At the same time, consumers who are interested in fitting into their peer groups may be more apt to exhibit conformity in their fashion choices (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009). According to a study reported by Chadha and Husband (2006), among women in their twenties in Tokyo, 94 percent owned at least one Louis Vuitton piece, while 92 percent owned Gucci, 57 percent owned Prada, and 51 percent owned Chanel. When this many people own these luxury brands, having them is more about fitting in rather than standing out. What would stand out would be *not* to own any of these luxury brands.

These conflicting motivations play out somewhat differently in different groups and different cultures. Sasha Newell (2012) found that among a group of young men in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa there was an obsession with having the latest brand name clothing. As displayed at an outdoor bar one evening:

The women were dressed in African wax print material cut in body-hugging European fashion, while the men wore U.S. and European name brand clothing: Nike, Adidas, Façonnable, Fubu, Docksiders, Hilfiger (p. 2).

Despite this ostentatious display of wealth however, Newell notes that many of those present would have a hard time affording food the next day. Nevertheless, they engaged in a competitive quest for the latest brands, displaying them in a confrontational dance called the *logobi*, or dance of the logos (see Belk & Sobh, [forthcoming](#)). In their desire to stand out through conspicuous consumption, “necessities” like food were being sacrificed to afford “luxuries” like fashion. This is something I have called “leaping luxuries”

(Belk, 1999) since supposedly lower order needs on Maslow's need hierarchy are being by-passed in order to service higher order needs.

Although something like the *logobi* has been found in other cultures including Brazil (de Castro 2015), Burkina Faso (Bjarnesen, 2014), Uganda (Pier 2015), Vietnam (Vann, 2006), the Congo (Friedman, 1990, 1991), and Zambia (Ferguson, 1999), other young people instead struggles to fit in. In five universities in southern India, Nakassis (2016), found that male undergraduate students were fond of wearing brand name insignia clothes, but only as long they were clearly counterfeits and knockoffs. For example, Diesel brand counterfeits were in the local market before the real Diesel brand entered the Indian market. One young man who was wearing fake Diesel logos asked the researcher whether it was a brand or the name of a band. Another young man whose father gave him a genuine pair of Adidas sneakers hid them under his bed in embarrassment. When he did wear them, he hoped his friends would assume that they were fakes. There is a strong desire for fitting shown in this case, except that it is fitting in by *not* owning the real brands.

A differently motivated display of both fitting in and standing out is exhibited by college women of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. These are two of the richest countries in the world and are both strongly Muslim among the 20 percent of their populations who are citizens rather than guest workers and expatriates. In an effort to preserve family reputation young college women still cover in black with a black abaya (gown), shayla (scarf), and burka or niqab (face covering) (Sobh & Belk, 2012; Sobh, Belk, & Gressel, 2014). But these garments have become more form-fitting rather than hiding the figure and their wearers often leave buttons undone on their abayas and show hair peeking out from beneath their shaylas. And underneath they wear skinny jeans and red high heels as well as heavy makeup and designer accessories. The abayas themselves have succumbed to fashion trends in the way they are cut, their uses of embroidery, and the use of embedded jewels. They are saying, on the one hand, that they are traditional and Muslim, unlike the Westerners who inhabit their cities. On the other hand, they are saying that they are modern and not like their mothers and grandmothers. Similarly, at women's wedding receptions, which are entirely separate from men's receptions, women either remove their abayas or wear transparent ones to show their Western designer clothes beneath. However, cell phones and cameras are confiscated to be sure one woman doesn't photograph another woman "uncovered" and show it to the men in her family. Here the fitting in is largely superficial and beneath the covering of black, women compete to display unique luxury finery.

Another context in which both standing out and fitting in are found is in the pursuit of cool. Cool is an alternative status system pursued by young and disadvantaged consumers who cannot afford to compete through luxury expenditures (Belk, Tian, & Paavola, 2010; Warren & Campbell, 2014). Although we can identify cool people by their emotional aloofness and air of superiority, we cannot identify cool consumption objects because they lack any particular characteristics. They are instead identified as being cool by their association with cool people. Uncool people try to emulate coolness by adopting these products. By the time totally uncool people begin to acquire these products in an attempt to fit in, it is time for the cool people to move on to other consumption patterns. This is another variation of the trickle-down effect described by Simmel (McCracken, 1985). While manufacturers may also chase cool products (Kerner

& Pressman, 2007), their introducing similar products onto the market only hastens the demise of these products as symbols of coolness.

3. Self-branding

One way of standing out that has been advocated by many is to treat the self as a brand (e.g., Graham, 2001; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; Montoya, 2002; Shepherd, 2005). When the self is regarded as a brand to be promoted, considerations like our “packaging,” “product,” “unique selling proposition,” and potential “co-branding” with other people, places, or brands become options (Belk, 2014). We are instructed to manage our online reputation (Madden & Smith, 2010; Solomon, 2010; Suler, 2002; Zimmer & Hoffman 2011). Consider the ways in which we might draw attention to ourselves via Twitter and other social media in which we use words and photos to suggest that we are attractive, popular, and doing interesting things in interesting places with interesting people. Implicitly we say: “Here I am at so and so’s concert.” “Here am I travelling internationally.” “Here am I at an exciting party.” All of these, along with accompanying selfies, help promote our brand (Detweiler, 2018; Humphreys, 2018; Rettberg, 2014; Tildenberg, 2018).

Our selectively curated selfies are not only a way for others to see us, but for us to see and imagine ourselves. It is like looking in the mirror, except that we have crafted our reflection. Indeed, there is some evidence that selfie-posters are more narcissistic and materialistic (Fox & Rooney, 2015; Sung, Kim, & Choi, 2018). Professionally we may wish to promote a different self-image and use different social media like Linked-In. On this particular social medium, we can also endorse others’ specific skills in the anticipation that they will reciprocate by endorsing our skills.

As the last example suggests, we are not the sole shapers of our brand image. Others can post photos of us or tag us in photos that show up on our social media pages. I have called such processes the co-construction of self (Belk, 2013) and Turkle (2011) calls this phenomenon the collaborative self. It is a practice that is especially prevalent during the formative years of adolescence (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). When others comment on our selfies and social media pages, they are adding “digital patina” that generally enhances the sense of external sanction for our self-representations (Davies, 2007; Odom Sellen, Harper, & Thereska 2012). Like the reciprocal endorsements on Linked-In, these mutual reinforcements help add the impression of impartial authentication of our beauty, wit, exciting lifestyle, and enjoyable persona. They are a form of affirmation-seeking as well as building the aggregate extended self as comprised of our self and our “besties” or best friends. As Côté (1996) notes, the historic shift has been from ascribed identity to achieved identity, to managed identity. I would add that it is now also often a co-managed identity.

One type of social media platform where we make special efforts to self-brand and stand out is on dating and hookup apps. When it is so easy to “swipe left” or “swipe right” and there is a seemingly endless stream of other “competitors,” it is tempting to photoshop our photos and exaggerate our profiles (Bogle 2008; Duguay, 2016; Liu, 2016). The result is increasing attention to bodily, corporeal, erotic or sexual capital (Hakim, 2011; Schwarz, 2010), especially by women, as well as economic capital, especially by men. Whereas other marketing promotions are intended to generate

sales and profits, such self-branding online involves attempts to establish erotic and economic capital that may not only enhance our ego or provide pleasure but may also be convertible into jobs, dates, money and other forms of symbolic capital (Belk, 2014).

4. Imitation

One further strategy consists not so much standing out, branding self, or even simply fitting in as it does trying to imitate admirable others in an effort to emulate and become like them. Advertising has long used attractive and celebrity others in an effort to provide alter egos onto which consumers may project themselves (e.g., McCracken, 1989). One key difference today is that there is a vastly increased array of people who are ostensibly just like us – regular people who have created a YouTube channel, a beauty blog, or an unboxing video. It is easy to imagine being just like them, and they often show us how (Cohen, 2005; Dean, 2010; Rettberg 2008). They can be influencers and microcelebrities thanks to such online presence (Marwick, 2015b; Pham, p. 2915). Following the Tumblr blog, *Rich Kids of Instagram* is just one example (Abidin 2018; Marwick, 2015a; Spieler, 2015). Like the late-comer adopters of cool products, those pursuing this strategy seek not be leaders, but followers of their online idols (Boon, 2013; Schwartz, 1996). Corporations, as well as individuals, have sometimes employed this strategy, with some success (Shenkar, 2010). Corporations are also active in hiring influencers to promote their products on their blogs (Galeotti & Goyal, 2009; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Li, Lai, & Chen, 2011; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

Another thing that differs in our online digital age is the seeming lack of distance between us and the celebrity or other wealthy others whose consumption lifestyle is not as resource-constrained as our own. Whereas we once imagined movie stars and sports stars to be so far “above” us that their consumption practices were unimaginably finer than our own, we can now imagine and sometimes actively pursue being just like them. Like the leaping luxury phenomenon, these people might be said to be aspiring to consume far above what some sober reckoning in light of their income would allow. But with credit and “populuxe” or democratized luxury they nevertheless strive in the direction of the consumption of their far richer target others (Danziger, 2005; Hine, 1986; Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Thomas, 2007).

There may be some cultural differences in the susceptibility to consumption imitation (Pham 2002). Choi, Lee, and Kim (2005) found that more than 57% of Korean television ads featured celebrity endorsers versus only about 9% of US ads. The authors attributed this to the greater value of harmony and group orientation in Asian societies versus Western societies. They also found that the Korean ads were much more likely to emphasize a sense of belonging and family than the more individualistically oriented US ads. Not surprisingly, Asians have been found to value fitting in more than standing out whereas the opposite tends to be true in the West (Markus & Kitayama, 2012). This also helps us understand the high frequency of ownership of the same brands of luxury handbags among young women in Japan (Chadha & Husband, 2006). Nevertheless, these patterns may paint culture with too broad a brush. Griffiths (2013), for example makes a strong argument that individualism is alive and well in China, but is expressed as individuality through connection rather than individuality through separation as is more common in the West.

5. Conclusion

Do the cultural differences between standing or versus fitting in Asia versus the West mean that we should not expect to sell radical fashions in Asia or conservative fashions in the West? No. We have only to look at the popularity of *kosupure* or costume play among the young in Japan's big cities to be convinced otherwise (e.g., Aoki 2001; Richie, 2003). We might note, however, that dressing up in these highly conspicuous costumes is done in the presence of others who are also doing the same thing at the same time and that the costumes tend to fall into genres that become common and recognizable. Clothing is still a language that must be decoded through the use of common symbols, even if these symbols may be inverted. And the presence of others, as well as certain times and places for display, assure that this is non-conformity among fellow non-conformists.

While there are surely cultural differences in the sanctioning of standing out versus fitting in, all cultures exhibit a range of fashions on this continuum. While it wasn't always this way, today females have greater fashion leeway than men. In heterosexual partnerships, it may be that female partners are more apt to stand out than male partners. Veblen (1899) observed something similar in the luxury display, with wives acting as vicarious displays of wealth and leisure for their more somber and hard-working husbands. Fashion, by its very nature, is about change. Today's mainstreaming of tattoos and business casual will surely fall by the wayside eventually. But what will not fade away is the continuum of standing out and fitting in, which together are the great engine of fashion.

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