

## Conference Paper

# Digital Post-Fashion: Transformation of Design Paradigm and Metamorphoses of Identity Practices

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### Abstract

In this digital age almost all cultural practices are experiencing changes; neither the fashion industry, nor the fashion itself as a form of social behaviour are exceptions. Fashion brands face the challenge of creating new discourses as fashion consumers are becoming more sophisticated and more individualistic at the same time, with their knowledge and imagination helping them to make conscious choices. This, in turn, affects fashion advertising and communication strategies: advertising campaigns use new discursive and narrative practices. A new emerging and developing design paradigm creates a "post-fashion." The phenomenon of post-fashion is associated with a deep focus on the consumers, and not so much on their needs, but on their fantasies and desires. Fashion becomes a social laboratory, helping us to decipher the mechanisms of identity building and more to understand more clearly current and future social changes. Remaining a creative industry, fashion enters the virtual space, setting new coordinates for the social imaginary of body, age and gender: that is, for all those identity parameters that are becoming increasingly vague today. This process exposes a new social imaginary, new imaginative structures and experiences. Post-fashion combines traditional elements (textiles, folk crafts and eco-production, as well as silhouette and form, and much more) with the new digital technologies in the creation and distribution of fashion products.

**Keywords:** fashion, digital age, digitalization, new technologies, tradition, innovation, social imaginary, social imagination

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## 1. Introduction

Digital platforms, social networks, augmented reality, telling of stories, fashion values, transmediality and cross-mediality of narratives become the tools for everyday use. Here several questions arise: how fashion uses these new technologies, how it adapts its language, which new business opportunities it finds: this set of questions concern the fashion industry. The second set of questions deals with fashion as a certain type of social behaviour and social imagination: these are the questions about the transformation of fashion's practices of imaginary. Studying how the social imaginary

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of fashion changes, we witness an interesting trend that can be termed “post-fashion”, similar to other “post” concepts.

In digital age fashion as a type of social behaviour and as a phenomenon of social imagination experiences changes that can be called a paradigm shift. Fashion discourse become not only an identity discourse, as it has always been, – now it becomes a discourse of conscious and directional identification. This substantially changes the designer strategies, as well as fashion communicative and visual strategies. The road from the consumer to the user transforms all cultural practices and creates a new paradigm of fashion design.

Contemporary situation is characterised by seemingly disparate phenomena: fashion’s environmental responsibility; re-assessment of historical and cultural heritage of famous fashion houses and those “soils” (to use the winemakers’ language) that have nourished their work; slow fashion tendencies; exploration of biomimetic fabrics, as well as “fashion tech” in general – all these trends does not contradict each other but, rather, indicate profound transformations in fashion. It seems that this transformation is tied to the profound user-orientation, and not so much to his/her vital needs but to his/her phantasms and desires. Consumer becomes user, and then co-producer, of a fashionable item: this leads to the development of prosumer world. Fashion as a phenomenon of social imagination becomes increasingly individualised – not only does it reflect its consumer, it also creates a new social imagination for our age and pre-visions and pre-determines new identification strategies. Today fashion becomes a social laboratory, allowing us to decipher modes of identity construction through personal style, choice and behavioural strategies of different generations; it also helps to see more clearly current and future social changes. Post-fashion combines traditional elements (textile, folk crafts and eco-production, local grounding, silhouette, form and many other aspects) with the new digitalizing technologies used to create and distribute the fashion products. While remaining a creative industry, it enters the digital space, creating new set of coordinates for the social imaginary of body, age and gender – that is, for all the identity parameters that today are becoming increasingly blurry. Research into this process shows a new social imaginary, new image structures and actions that determine our consciousness.

## 2. Research Methods

The main focus of this research into the phenomenon of social imagination are the processes in which fashion influences the parameters of subject identity and the identification process itself. The basis of the research are classical identity theories, from E.Erikson to performative approaches of H.Bhabha. In my previous work I have come to the conclusion that identity is re-presented as a social identity, its performative context is society, and its narrative is determined by cultural context. [1] Talking about group identity, we find ourselves in the discourse field permeated by the discussions of identity crisis, denigration of individuality in the contemporary culture and, finally, of the devaluation of values and value vacuum. In post-consumer culture we witness the changes in the schemes of identification processes, which can be understood through the comparison with the consumer culture: "... the various politics of Difference – the differences inherent in the various politics of "group identity" – have been made possible only by the tendential levelling of social Identity generated by consumer society." [2, p. 132]

However, what does it mean to say that social identity is levelled by consumer society? How does it happen and why; how does it influence identification strategies and, finally, the value dynamics?

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. The problem: post-identity as a lifestyle

In contemporary discourse the discussions of polyphonic, drifting, disconnected and multiple identity have become commonplace. But does it mean a total schizophrenia that has destroyed a holistic person, and does it mean a destabilisation of value system? Here it is important to distinguish between two different aspects. On the one hand, there is basic identity based on the structures of bodily schemes (*habitus*). This identity is non-reflexive in everyday life. A sane mentally stable person "controls" his/her body without reflection, by performing routine actions and controlling his/her physiological reactions, while preserving ability of sensory experience and pleasure. This identity is marked by sameness. This is a differing selfsame identity that constitutes a foundation and a condition of all cultural practices.

On the other hand, there is a basic social identity that depends on identification practices of a given culture. Jameson believes that all these "drifting" identities are

forms of representation, or non-recognition, of a basic social identity, which he calls the “autonomous ego”. As a result, basic identity, or autonomous ego, is a pure ability to act. This is a valid argument, since ability to act is what underlines sociality as such. It is based on the principle of difference. Pure activity affirms being, which is the being of culture. Therefore, identity as difference is a social identity, an activity.

At the same time, ego autonomy is inextricably connected to its bodily practices, including identification and representation practices: a body image is constructed depending on the established norms of transformation of cultural tradition. Now we can see, why Jameson writes about transformations of basic social identity in consumer culture – in the age of fashion, spectacle and media dominance. It does not mean the destruction of value system or vacuum as an empty space of nothingness. On the contrary, it means the adoption of cultural value through personal experience, a kind of interiorization of values and the corresponding changes.

Identification practices depend on the forms of representation, on the forms in which cultural experience is framed, which undergo considerable transformations in modernity. These transformations are linked to the change in structure of human activity. First, humans became consumers (which is a very well-researched topic), and then, in early 21st century, consumers become users, mostly because they have access to an information resource that cannot be acquired (transferred from the sphere of Alien to the sphere of Own): that is, cannot perform identification with the stream of information by using mechanisms of sameness.

Here Deleuze’s other-structure comes into play [3], but so to say, in a negative sense. As for the question of the other people, here identification practices cannot be perceived as one-directional. Philosophy has long explored this thesis, and the merit of discovery here belongs to E.Levinas. Levinas’s concept of the “face of the Other” engendered an entire range of new philosophical meanings; naturally, it had to influence the understanding of identity. Phenomenology, which purports to explore consciousness as intentionality and experience (E.Husserl), found its counter-intentionality in Levinas’s “face of the Other”. This is what remains invisible, unseen, in the end unrepresented, which is often concealed within the other human being, as well as within oneself. That is, the operation of validation is subtracted from the practical working of other-structure – there are always too many differences (which, according to Deleuze, we necessary experience), which cannot be validated or identified. Therefore, the other-structure constantly presents a choice to the self-identifying “I”, and not just a binary choice, but a choice field. Choice field influences all spheres of cultural practices, including, of course, fashion. Fashion provides the identifying Self with the modes of visual representation:

in contemporary situation they are mostly representation modes of individuality rather than of social status or rank. That is, we are dealing with the practices of differences.

Here we find an interesting problem of identification practices and policies in information society. Our contemporaries possess a considerably increasing freedom in their choice of cultural practices and, therefore, values and norms. Consequently, there is an increasing amount of working identification “matrices” or “patterns”, as well as the increasing distance towards the Other, towards the object. This is what Manuel Castells wrote about when he noted that distancing from an object intensified imaginary experiences. [4] This cursory remark is important; it needs to be addressed. Behind the imaginary experiences there are changes in relations to the primary basic identity of the body. These changes are tied to the transformations of social reality. In this regard, Castells proposes a theory of changing biological rhythms which conform, among other factors, to the information streams. From this it would be logical to explore somatic changes as such, as well as the changing images of basic identity, i.e. age, gender, profession.

The paradigm of contemporary fashion (and not only fashion) design is transformed within the context of transformation that leads from fashion to post-fashion, from the consumer to the user, from identification model of the way of life to the model of lifestyle. “There is a shift from the “way of life” to the “lifestyle” fashioning a new ideology of human existence through the entirety of existing stereotypical forms.” [5] Identification model is a system of images that frame idealised value positions for a relevant age.

The “way of life” model was based on static stable norms and value attitudes – that is, this identification model was based on the principle of sameness. It existed as a product of the collective imagination, as an artificial conventional structure produced through discourse practices. A way of life was based on the individual’s social status. The parameters of this identification model were more or less stable: such points of identity as gender, age, profession, religious denomination, ideology played an enormously important role. Within this model, techniques of image construction were simple, and the image itself served as a recognition device performing an operation of affiliation, of sameness. This model existed within the culture of production–consumption, which created fashion as a major social phenomenon performing, first and foremost, differentiation functions.

Within the production-consumption culture, body image and image as a representation of identity were symbols of status. Analysing the history of the European fashion, G.Lipovetsky [6] notes that the scheme of social change, which served as a key to understand fashion in almost all predecessor theories (from G.Tardes and G.Simmel

to J.Kavamura and L.Svendsen) cannot explain the fashion's main characteristic – its changeability. Lipovetsky believes that individual values performed the leading role in the history of fashion. Although I agree with the main thesis about the increasing role of individuality in the history of culture, it is important to note that within a way of life model fashion used to be an instrument that allowed to create a stable image that projected social status and prosperity. The demonstration of the value of individuality existed within stable, socially approved reputation image that guaranteed the sameness of identity within the allowed limits of difference. A good example of the way this identification model worked is found in a “star” industry, which created not only the images of stars themselves but also their popular profession.

The new lifestyle identification model develops when static identity model becomes dynamic. The concept of lifestyle demonstrates the value of individuality which does not perform the identity operation, every time demonstrating itself as a difference. A lifestyle operates through the pure cultural activity of the assertion of self as a unique cultural subject. Of course, this identification model also uses stereotypical forms, constructing ideology based on the existing social stereotypes and collective imagination. However, unlike the way of life mode, which utilizes narrative structure and rhetoric rules, the new identification model is represented as a performance.

Today it is an image transformation, not an image stability, that becomes a key to public success: the skills to be different, to show spontaneity and to re-create mainstream again and again become the most relevant symbolic capital. The fashion's main value, i.e. novelty, becomes a value of entire contemporary culture, and the identification processes also determine the value of novelty. The Diversity Paradigm that determines contemporary culture accentuates visual presentation; instead of internal differences, it pushes forward demonstrated differences (the society of spectacle by Guy Debord). The demonstration of diversity is its affirmation through the codes of cultural activity. This is why the mechanism of fashion functioning itself is transformed. In the post-consumer culture fashion stops being a dictator, it does not offer new shapes any more – rather, it offers new tactical images subject to change depending on the demands of situational self-representation. Thus, fashion becomes post-fashion, transforming itself and the designer paradigm.

### 3.2. Phenomenology of post-fashion: the new design paradigm and the performance of lifestyle

Design understood as a “object–form–style” triad [7] loses its middle element and its balanced triangulated structure tested through the centuries of Enlightenment rationality. The creation of fashionable things centres on the tactics through which users can demonstrate differences and spontaneity. Here are just a few examples that show relevant trends in fashion design as lifestyle design.

In 2016 New York showed the Coded Culture exhibition dedicated to digital technologies in fashion practices. This exhibition featured a lot of items of fashion design, including clothes, accessories and shoes with speech and movement sensors, pulse sensors etc. One of the exhibits was a Bioware dress created by Alison Tsai. The dress is made with haute couture technologies: handmade embroidery, use of feathers and jewellery and complex details confirm that this is a product of fashion design, and not just a new technological gadget. At the same time, the dress uses new technologies that, according to the designer, serve humans. Biowear has a built-in shoulder pulse sensor that register the model's state. When a model experiences stress or excitement, special motors connected to the sensors raise the feathers. As a result, a work of high fashion is able to transmit emotional state of a model who wears it. Visually this image conforms to cultural stereotypes: raised feathers create association with an excited bird that demonstrates its aggression. This image fits very well into the culture of diversity paradigm: it shows an emotional state, the dress becomes personalized, not just made for a specific model but a part of her everyday experience, a part of her lifestyle. The same exhibition also featured Melissa Coleman's Holy Dress with built-in polygraph detector sensors that turn on the led lights when a model lies.

These examples highlight an important trend in contemporary digital fashion design: the personalisation of clothing that produces external expression of emotions. It is a sign of considerable changes in identification practices, and the fundamental causes of such changes demonstrate the influence of the same digital, i.e. Internet, culture. Sherry Turkle believes that digital technologies have led us from the real communication into the loneliness [8]; however, it is also important to note that they have also created for us a virtual space of communication, in which we have learned to express our emotions. Today's fashion changes the emphasis from IQ to EQ becoming characterized by the attention to the body, to the emotions and feelings. In its new interaction, fashion design focuses on this trend. Both these examples not only expose the new trend but also demonstrate the new identification techniques and make the model a fashionable item's

co-creator, since only the model's emotional state can show the public the novelty of the represented garment.

However, human beings possess not only emotions and reactions, but also inner needs: for support, for approval, for safety. What can we do to offset the lack of genuine companionship? The solution was offered by the Dutch fashion designer Pauline van Dongen, who in 2017, at the SXSW festival of new technologies, presented an elegant denim jacket called *Issho*, capable of gently stroking the wearer's back. The jacket's fabric includes sensor threads that connect several sensors to the motorised details. When the sensors register touches to different parts of the jacket, the in-built component reacts, producing certain feedback touches at the back of the wearer's shoulders. They could be soft caress, light pressure or even a push to remind the wearer to correct their posture. "*Issho* motivates its owner to be more aware and to represent themselves through feelings that occur while the owner wears the garment," according to the personal communication from the designer. *Issho* works without a smartphone: according to its creators, it was a deliberate move to reduce gadget dependency in the use of interfaces. Smart jacket feels when it is being worn and communicates with its owner. This jacket design exposes the problem faced by our contemporaries, who experience acute loneliness while living in the conditions of total communication: the jacket's collar is high at the back, which, according to the designer, creates an additional sense of security.

Apart from the trend of emotional self-expression through clothing, another fast-developing trend is digital union between clothing designers and software programmers creating "useful" innovations. For example, spring 2017 jacket Levi's Commuter x Jacquard by Google is designed for the cyclists who want to always "be connected". Touchscreen panels are built into the sleeves of the jacket that can serve as a navigator, can be used to listen to and navigate music lists and answer the phone calls by simply touching a sleeve. A microphone can be used to dictate and immediately send letters. Smart patches are removable and should be detached before washing the garment. Here personalization and communication technologies go hand in hand with the increasingly popular healthy lifestyle. Indeed, athletic design was the first area to actively introduce the new technologies. Here we see an elimination of choice: there is no need to choose whether to go for a jog or answer urgent work letters, since the design allows to perform these actions at the same time. Design of athletic clothes uses personalization both as an expression of stylistic choices and for comfort and maximum efficiency of movement. The latest developments in 4D printing personalized both soles and upper parts of athletic shoes to give maximum efficiency to a concrete



user's athletic projects, while inbuilt sensors determine changing weather and bodily conditions and can autonomously fasten or unfasten a jacket, take off a hood when the rain stops or roll up the sleeves if it is too hot.

Apart from the technological innovations in design, fashion industry widely utilizes the new trends in fashion advertising and communication: screens built in bags, virtual dressing rooms and shop displays that show personalized image of a clothing item, and, finally, fully virtualized fashion collections that can be acquired for Instagram and never used in actual daily life. The latter examples demonstrate another post-fashion trend, in which fashion consumer stops consuming objects as such, becoming instead a consumer of social acceptance linked to these objects. Post-consumer culture clearly shows a tendency that M. Maffesoli termed "new tribalism": a culture, in which micro-social groups based on belonging become more important than any other forms of identity. [9] Here digital environment plays an important role. It facilitates the formation of micro-communities, in which fashion logic is transformed, since they lack fashion cycles well researched by sociologists (leaders, innovators, early majority, late majority and, finally, late minority). Micro-social group acceptance demands active participation and performance, while actual participation is possible only through the creative and communicative interaction.

## 4. Conclusion

All of this shows that post-fashion, while remaining an identification mechanism based on the functioning of social imaginary, clearly differs from fashion of the previous consumer age. These changes are characterised, first, by the technology-based innovation and creativity linked to the skill of forecasting the needs – what may be termed a practical personalized innovation oriented towards the consumer's desires and imaginary identities. Second, it is a creative adoption of innovations, their adaptation to the consumer's needs, fantasies and self-expression, a state of being attuned to one's somatic and emotional processes, – that is, these are identification strategies of self-expression through the adoption and exploration of innovations. All of these factors were never included in fashion mechanisms before.

Virtual clothes, virtual catwalks, virtual shops, smart objects, clothing equipped with neural processors, 3D printers and, finally, virtual communication and digital identity – all of this form a reality of our times. It is possible to state that in this reality digitalization of fashion influences not only the designers who create new products, but also the consumers/prosumers who use it. Digitalization of fashion influences the entire set of

practices: consumption, production, representation, individual and collective practices. Digitalization transforms design paradigm, which is shifting from image design to the digitalized, or intelligent, design. This new paradigm demands our understanding and research, and not only in fashion.

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