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APPLYING TRENDS TO DESIGN: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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1. Introduction

When technology and functionality are not enough to differentiate a product from its competitors, the product's visual appearance becomes a major driver of consumer preference [Cappetta et al. 2006]. Consequently it is clear that commercial success will result from consumer products that are both functionally sound and fulfil the visual desires of the consumer. But how do designers identify what is and will be attractive to the consumer, and how do they apply this to the styling of their products? Blumer [1969] observed that fashion designers working independently still create similar designs because of the signals that they are receiving from the marketplace. Coates [2003: 67] explains that this is because the designers are absorbing their contemporary aesthetic *zeitgeist* or "ghost or spirit of the times", and are capturing it in their products – not necessarily knowingly. Coates [2003: 67] also states that consumers "instinctively resonate harmoniously with any artefact that brings the zeitgeist to mind". Woudhuysen [2006: 21] suggests that "a partial mosaic of the future zeitgeist can be built from gathering data on forthcoming anniversaries, elections, sports fixtures, films, television specials etc". Designers appear to be able to identify or predict the trends that contribute to the zeitgeist and apply them to their products Understanding this ability is one that could prove valuable to designers and managers, but the subject area has not been directly covered in literature.

Gap: It is evident that physical products are increasingly becoming fashion based items. There is a substantial body of theory, built over the last 50 years, as applied to fashion. However, to date, little of this understanding has been applied to the design of physical consumer products. Thus, this paper seeks to address this gap, by synthesising seminal literature from fashion theory, taste, consumer behaviour, and product design.

2. The Study

In order to prevent ambiguity, some of the key vocabulary in this paper should be clarified. ***Trends*** will be fully explained as the paper progresses, but an initial working definition is *a direction of behaviour* [Sproles and Burns 1994: 12]. A manifestation of trends is a ***fashion***, which implies the temporary adoption of a given ***style***: "a characteristic mode of presentation that typifies several similar objects of the same category or class" [Sproles and Burns 1994: 7]. ***Diffusion*** is the mechanism by which fashions are collectively adopted by consumers [Midgley 1977].

This paper forms the initial descriptive part of a wider study which seeks to understand and make explicit as well as improve the way in which trends contribute to the styling of products. The study will later use multiple research methods, including case study interviews with designers and archival research in various consumer product sectors. This paper presents a framework that has been drawn from the literature (figure 5 at the end of the paper). The purpose of the framework is to explain how

designers are able to absorb signals from the market place and turn them into attractive, relevant products.

3. Origins of Trends

First to be considered are the originators of trends. These sit on a sliding scale of tangibility: at the tangible end of the scale is *commerce* which outputs very visible products which can provide a direct aesthetic influence on consumers and designers alike. At the other extreme is *social behaviour* which has an indirect influence on the propagation of trends and style changes.

3.1 Commerce

According to Sproles and Burns [1994], brands, manufacturers, designers, marketers and retailers, collectively described here as *commerce*, all play a role in initiating and sustaining styles. Famous designers such as Heidi Slimane, Karl Lagerfeld, Philippe Starck and Jonathan Ives have all created breakthrough trend-setting products, but this does not mean that they can design any object and expect it to sell. A new style cannot simply be "initiated and sustained at will" [Lloyd Jones 1991: 222] – the consumer still has the power to reject an item that is in "serious conflict with prevailing social attitudes" [Eckert and Stacey 2001: 128]. Manufacturing companies are also responsible for technological advancements that enable new functional possibilities, expensive styles being made more cheaply and hence more widely available.

3.2 People

Certain groups of people can be seen to create or adopt innovations earlier than others and thus form an important source of trendspotting information. The three main groups of interest to this study are *elite* consumers, *innovators* and *subcultures*.

Elite

Simmel's [1904/1957] upper class leadership theory stated that fashions began with the upper, wealthy classes before being imitated incrementally by the lower classes, which leads the former to abandon the style "as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate [it]" [Simmel 1957: 543]. There is evidence that this trickle-down leadership continues today – much of the leading fashion design on the catwalk and in the media, and also in product design, is initially elite-oriented [Sproles and Burns 1994] before being imitated further down the adoption chain. But the new elite opinion leaders are celebrities, sports stars, designers, and journalists rather than the aristocracy [Lloyd Jones 1991; Sproles and Burns 1994].

Innovators

Alternatively, "creative or innovative individuals" [Sproles and Burns 1994: 127] have the influence to shape the taste consensus across society. But they don't have to be the elites described previously. Blumer [1969: 281] argues that "not all prestigeful [sic] persons are innovators – and innovators are not necessarily persons with the highest prestige". They are just the people at different income levels, in different social classes who actively select and adopt innovations early and lead the direction of opinion among their peers. Innovativeness is an internal quality that will be discussed in section 4.

Subcultures

Minority groups such as skateboarders, African Americans, hippies, youth, urban, and ethnic minorities create and modify styles among themselves that are often then adopted across society [Sproles and Burns 1994]. Miller et al [1993] suggest that these groups have a lower concern for fashion risk, this is particularly the case with lower-class consumers since they have no "traditionally honoured social position to protect" [Sproles and Burns 1994: 127]. Subculturally led styles can stem from the traditional artefacts of the group (crafts, religious items) or new stylistic creations.

3.3 Culture and Society

Domestic and Foreign Culture

The cultural and societal activities which exist in the consumer's environment have a great influence on styles and tastes [Sproles and Burns 1994]. Sproles and Burns describe fashions and fads emerging from national celebrations, sporting events, scientific discoveries, widely publicised events in other countries, leisure activities, and arts and movies. Such events contribute to the current *zeitgeist* [Coates 2003; Woudhuysen 2006].

Social Behaviour and Attitudes

Changes in prevailing attitudes, economic situations and even the environment can lead to stylistic innovations. For example, in the early 1900s, when clerical jobs became available to women, this had a dramatic effect on women's fashion with a male styles – i.e. suits, collars and shirts – being adopted [Sproles and Burns 1994]. Another example is the US fuel shortage and price increase of the 1970s which Coates [2003] believes led to the popularity of small, aerodynamic and fuel efficient cars.

3.4 Impact on Product Design

Designers look to the behaviour and activities of the trend-origins that exist in the target consumer's environment. This may lead to identification of new or existing styles or behaviour that can influence the design of products.

4. Diffusion of Trends

Once a trend has been initiated, there are many theories that describe how it diffuses out across society. Miller et al [1993] compiled a review of these perspectives that was very comprehensive for its time; it references all of the main fashion theories and tries to classify them in a useful and meaningful way. Miller categorised the perspectives into the four quadrants shown in figure 1: between the external and internal forces acting on the consumer; and an individual or societal focus.
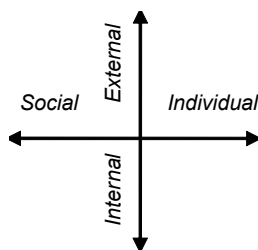

Figure 1. A representation of Miller et al's [1993] fashion perspectives

However, the theories are primarily focussed on clothing fashion; hence their relevance and implications may be different for consumer products. Nevertheless, it is widely agreed that the motivation to adopt a style can be applied to any commodity with visual qualities [Robinson 1975; Lloyd Jones 1991; Sproles and Burns 1994). In this section, the categorisations will be explained, along with some justification for each one. This will be followed by a summary of the implications of this work for product design.

4.1 External-individual

This first quadrant contains the single theory that consumers *learn* to like objects that are sufficiently different from familiar artefacts, but not too different [Sproles and Burns 1994]. Similarities between the new product and other products allow the consumer to understand and categorise the product [Coates 2003]. But, Coates' [2003] aesthetic balance states that attractive products must achieve a balance between familiarity and novelty.

4.2 External-social

The second external quadrant contains several theories that describe socio-cultural and commercial factors shaping the tastes of society. This certainly overlaps with the external origins introduced in section 3, and compliments the learning theory, in that these external activities provide the artefacts and imagery with which consumers can make comparisons and references [Sproles and Burns 1994]. The *market infrastructure model* states that through advertising, magazines and trade shows, and the obtainable stock in retail stores, industry essentially controls the range of styles that are widely available, so that consumers only have a limited window of choice in what style they adopt – unless they create their own [Eckert and Stacey 2000]. With improvements in the speed, coverage and volume of communication, the *mass-market model* suggests that retailers can rapidly make new styles widely available at different price points allowing access to innovative members of all socioeconomic classes [Sproles and Burns 1994].

4.3 Internal-individual

This quadrant contains *personal* perspectives that are concerned with the psychological motivations of the individual consumer. Sproles and Burns [1994] suggest that it is the desire for individuality which initiates trends (a characteristic of the *innovator*); once a fashion has been established, conformity drives consumers to imitate; while their desire for some degree of uniqueness explains the fringe variation of colours and details around the main trend, and which can also lead to the generation of new styles and the decline of the fashion. Other desires exist in this category: such as the value of scarce or rare items; the desire to be current; or the conspicuous consumption of expensive objects [Miller et al 1993].

4.4 Internal-social

Alternatively, the influence of other members of society, such as the elite or subcultural groups mentioned in section 3, can have an effect on the consumer's taste [Miller et al 1993]. Also the circles of people from whom the consumer chooses to take influence vary from broad circles to close friends, and two consumers may have very different opinions of a single influential person [Midgley 1977]. However, there is some discussion over the route which the innovation takes as it diffuses across society. Authors such as Robinson [1975] and Blumer [1969] are advocates of collective behaviour – suggesting that fashions are the result of a convergence between consumers over a specific style. Alternatively, in the work of authors such as Midgley [1977], diffusion of innovation could be described as analogous to chemical diffusion. This is because they describe individual consumers as having internal characteristics (like the chemical properties of a molecule) that define their response to an innovation, and they then modify or pass the innovation on to other consumers – depending on their influence – forming a chain reaction of adoption within a group (from innovator to laggard).

4.5 Impact on Product Design

This variety of factors that contribute to trend diffusion, alongside the origins of trends, can help designers to create a picture of the internal and external influences that are acting on the consumer. This sees the consumer existing within a society that is a mix of hierarchies, leaders and followers, with individuals displaying a balance of characteristics such as individuality and conformism. Society exists within a zeitgeist that is shaped by, but also contributes to, social, cultural and commercial forces. Next to be considered are the dynamics of these factors.

5. Evolution of Trends

Having identified the origins and diffusion of trends, this section examines how these sources can be turned into useful information for designers. By considering theoretical and historical evolution of product forms and styles, interesting patterns and characteristics of trends can be observed. This provides designers with a view of the dynamics – or lifecycles – of trends after they have been initiated. The standard product lifecycle curve [see Lloyd Jones 1991: 228] shows the simplest possible behaviour of an individual innovation while it is in the market, from *introduction*, through

growth and its peak at *maturity* and into *decline*. According to Lloyd Jones [1991], the actual lifecycle duration and behaviour will vary between styles and products as they are initiated and shaped along the way by other concurrent trends with varying lifecycles. When describing the lifecycle of a stylistic trend, different terms are often used to imply its duration and span of influence: table 1 classifies some of these terms found in literature. The lifecycles increase in duration from left to right, and at the same time the scope of influence widens [Lloyd Jones 1991].

Table 1. Fashion Trend lifecycles [Sproles 1994; Lloyd Jones 1991: 222]

Rages, crazes, manias, fads	Snowballs, stampedes, bandwagons	Trends, Vogues, fashions	Movements, styles	Tastes, customs
Trivial, ludicrous, transient, limited number of items affected, rapid growth, permanent decline		Fringe deviation from mainstream taste	Aesthetic refinement, intellectual calculation, slow change, wide-ranging influence	

5.1 Continuity

While there is some debate over the drivers of change in styles and fashions, one consistent factor throughout the literature is the concept of historical or cultural *continuity*. Continuity in fashion holds that successful new styles are rarely revolutionary, instead they are an "evolutionary outgrowth and elaboration of previously existing fashions" [Sproles and Burns 1994: 32]. Lowe and Lowe [1995: 205] argue that "most fashion flops have flaunted the principle of cultural continuity", and also that there are "inherent brakes on the rate at which fashion changes may occur". This relates back to the often reserved attitude that consumers hold toward change (discussed in section 4.5).

5.2 Cycles and Extremes

Furthermore, historical studies by authors such as Kroeber, Young and Carman suggest that fashion trends follow periodic cycles [Miller et al 1993]. More recently, Robinson [1975] has revisited this possibility, proposing that trends cycle between *extremes* – constraints that limit the continuation of a trend. These extremes can result from technological, anatomical, or just practical limitations. For example the roof-height of cars in 1950-60s America decreased each year until it reached an extreme low – exceeding which would make it impossible to fit an average driver inside at which point Robinson [1975] observed the rising popularity of smaller, taller cars and European imports, such as the Beetle.

5.3 Convergence

Another explanation for these fashion cycles is commercial convergence. This consensus can be observed through content analysis of archival media (i.e. tracking recurring images of a style in fashion magazines over a period of time [Cappetta et al. 2006; Robinson 1975]). Cappetta et al [2006] explain that after introduction of a new style, its media coverage will grow as a result of convergence between fine fashion companies; when the trend reaches its maturity, the companies begin to look to differentiate themselves and their divergence leads to the decline of the trend; at the same time new trends start and lead to further convergence.

5.4 Classics and Icons

Some products or styles do seem to remain popular beyond the extent of normal lifecycles – immune to market saturation, and the dangers of over-familiarity. These can be described as design *classics*. Sproles and Burns [1994: 172] attribute the success of classics in clothing to simplicity and versatility, their ability to fit with current styles and their enduring "traditional styling details". Coates' [2003: 151] definition differs slightly; he states that a classic acquires a "special kind of novelty" by departing from the norms, and redefining a product class. Coates explains that classics are characterised by being an *epochal innovation*: a new solution to an existing, or unfulfilled functional need; and/or a *seminal form*: a "new visual standard for a class of products" that "seeds a new trend that competitors

are obliged to follow". Coates adds that the downstream effect of a classic is imitation and adaptation by other designers. *Iconic* designs, on the other hand, according to Coates [2003], are products that are synonymous with an era. Crilly et al [2004: 567] describe how new products can "utilise nostalgic design cues" from past icons. However, Coates' [2003] states that "designers seem unable to purposely create [an icon]".

5.5 Impact on Product Design

Understanding the characteristics and lifecycles of trends can provide designers with a dynamic view of their target consumers and markets. This can allow the designers to respond appropriately by styling and timing the release of their products so that they have the desired impact. The strategic response to trends will be discussed next.

6. Design Strategy

Once the trends and styles have been identified, designers need to decide how to respond appropriately in the styling of their products. This section looks the approach that is established in the fashion industry, and then considers the options available to the designers of general physical products:

6.1 Style Evolution

Eckert and Stacey [2001] describe new season apparel being designed within an acceptable envelope to maintain the continuity of a style without making drastic changes that might suffer from a shortened lifecycle or rejection. Figure 2 explains how the boundaries are formed: the *conservative designs* are the existing products and styles in the market place; *novel designs* are the acceptable extensions of the current trend; and *irrelevant designs* are the risky, specialist or niche concepts that may not receive prolonged acceptance.
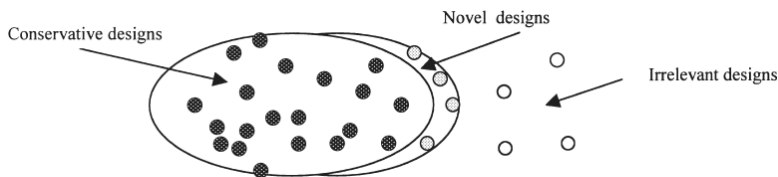
Figure 2. The envelope of acceptable designs [see Eckert and Stacey 2000: 526]

6.2 Impact on Product Design

Figure 2 introduced the possibility of visually articulating the deviation from, or the lagging behind of a trend. This understanding led to the creation of figure 3 – which presents all of the apparent options available to the designer when aware of a trend: following it by copying the format, or elements of it; reinterpreting it, by modifying it in some alternate direction; ignoring it; or opposing it, by deliberately doing the opposite.

Figure 3. Alternative responses to a trend

7. Framework Proposal and Conclusions

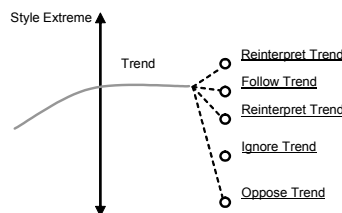Figure 4 shows the theoretical framework that has been generated from the literature exploration conducted for this study.
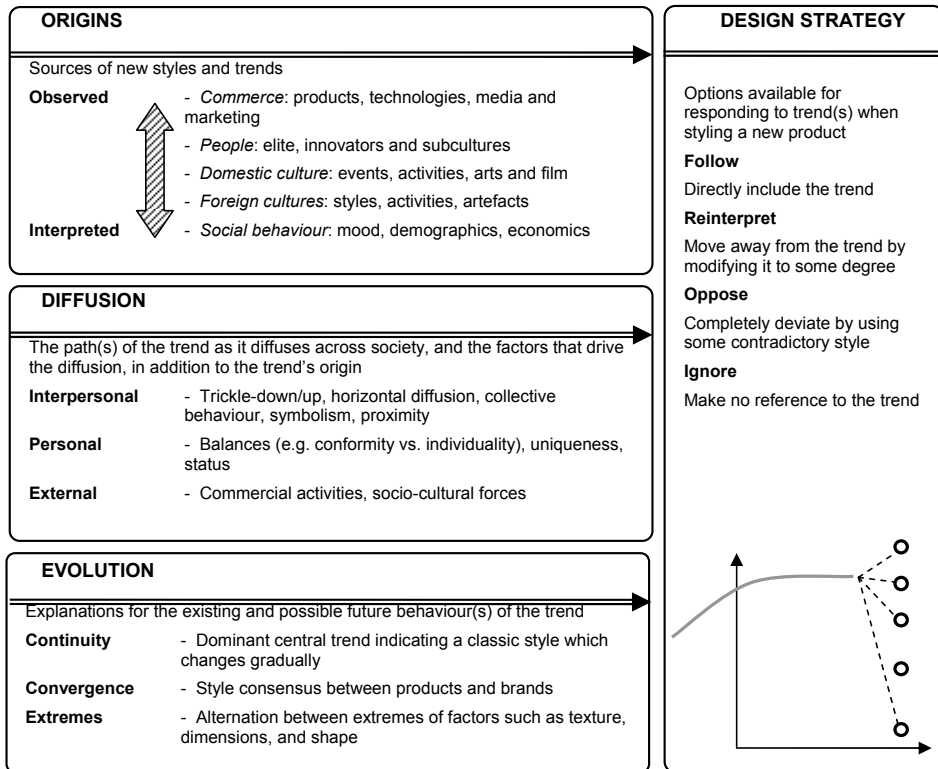

ORIGINS	DESIGN STRATEGY

Sources of new styles and trends
 	
Observed   - *Commerce*: products, technologies, media and marketing
   - *People*: elite, innovators and subcultures
   - *Domestic culture*: events, activities, arts and film
   - *Foreign cultures*: styles, activities, artefacts
Interpreted   - *Social behaviour*: mood, demographics, economics
	Options available for responding to trend(s) when styling a new product
	
	Follow
	Directly include the trend
	
	Reinterpret
	Move away from the trend by modifying it to some degree
	
	Oppose
	Completely deviate by using some contradictory style
	
	Ignore
	Make no reference to the trend

DIFFUSION

The path(s) of the trend as it diffuses across society, and the factors that drive the diffusion, in addition to the trend's origin

Interpersonal	- Trickle-down/up, horizontal diffusion, collective behaviour, symbolism, proximity
Personal	- Balances (e.g. conformity vs. individuality), uniqueness, status
External	- Commercial activities, socio-cultural forces

EVOLUTION

Explanations for the existing and possible future behaviour(s) of the trend

Continuity	- Dominant central trend indicating a classic style which changes gradually
Convergence	- Style consensus between products and brands
Extremes	- Alternation between extremes of factors such as texture, dimensions, and shape

Figure 4. The proposed trends framework for designers

The framework sees the origins, diffusion and evolution of trends that might inform designers' aesthetic decisions. By gathering and structuring information in these areas, it might be possible build a dynamic picture of a target segment. This moving viewpoint shows how the designer might envisage a product style that responds to the current or future zeitgeist. The framework then presents the options that appear to be available in reaction to a particular trend. The intention of the framework is to understand how designers consider and articulate the signals that they receive from culture and society and how these might influence their designs.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has drawn together various streams of literature in fashion, taste, consumer behaviour, and product design to form a novel theoretical understanding in the form of a conceptual framework. However, the framework only suggests possible thought processes that designers might use in identifying and applying trends to the development of their products. The next stage of the study is to test this understanding through contact with designers and trend researchers. This will allow the framework to be corrected and strengthened by real industrial practice. Working within very different product sectors (such as furniture, graphics, and consumer electronics) will also provide a comparative understanding of the relevance and usage of trends to each. This next phase of the study is underway.

Acknowledgement

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