

## Fast Fashion, Fast Shopping: a semiotic approach to practices of consumption of young consumers

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In this article I will sketch the first results of a research I am conducting, which is still in progress at Bologna University in Rimini

The research started three years ago and is divided in several steps. The step I am describing here was called *Fashion Shopping Awareness Project*.

The aim of the inquiry was to answer two questions:

1. Is semiotics an useful tool to study consumption behavior, in particular, fashion shopping? This implies to answer a critical question about the semiotic method: what is it and how are we to use it?
2. Which role does fashion shopping play in that complex process we can define 'dressing behavior', a process that, in its turn, is just a part of social life in general?

I will treat shortly, in this communication, the question of method. A complete discussion will be published with the final outcome of the research.

I will then present the first results of the research my staff and I conducted with my class from January to April 2007, a so called 'basic inquiry' on the data we have just collected.

The research involved a class of young (mostly female) consumers. They accepted to work on their own consumption behavior. We divided the shopping process into separate steps and asked them to describe each step while they were actually performing it.

In the second stage, we are analyzing the texts thus produced by means of different semiotic tools.

Let me explain why I chose such a method.

### A short methodological outline: the approach of social sciences

In social sciences (where Semiotics is placed), it is widely accepted that observation changes the observed object.

It changes it in two ways.

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1. The inquirer's eye has an effect on the perception of the phenomena she observes. As the eye of the same person looks at the food in a different way whether he is hungry or full, so the inquirer's eye, in observing phenomena, in particular social phenomena, is loaded with culture, knowledge, intentions and other elements that bend and filter what the senses certify. Of course, if perception itself is culturally and psychologically biased, all further judgements will carry a similar load. This subjective bias is not avoidable in social sciences.
2. The object observed by social sciences is humans beings. The results of social research are used to plan social actions, and, at the same time, are (mass) communicated. Thus, the results of social sciences bounce on society and cause reactions that, in their turn, change the observed object. This is very clear in fashion: elements collected from the streets ('street styles', or actual social dressing behaviors) by cool hunters are milled by creatives, forecasters and marketing strategists, propped up by the media flow and mapped onto products that, in their turn, are selected and worn by consumers that are observed in the streets.
3. Such interactional bias might be avoided if social research would be kept useless and segregated from the industrial system, but this would strongly weaken any research, in a short time.

If we frankly consider these two points, we become aware of two essential facts:

- a) social research is reflective, it implies an observation of ourselves as inquirers, mirrored in our method, goals and results. Any research will produce a change in the researcher's awareness, and the collected data are just a part of this change. Social research is always 'meta-research', that is, research on method.
- b) any social research that produces public or widely shared results is an action, has a pragmatic outcome. The researcher may, or may not, be conscious of the effects of her inquiry, but this does not prevent the effects from taking place.

Therefore, if a group of researchers take themselves as the object to study, and, during the inquiry, share the results of their self-observation, they are just following the traditional method of social sciences, though in a more concentrated and, so to say, short-circuited way. This model has two main consequences:

**First**, the observer will be forced to play two roles, as he will be both subject and object of the inquiry. Will the reflective nature of research come in full light?

After a first fast reading of the data, almost all the observers in our research report that they discovered sides of themselves they were not aware of. Yet, it does not emerge almost any awareness that the observing grid and method have in any way distorted the object of observation.

**Second**, this method brings each one to compare her own behavior and her own way of observing with that of the others. This is strongly perceived by the students, and many of them were surprised to discover that some traits of their shopping behavior were shared by others. This brought them to compare their own way of shopping with the other's, and in many cases to change it. It was a clear case of social negotiation of functional and ethical behaviors.

The product of this process is thus an increment of awareness. This research aims to detect and evaluate the awareness change in the group of observers-observed.

## The semiotic view

In general, fashion shopping appears to the 'semiotic eye'<sup>2</sup> as a complex behavior, prepared, accompanied and followed by continuous reflection and judgment. This semiotic behavior can be described (and it is often actually described by consumers) as a narrative which fits the attantial structure and the canonical narrative schema<sup>3</sup>. We have translated the four steps of the canonical narrative schema in as many steps of the shopping process.

**Manipulation**, traditionally, is the step when the Hero is convinced to embark in the venture. It may be the king that promises his daughter's hand and half of his kingdom to the one who will kill the dragon, or 'M', James Bond's boss, who assigns him a new mission. In shopping, we considered as manipulative the phase when the consumer's desire is attracted by some fashion good. The agent of manipulation is, of course, of crucial importance.

**Competence** is the step when the Hero receives the instruments to perform the enterprise. Like King Arthur who extracts the sword from the rock or Bond who receives from M5's engineers his shooting pen or walkie-talkie shoe or the famous Aston Martin with machine guns behind the tail lights. In shopping, competence regards the acquisition of the purchasing power (money or the support of parents) and the knowledge of the best PoS (Point of Sale) to patronize and so on.

**Performance** is the actual execution of the undertaking by the Hero. In shopping it is the actual walk from one PoS to the other, observing, trying on, leaving or buying.

**Sanction** is when the sanctioner, usually (but not always) the same agent that manipulated the hero, acknowledges that the hero has performed the enterprise and awards him the prize: the princess's hand and half of the kingdom. Bond used to award himself a love holiday with the Bond-girl of the movie.

In shopping, sanction has two main actors: the customer herself, who evaluates her own purchase, and the social environment (significant others) where she is going to wear her new clothes and accessories.

The whole process of fashion shopping is, in this approach, the behavior by which individuals build and change their social dressing appearance, which is, in its turn, a part of their social image, more or less important, depending on life style, social events, personality and so on.

The semiotic approach allows us to go deeper in the shopping behavior self-description. Shopping behavior has at the same time a psychological and a social side,

2 Semiotics, as well as other social/human sciences, has no specific part of experience as its field of study, like, for instance, chemistry. Semiotics considers any phenomenon as it is represented by human beings, that is, under its phenomenological appearance. This is often expressed by the metaphor of 'semiotic eye'.

3 For these and other concepts related to analysis of narrative see A. J. Greimas, J. Courtes, Larry Crist, Daniel Patte *Semiotics and Language, An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Original edition: A. J. Greimas, J. Courtes, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris, Hachette, 1979. For an introduction see Pozzato, M.P., *Analisi del testo*, Roma, Carocci, 2001

as it happens with discourses. Typically, discourse is the space where the Self continuously negotiates with the social environment. Semiotics puts under the category of 'discourse' both observed behaviors and inner reflections. Semiotics deals with discourses when and only when they are fixed into texts. Thus, the two crucial points in the analysis are: a) the identification of discourses and their environmental setting (space and time where discourses take place); b) the passage from discourses to texts, or 'text production'. Semiotics has reflected on text production more than any other social science, and this allows semioticians to work on texts with quite a light heart, knowing how critical it is to pass from experience to description.

## Some results

The first results show that our sample (Italian, young, learned, fashion-wise, low spending capacity, female students) practice a frequent and strong impulsive purchase of Fast Fashion<sup>4</sup> and unbranded items, together with desire and (more limited) reflective purchase of more expensive prêt-à-porter goods.

Fast Fashion PoS are put almost at the same level as marketplaces, where they shop frequently, and where you can find low fast Fashion brands and unbranded items.

This 'fast shopping' behavior is described by many subjects as an important practice with a goal which is not, as we might expect, aimed at a social sanction, but, firstly, at an inner approval that, if positive, produces a 'good feeling', which is depicted with terms that go from 'relax' to 'joy'.

If we observe it only from a behavioral point of view, fashion shopping (in our sample) seems to slip into patterns typical of mass consumption goods. Yet, if we look deeper, this 'fast shopping' behavior shows a deep involvement of the subject in the attainment of **inner ethical and emotional states**.

Moving deeper to investigate the choice of Fast Fashion PoS and brands, the evidence is even more interesting. The subjects do not express any difference between low prêt-à-porter, Fast Fashion brands and unbranded goods found on marketplaces, apart from the price. The difference is expressed only when we come to luxury brands as Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Dior, Prada, which live a separate life as dream goods or incarnate in exceptional purchases (graduation, birthday gifts).

One more step shows us that this indifference is negotiated in the social interaction and discourse. Some problems emerge (Zara does not 'fit', in Italian: 'non veste') but the social environment the subjects live in has a strong need for fashion goods, and this demand gives Fast Fashion brands the passport to enter with full rights the Fashion realm.

The outfits and wardrobes (that in semiotic terms are the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions) resulting from this consumption behavior combine low price Fast Fashion items with prêt-à-porter and luxury ones, particularly accessories (handbags, belts).

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<sup>4</sup> Fast Fashion is a system of production and distribution for fashion items characterized by: reduction of the cycle from 40-50 week to 5-10 weeks; primary emphasis on speed with fashion, and quality secondary; streamlining of the full cycle from concept to store; quick daily, weekly decisions; continuous flow of products, with small frequent shipments; continuous feedback from stores and reaction to consumer; consumer pull, quick replenishment; demand chain processes. Actually, almost any company adapts the model to its particular purpose.

Another element which is confirmed by the research is the strong demand for handbags, that follows that of shoes, now steady, due to low prices and strong offer.

Thus, the first **Object of Value** or goal for shopping, as it comes out in the collected narratives, is the '**right purchase**' (which is not the traditional 'good deal'), regardless of its being impulsive or reflective, high or low priced.

But 'right purchase' is, in its turn, a **Use Narrative Program**, since it plays as a Helper in producing the final result of shopping, which is (in many cases), an **inner feeling**.

Shopping is described as a practice that '**makes you feel good**' or 'relax', 'puts you in a good mood'. According to many subjects, the 'wrong purchase' makes you feel guilty; if it took place, because of the high price; if it did not, for the lost chance.

The main opponent of the Subject in its effort to attain 'good feeling' is 'sense of guilt', that is a typical post-purchase feeling (or post not-purchase).

The element that surprised the research staff is how important appears to be **the inner, intimate side of consumption**, for such goods as clothes and accessories, regarded, not only by common sense but also by psychologists and sociologists, as the exterior, social part of the individual. Instead, purchase of fashion goods, in our sample, emerges as a complex behavior aimed at the agreement of rational and emotional values in order to attain a feeling of 'peace of mind'. In this feeling the pleasure of possessing some 'beautiful' thing goes along with a moral sanction to form a positive mix of desire and control.

### Strategic issues

At a strategic level, first results show that Fast Fashion is the answer to the fashion need great stylists have produced and contributed to spread among low spending capacity groups with strong fashion attitudes. Fast Fashion brands, particularly the top pair H&M and Zara, profit by the social diffusion of fashion.

This should sound as a warning for many producers. Zara, H&M, and other major and minor Fast Fashion brands are gaining costumers among young learned women, who will be faithful to the brands provided they follow their evolving consuming profile.

Such a strategy is already at work in top Fast Fashion firms, which expand their qualitative offer, moving towards higher positions and slowly increasing their prices. This is already putting prêt-à-porter under a pressure it cannot stand for long time. In their turn, Fast Fashion strong brands that move upward are exposed either to the risk of losing consumers in the low price segment or to that of overstressing their offer.

At the same time, this segment of consumers is getting used to low-price, high-frequency, impulsive shopping, and this means that fashion is slowly (slowly?) becoming like other consumption goods.

This research shows strong clues that low price fashion will constitute a steady segment of offer, the lower end of the fashion system, the upper end being high prêt-à-porter. Purchase, and, accordingly, outfits and wardrobes, combine low, middle and high price products, without any shame in wearing -for instance- Chanel shoes with an H&M overcoat and a D&G bag. Furthermore, the combinations of daily outfits the person can combine are thus enormously multiplied, giving any individual a vast range of choice, in a system that is more and more made of many contemporary fashions and not of a single one.

Of course quantitative research must be used if we want more affordable data to take strategic decisions.