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Social ape

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SOCIAL APE

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

By
Morgan Dione Harris
B.A., University of Alabama, 2002
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Abstract

“ Social Ape” is an investigation and rationalization of America’s obsession with consumption. As a designer, this battle between consumption and individualistic expression has been intriguing. It is a platform for questioning how the public processes information supplied by marketing and advertising, resulting visually in interpretations of this information. It seems fascinating that even though consumers are constantly bombarded by persuasive propaganda, they feel in control of their purchasing decisions. To this end, I am using fashion as a tool for investigation. Fashion is a powerful commodity, representing identity and status, and thus fueling consumption and expression.

Introduction

“Fashion seeks constantly to get those attuned to its symbolic movements, to alter their virtual identities, to relinquish one image of self in favor of another, to cause what was until then thought ugly, to be seen as beautiful and vice versa”

–Fred Davis, author of *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*

Growing up in America means you are blessed with many privileges. Privileges of wealth and possibilities that youths in other countries only dream about, enabling freedoms to be, think, feel, and choose. With all of our freedoms and privileges, growing up in America also means that you are part of a culture of consumers. Not only are you a part of this culture, but you are the central hub that fuels consumerism and growth.

America’s youth become social apes, copying the roles that society has already dictated to them, as well as the identities of others around them. Open to the elements of a frequently changing environment, and with constant exposure to advertising trends, they are unknowingly persuaded to recycle their identities in order to remain a part of the popular culture.

Youths from tweens to twenty somethings represent the most powerful category in the retail market. Because their lives are so closely linked with the whims of popular culture, marketers spend millions of dollars communicating to them. Marketing executives collect any information about the lives of young people, from what they wear, to what they drink and what they watch, in order to make their products popular. In fact, the advertising industry has become so good at this communication that the line between the corporate invented definition of youth and individual expression has become blurred.

The result of the media saturating us with advertising and celebrity is a loss of self. American culture has lost its imagination, thereby losing its very identity. This occurrence has become so heightened that even those who are responsible for the most prevalent creative outlets, such as television and film, have turned to producing reality programming and recreations of previously successful classics, demonstrating to their audience that creativity is no longer admirable or attainable. For instance, MTV and VHI, stations once admired and sought out for their display of new thinking, are now merely reality programming and nostalgia venues. Teaching the youths of America that if at all possible one should not strive to be different but should do what is known to work. Therefore, in a sense, we have become the blind leading the blind.

Since young people spend so much time absorbing advertising, they are constantly fed the man-made ideal of who they are, making it difficult to decipher where their world ends and the invented world begins. Young girls are told by watching icons like Britney Spears that being pretty and sexy will result in success and empowerment. Young men have role models similar to the cast of Jack Ass telling them that impulsive, testosterone-driven behavior will gain them acceptance. By closely monitoring the predicted behavior, people begin to emulate what they see as acceptable, believing that they are not merely being sold to, but are making individual decisions.

This sort of cyclical correlation between creator and consumer can now be clearly observed in the fashion industry. Representing one of the largest consumer industries, fashion is a perfect example of this relationship as it is an industry that is constantly changing and reliant on trends and endorsement. Just as one trend begins to spread throughout the population,

designers are beginning to observe and analyze the public, looking to find inspiring styles for the next new trend.

Consequently, this cultural obsession with identity and fashion forces America's youth to be the same. Fashion feeds the need to be identified and accepted, with its parasitic processes. By taking original styles, adapting and mass-producing them, then introducing them to the consuming public, fashion becomes a template for instant popularity and approval. As long as industry leaders get inspiration from individual style leaders, those leaders are in turn forced to reinvent themselves, as their own style becomes duplicated. Thus, as the cycle is driven we continue to lose more and more of our identity, and become assimilated into an automaton culture.

So where is the line drawn between consumption and expression? Is it simply that Americas youth are not given a chance to discover who they really are because any new invention of self is eventually capitalized upon? "Social Ape" is an endeavor to investigate this cycle, to see if individuals are simply rising and falling from one position to the next, from creation to obsolescence, or if there is an actual beginning or end to this generation's creative expression.

Tribal Belonging

“You wanted to be a member of the most powerful clique in school. If I wasn’t already the head of it, I’d want the same thing.”

–Heather Chandler, *Heathers*, 1989

Our consumer culture has turned fashion into nonverbal communication. We use these commodities to send out messages about who we are, about our personalities and our lifestyles. Fashion has become so much a part of our lives that it separates us into tribe-like groupings. We behave as though we belong in archaic tribes, bracketing ourselves together with others that look familiar so that we can have some sort of connection with what is socially appropriate, a sense of belonging.

This occurrence has always been omnipresent and always will be. It can be seen in teenagers whose ultimate goal in life is to be one of the in crowd, to sit at the cool table, and to be thought of as popular. However, it does not stop there. We eventually grow from wanting to be associated with the kids at the cool table to wanting to get into the hippest club or most exclusive restaurant; it’s all about status. Our clothing is our stratification marker. We use clothes as if they were a set of sumptuary laws dictating our relationships, affiliating us with those whom we deem acceptable and separating us from those who do not meet those standards. This fashion-driven caste system can also easily be seen on college campuses. Sit outside on any quad and you will see pretty young sorority girls with pearl earrings and designer clothing grouped with their baseball-cap and polo-shirt-wearing counterparts in one corner. A group of kids with tatty paint splattered clothes, from the art school in another. Then another for the hip-hop set with jerseys, oversized clothes and the latest tennis shoes.

Belonging has transformed fashion into a social classifier. To belong to a group means that you have been specifically marked with a label. People are no longer seen as individuals but as affiliates. As they relate themselves more to a specific fashion, they become more absorbed into the tribe. They become vacuous, relinquishing their imagination, and unknowingly teaching themselves to buy based on their label. The stratification has made it seem as though each group has been assigned pre-prepared Garanimals, making it foolproof and easy to be accepted.

Our culture is involved in a perplexing dichotomy wherein we want to belong to a specific group on one hand, but on the other we want to be the standout, to be unique among our fellow tribe members. This is where the self-deception begins. We convince ourselves that despite our desperate devotion to the group, we can still somehow manufacture an original style. Because of this, people truly believe that they are the creative ones and that all others are simply followers. This does not mean that we are a culture of self-absorbed people, but that we are searching for something tangible as a means of identification. No one wants to be thought of as unoriginal, but at the same time everyone wants to belong, to be accepted.

The Phases

“As a fashion designer, I was always aware that I was not an artist, because I was creating something that was made to be sold, marketed, used, and ultimately discarded.”

–Tom Ford

The type of ambivalent behavior that fashion creates is a result of its unremitting phases. Fashion constantly takes from itself and adds to itself with its wavelike rising and falling of adoration and abhorrence of style. This process that fashion takes on can be specifically mapped and divided up into six phases: they are introduction, leadership, visibility, conformity, saturation, and finally obsolescence.

The introduction phase is exactly what it appears to be; it is an introduction, a new trend beginning. This is the time in the cycle when everyone from the media, to buyers, to retailers decide which new design will be the “fashion that will set trends and be highly profitable for their stores.”¹ An event like Olympus Fashion Week is the perfect setting for this phase to begin. Designers from all of the major fashion capitals fight to have their work showcased here because they know that it will give them immeasurable exposure.

Fashion week is the perfect opportunity for young new designers to introduce an innovative and exciting design to the public. The weight of participating in an event of this caliber can be seen in the reality show Project Runway. Project Runway showcases the talent of the brightest and most eager designers from the most prestigious institutions, pitting them against one another to win the prize of a show in fashion week. Even though these designers have had an incredible education, and are very talented, they still go on this show simply to have the

¹ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 134.

opportunity to have a show in fashion week. This speaks volumes about the effect that this can have on an individual's work and shows that they know that it is an event that can make a person's career. As a result of this introduction, millions can see their work as the new must-have item.

The next phase in the development is leadership. In the same way as the introduction phase, this phase is all about the beginning of a trend. However, here the introduction is not from designer to industry leaders, but from fashion leaders to the remainder of the population. This is the time when those who are passionate about fashion become aware of and begin to adopt a new movement. Fashion leaders set the trend in motion; they are the blueprint from which the populace works. They are persons who begin to investigate and promote new fashions when others are becoming overwhelmed by fashions that are viewed as passé.

These fashion leaders are the tool that industry leaders use to advance their decisions. They have already invested in certain designs by saying that they are going to be popular; therefore they need for people to back up their prediction. This is where the fashion leaders role comes in to play. "The fluidity and openness of fashion leadership today makes it possible for the mass media, particularly the visual media of movies and television, to influence the direction of taste."² Members of the media are relying on the fashion leaders to begin a snowball effect, propelling the buying of a trend. They know that if people see specific individuals such as celebrities, wealthy fashion icons, or average style innovators wearing what is said to be popular, then it will actually become popular.

Continuing further in the phases we approach visibility. As seen in the first two phases, the prior phase fuels the next, and this phase is no exception. Because of the audaciousness of the

² Ibid., 148.

fashion leaders in phase two, the emerging style is now in a position to gain acceptance. This is an important step in the progression because this is where, “the anxieties of potential buyers are allayed by assurances in the fashion press and from the mouths of store salespersons that the new fashion is for everyone, that one needn’t be too thin, too tall, too young, too sexy, etc.

(depending on which attributes the fashion plays to) in order to wear it to good effects.”³ This reassurance is created because more often than not fashion leaders take it upon themselves to alter an emerging style to fit their preexisting sense of style. If the new style is no longer in its high fashion or couture state, then it is much easier for the public to adopt. The attributes that would have only been flattering to models are now non-existent, making the style non-threatening and acceptable to others.

This is the time in the phase when marketers work hard to communicate the attractiveness of their product. The style becomes like a celebrity. It is featured in important venues and is lavished on the glitterati in order to communicate that this is the new accepted state of being. Their hope is that the endorsement will prove beneficial and the new style will be embraced by the buying public, replacing all other styles, making them banal in the eyes of anyone significant.

The fourth phase, conformity, is the most commonly known. This phase is the beginning of the weakening of a style. Up to this point the style has most likely been altered by the fashion conscious, and has been pushed on the public numerous times in order to bring in the desired revenue. “This is where a style transcends the gap from mere novelty, fad, or passing fancy to true status as a more enduring and widespread fashion symbol.”⁴ The conformity phase is the physical manifestation of its name. People so desperately want to be seen as up to the popular

³ Ibid., 151.

⁴ Michael R. Solomon, *The Psychology of Fashion* (Lexington, Massachusetts/Toronto: D.C. Health and Company, 1985), 67.

standard as they are eager to be nourished by the message being fed. The result of the public's blind pursuit of acceptance is widespread conformity. Malls and boutiques carry the style, making it accessible to the masses, while at the same time allowing it to remain mainstream. This phase leads the way for the descending end of the process.

The end of the style arises with the emergence of the saturation phase. At this point in the process, the style has been used nearly to the point of exhaustion. It has traveled from an avant-garde to a mass-distributed existence. The key instance of style saturation occurs when “inventories build up as manufacturers and retailers are unable to register sales in nearly the same volume as in previous seasons.”⁵ As a result, the style is now available at a lower cost and is sold in wholesale venues such as discount warehouse stores and home shopping channels. Because it is now available at a lower prices, the market for the style changes. It is now adopted by those who are not as concerned about the context of the style and is therefore further removed from its initial state, allowing it to become increasingly less attractive. At the same time, because of the waning of the style, the members of the first two phases have lost interest in the style and have already begun to move on, vying to associate themselves with any new and interesting fashion movement.

The last stage in the process for style is obsolescence. At a time when not even clever marketing or reduced prices can attract buyers to the product, the style has reached its ultimate in despondency. It has been over exposed. Seen everywhere, adapted and manipulated, the style is now defunct. “No fashion dies until an acceptable alternative taking its place arises; but when

⁵ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 155.

this takes place, the genesis of a new fashion process has occurred.”⁶ The process is continually fuelling itself, so by the time the end has been reached, another style is beginning.

It is a very destructive cycle for those involved. One will never be able to adopt a style and keep it for too long. Everlasting acceptance is unattainable; individuals that are caught up in the cycle will constantly be subjected to self-reinvention. This is what is entertaining for those that are involved in the early steps of the process; however, for those that acclimate themselves to the style at its pinnacle, the only result is a lifetime of insipidity.

⁶ Solomon, *The Psychology of Fashion*, 67.

Opinion of the Masses

“Maybe in my next life, huh?” says Adrien Williams after first seeing the rich kids at an East coast country club.

“That’s not a life. It’s a J. Crew catalogue,” says her co-worker Joanne in response.

–*The In Crowd*, Warner Brothers Studios, 2000

To begin to obtain a better understanding regarding how America’s consumer culture has affected its youth, I approached numerous people to get their opinion on the matter. Once again I was exposed to an interesting duality wherein young people see themselves as being original in their dress while admittedly borrowing from the styles presented to them in the media.

The most widespread opinion that people have of themselves is that they are always the exception to the rule. As stated earlier, when speaking about the need for tribal belonging, no one wants to be seen as out of style, or as a social pariah. This need for acceptance is what drives our self-denial. Most people are aware of a few specific occurrences when it comes to fashion; however, everyone relates such occurrences to others and not themselves. One instance of this begins to surface when individuals are confronted with a question of self-definition.

Every person interviewed relates his or her identity to fashion in one form or another. The most common form of identification for women is by using a specific classifier or label. The most prevalent labels that women assign to themselves or associate themselves with are trendy, preppy, original, and eclectic; however, none of these labels are self-consuming, but are usually accompanied by an additional modifier.

For instance, a frequent statement uttered by women is that they are trendy but classic or trendy but original. Both of these ideas are contradictions of themselves, but the prior statement,

being the most pervasive, produces an interesting reflection of how people attempt to rationalize their identity. These women want to be thought of as contemporary fashion leaders, but at the same time they do not want to stand out too much, which is where the “classic” modifier adds to their ideal. By associating themselves with the classic brand, they allow themselves a buffer, a rationalization for being a follower. Therefore, even though they may be adherent to a trend, they will continue to remain suitable, as they are refined and elegant.

Another label that women tend to accompany with a classy modifier is “preppy”. This association, however, makes more sense, as it is not a contradiction used in order to promote oneself, but to augment their first style label. By using these two ideas as one, they are telling the world that they are affluent and well put together, while at the same time, stylish and elegant. This type of identification is usually used by individuals who are wary of venturing out into the unknown, and thus would rather remain within the confines of their comfort zone. Preppy and classic styles are usually those that remain constant no matter what style emerges; therefore, if they belong to that group, then they will always remain fashionable. If somehow they had proven to make a wrong decision, however, a classy style can be used as their default, always leaving a safe option with which to retreat.

In the same way, the ideas of originality and eclecticism represent our desire to be prudently distinctive. All of the women that I spoke with believe and acknowledge that their sense of style defines them and communicates who they are. Therefore, this association forces them to make one of two realizations, that either they are conformist, subject to the whims of the fashion cycle, or that they are style inventors, constantly evolving and at the forefront of every style movement. Because all humans are subject to some level of innate narcissism, it is only natural to want to be considered the latter. Although simply classifying oneself as being original

is somewhat cliché, and hard to believe, it helps to propel denial and keep us secure in the notion that we are not dependent on others for inspiration, whereas association with an eclectic sense of style implies a more emboldened approach. If a woman is eclectic, she is inventive, because she has the imagination to use what is available to her to create a new style. Women coupled with this label are telling the world that they realize that fashion is essentially trite, but they have not reconciled themselves to that fact.

The young men that I interviewed related to fashion in different way, yet they still had some of the same concerns as the women. Similarly to women, men use clothing to communicate identity, but the message is much different. Every man was fervent in expressing his complete individuality. Men want to be seen as fashion conscious and stylish, but at the same time want to communicate independence. They want to be thought of as leaders. Because they link fashion with the concept of leadership, they are not as concerned about labels that group them with a specific style, but with labels that denote control and supremacy. Men use the adjectives “confident,” “contemporary,” and “urban” to describe their use of fashion. As long as their fashion communicates that they are sure of themselves, and up to date, they are content. In the same vein, the only style label that they assign to themselves speaks to their role as a leader. They feel that an urban image is suitable, because it reflects a metropolitan air. Urban is fast paced and nonchalant, but also says that they are constant and motivated.

Unlike the women, more of the men were willing to acknowledge that they had been coerced in some way to assume their urban dress. Though they were willing to admit this, they were not inclined to fully acquiesce to it. Men see any conformity as a subconscious effect, an unintentional reaction. Because they do not consciously take inspiration from other places, they cast off any relation to a specific style as irrelevant.

The Work

“Design is a plan for arranging elements in such a way as best to accomplish a particular purpose.”

–Charles Eames

Design is a process; it is about creating and solving problems. These are words that I have heard repeatedly throughout my design education and only now do they make sense. This has been the most difficult process that I have ever enacted. To endeavor to stage, create, invent, and discover essentially who you are is very taxing. This process has been draining and difficult at times, but revealing as well.

Primarily, what has made creating this work so arduous is self-reflection. As a result of this project, the way in which I view fashion, one of my great loves, was difficult. I had to acknowledge and work with my own faults concerning fashion, and design in order to make my work a success. The same pitfalls that surround fashion also engulf design. It is easy to design in a style that is popular because one knows that it will be well received by the audience. In the same way, it is just as easy to continue along a well-worn design path instead of consciously diverging from such a path. I myself have fallen into both traps.

As noted above, I began this process with a series of interviews. I spoke to several individuals- college students, teenagers, mall shoppers, and anyone else who wasn't intimidated to talk to me. My questions were surprisingly well received. I obtained a wealth of information about how we all see ourselves in this world. Fashion is a very minute aspect of life, yet, it can be a powerful symbol of self-definition and communication.

The interviews were used to inform my own study, delving into each person's identity and vision as it related to fashion. I already knew how I felt about the subject, but I wanted to make sure that I was not simply projecting my own thoughts and feelings about mass fashion onto other people. I developed a series of questions to gauge public opinion, using a different set for men and women. I made two separate questionnaires because I realized that men and women interpret fashion in different ways.

Although most men do not consider themselves clothing-conscious, they do consider themselves fashion conscious in one form or another. Since men associate non-clothing-related objects as being part of fashion, such as cars and music, I approached their questions as more of a mix of social experiences, whereas a women's inclination to know about and care about trends and appearances allowed me to concentrate on clothing. Therefore, I knew that with women I could immediately begin asking more thought-provoking questions about fashion. For instance, questions such as "how do you relate fashion to your identity?" or "how would you describe your personal style?" would not be difficult to answer because they are both questions that most women have more than likely considered previously. Conversely, a mix of questions about cars, music, and fashion could elicit responses from men on issues about which they may previously have had no conscious opinion.

As I spoke with people, I photographed them speaking and writing, focusing on their clothes and their faces. I found that I was drawn to closer shots of faces and expressions, shots that revealed feeling. I wanted this project to be about people, and wanted the audience to relate to them as such, so I tried to capture who they were. This goal made me focus more on personality, in order to discover why we project certain ideas of individuality and willingly accept endorsed messages. I had a fear that true individual personality would not come across, as

most people are wary of having their picture taken. However, most people were very friendly and happy to help, so as the discussion became comfortable, so did the documentation.

Lastly, there was the daunting task of translating all of this information into design. This project is as much about feeling and emotion as it is about identity, and I did not want for the design to be too complicated or to overpower the message. To do this, I categorized the work into three elements - photography, color, and type- leaving viewers to rely on their basic instincts to interpret the message. I want people to see faces and read feelings in typography, to be compelled to think of how they feel about their own use of fashion just by seeing other's interpretations. Most people don't think about falling into the traps of the fashion cycle, perhaps because it is too obvious and too difficult to alter, but I want this project to make people reflect, to make them observe people that look like them and relate.

Conclusion

Where is the line drawn between consumption and expression? What this project has helped me discover is that the solution lies within the person being asked. There are some who try very hard to be different, to make their mark on the world, and there are those who are content to follow and be accepted because they emulate what they are told is acceptable. Even though we are all consuming mass-produced goods, we are still expressing who we think that we are and are not concerned that others may be expressing the very same message.

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Appendix: Images



Gallery Shot 1



Gallery Shot 2



Gallery Shot 3



Gallery Shot 4



Gallery Shot 5

Vita

Morgan Harris was born on September 21, 1980, in Huntsville, Alabama. She grew up in a beautiful rural environment, surrounded by love and encouragement. When she was seventeen she moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to begin her college education at the University of Alabama. This is where, thanks to professors like Uta Krapft and Laura Lineberry, she discovered her love for more than just painting and drawing, but for graphic design as well. She received her bachelor of arts degree in graphic design from the University of Alabama in December of 2002. She will happily and unreservedly receive her Master of Fine Arts degree in May of 2006 from Louisiana State University, and from there will find an exciting, new adventure to pursue.