

# Retail and Fashion – A Happy Marriage? The Making of a Fashion Industry Research Design

By Cecilia Fredriksson

## Abstract

Fashion and retail ought to be a happy marriage. Yet several entrepreneurs in the field of fashion speak of a climate that is difficult to penetrate because of economic and cultural factors. For example, the chain store concept is an expression of the specific and current fashion situation in Sweden: democratic fashion that is cheap and accessible. At the same time, customers now demand personal, unique and ethical fashions. However, there are few possibilities in this climate for low cost development in progressive Swedish design. This article addresses the questions of how special trade conditions are reflected in the relationship between fashion and retail, and how different interests and values are expressed in the culture of Swedish fashion. To gain a deeper understanding of diverse working conditions and strategies, this article analyzes the culture of the Swedish fashion business as a narrative of different social and cultural processes. A conclusion drawn is that a cultural perspective on the oppositions between different practices and logics in the fashion business may contribute to mapping and managing these oppositions.

**Keywords:** fashion, retail, design, consumption, cultural economy, narrative, theme analysis

## Setting the Scene I

When Helen Svensson opened her own fashion store in February, a dream was at last fulfilled. Clothes, shoes and swimming had been important factors in her life. The girl from Höganäs, who was a swimmer in her youth, always had a great passion for clothes. After working in the fashion industry for her whole life, this store will be her greatest challenge. (*Helsingborgs Dagblad*, Spring 2008, my translation)

Fashion and retail ought to be a marriage as happy as the one in this story, which describes the dream many women have of opening a fashion store of their own. However, in reality, such an entrepreneurial business undertaking may more likely end in failure than success. Several entrepreneurs in the field of fashion speak of a climate that is difficult to penetrate because of economical and cultural factors. In Sweden, there are some important developments in the fashion industry, and fashion today has a strong position in Swedish contemporary culture. First, while there is little evidence of higher education among practitioners in the retail field, the science of fashion has even entered academia and most people in fashion design today have an academic degree. Second, reflecting standardisation and concentration, the chain store concept, with its cheap, accessible and democratic styles, has gained wide acceptance in Sweden.

Fashion studies is a new theoretical academic field that calls for constant development of knowledge and legitimacy. The world of fashion has often been described as an 'institutionalised system' (Craik 1994; Entwistle 2000, 2009; Kawamura 2005). In the fashion industry, there has been a clear development from powerful fashion influences on standardized ready-made clothing to a more diffuse contemporary fashion market where consumers have the freedom to make choices. The possibility of identity building through consumption also implies expectations for active and creative self-fulfilment (Douglas & Isherwood 1993; Fredriksson 1996; Brembeck & Ekström 2004; Johansson 2006; Mörck & Pettersson 2007; Ulver-Sneistrup 2008; Gradén & Peterson McIntyre 2009). The sociologist Diana Crane (1999) claims that the former, centralized fashion system has been transformed into a more decentralized fashion system, where fashion editors, consultants and consumers rule fashion to a far greater degree. And far from being simple distributors of goods, shops and other retail sites are active makers of goods, enactors of consumption worlds (Shove & Pantzar 2005; Warde 2005) and producers of value (Penaloza 1999; Kozinets, Sherry et al. 2002, 2004; Crewe 2003; Pettinger 2004). How will these new directions affect the actors in the retail and fashion industry? What cultural, societal and economic conditions are required to meet these increasing demands by the fashion market and by consumers?

In the fashion industry, the encounter between different oppositional forces and social positions is obvious. Fashion is a dynamic field of power that is connected by constant storytelling and conversations that define the present. How are these stories incorporated in the fashion organization? What story does the entrepreneur, the fashion journalist, the fashion photographer, the frontline worker or the

fashion manager tell? How do these stories connect to each other and how can the actors' increased awareness concerning different strategies develop the traditional structures of the fashion industry?

One significant trend is that the necessities of low cost development in the fashion industry allow little possibility for the growth of progressive Swedish design. In an industry where a few major players dominate the Swedish fashion culture, most newly graduated fashion designers begin their careers at the large retail chain stores, ruling out the possibility of owning a business of their own. The result is a fashion industry where new design seldom breaks through (Sundberg 2006).

Two general research issues of interest in this connection are the ways in which special trade conditions are reflected in the relationship between fashion and retail, and how different interests and values are expressed in the marketing of fashion. In order to gain a deeper understanding of these issues – the diverse working conditions and strategies in the fashion industry – I will analyze the Swedish fashion industry culture in connection with fashion and retail as scenes of various social and cultural processes. As empirical data for this study, I investigate some of the necessary conditions for entrepreneurship in fashion and design. From a starting position in cultural analysis, I examine the possibilities of a suitable research design.

### **Framing the Picture: The Market of Fashion**

The fashion market is constructed of various oppositional forces. These oppositions are the required conditions for, and the result of, fashion as an industry that is in constant change. The spread of oppositions is reflected in a constantly growing lifestyle industry where the very specific organisation of the fashion industry can illuminate contemporary working conditions. Therefore, an empirical focus on the interaction between the actors in the retail industry and the fashion industry is an important research avenue.

One method of studying such interaction is to use a narrative perspective in which narrative methods, as a research tool, assume that stories are useful for communication and sensemaking processes (cf; Adelswärd 1996; Boje 2001; Corvellec & Holmberg 2004; Boje et al. 2005; Johansson 2005; Mossberg & Nissen-Johansen 2006). From a management perspective, there is also widespread interest in mediating messages and strategies through storytelling (Czarniawska & Alvesson 1998; Czarniawska 1999). General fashion business narratives and specific sensemaking fashion stories offer an empirical basis for understanding the specific conditions of the fashion industry. Such narratives and stories are part of a constant sensemaking process as actors, in their ongoing dialogue, make reasonable interpretations of events in the organisation and its surrounding world (Weick 1995).

As already mentioned, in the last twenty years, the consumption of fashion and style trends has been viewed as a sensemaking, everyday life activity in lifestyle production, identity building and communication. Much individual activity concerns negotiations about the innumerable free choices available in the market. Furthermore, the market of fashion is considered an important arena for contemporary identity expression and identity construction. As a result, this close connection between identity and consumption increasingly expands the interactive lifestyle industry and changes the working conditions of actors who must transform commodities into individual lifestyles and fashion experiences (Sennett 1999; McRobbie 2003; Salomonsson 2005). In the so-called experience society (Pine & Gilmore 1999; O'Dell 2002), design has become an important key symbol of the change in the production of goods and services.

In Sweden there is a great confidence in the future growth of the design and lifestyle industry. The Swedish government proclaimed the year 2005 a *Year of Design* with the intention of showing how design could contribute to cultural development, economic growth, social welfare and ecological sustainability (Fredriksson 2005). In 2008, Stockholm University created the first Swedish professorial chair in Fashion Science and designated fashion as an academic subject.

The recent investments in fashion and design are the result of a new and strategic cooperation between culture, trade and industry. This cooperation may be interpreted as a symbolic union between culture and economy (Löfgren & Willim 2005), a cultural economy (du Gay & Pryke 2002; Amin & Thrift 2003) or an economization of culture (Fornäs 2001). Even in 'the new economy' of the 1990s, metaphors from the world of fashion were used. For example, the 'Catwalk economy' links the cultural aspects of business to the puffed-up fashion industry (Löfgren 2003), both of which are preoccupied with predicting the future. This design discourse is also an important tool for the transformation of traditional work into new trends in labour and production (Warhust, Thompson & Nickson 2009). Thus, given the consumption aesthetics of the experience society, it is important to develop a more critical attitude towards these aesthetics and toward the consequences of the new work ethics (Bauman 1998). How can these changing working conditions be connected with a general narrative of fashion industry discourse?

## **The Story of Fashion Industry**

While fashion is often analyzed as cultural practice and social processes (Steele 1997; Crane 2000; Aspers 2001; Kawamura 2005; Nilsson 2005; Frisell Ellburg 2008), it has more rarely been studied from an organization perspective. According to Bourdieu (1991, 1993), however, it is important to examine perspectives of production as well as perspectives of consumption. The connections between fashion as a social system, a cultural practice and a symbolic product are essential

components in the consumers' identity construction and in the working conditions of the fashion industry. One of the most basic transactions in the fashion industry is the encounter between frontline service workers and customers. Here, the purchase transaction transforms the abstract fashion system into specific and critical factors where service encounter, customer interaction and experience can be studied (Grönroos 2005; Corvellec & Lindquist 2005; Bäckström & Johansson 2005).

In the general media and in popular culture, fashion sensemaking processes are shaped as scenes that carry a specific meaning. A current example of such a scene is an episode in the well-known film, *The Devil Wears Prada*, where the tyrannical fashion magazine editor (Miranda, played by Meryl Streep) verbally punishes her new assistant. The very unfashionable assistant (Andrea, played by Anne Hathaway) giggles scornfully when the editor and her consultants struggle to choose between two identical blue belts. Miranda lectures harshly:

'This stuff'? Oh, okay. I see. You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select, I don't know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you're trying to tell the world you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back, but what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue. It's not turquoise. It's not lapis. It's actually cerulean. And you're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns and it was Yves Saint Laurent who showed cerulean military jackets.

I think we need a jacket here.

The cerulean quickly showed up in the collection of eight different designers. And then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic Casual Corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs. And it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing a sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room from a pile of 'stuff.'

This film scene impressively summarizes the encounter between different structures of meaning as well as legitimizes the processes of the fashion industry. By explaining all the knowledge behind the blue of Andrea's sweater, Miranda is simultaneously justifying the huge cultural and economic importance of fashion. The message is that no one should believe that he or she is indifferent to fashion, or is better than those who take fashion seriously. The scene also shows how the fashion industry works as it constantly struggles for respect and exclusivity. Guardians of the industry, including fashion magazine actors, play an important watchdog function. Additionally, although the fashion industry is a star system where the creative designer has the starring role (Kawamura 2005), there are social processes and collective agreements that award charismatic authority to designers in their stereotypical roles as creative geniuses. What happens when such a star system interacts with the retail side of the business?

## Fashion Business as Theme Analysis

My methodological approach to the fashion industry is based on an analysis of a number of cultural themes represented in business material, magazines and popular fiction like the empirical case above. Classic cultural analysis often takes as its point of departure the basic sensemaking themes in a culture or a phenomenon (Spradley 1980; Ehn & Löfgren 2001; Sunderland & Denny 2007). David Boje (2001) has developed this eclectic method into a well-established qualitative research method in management and organization research. The print media often publishes exclusive fashion reports, new fashion magazines constantly appear and new fashion books are published. What is the subject of those public conversations? How do these conversations reveal the interaction between the fashion industry and retail business?

After a brief scanning of the research field I identified the striking element of different success stories in relation to fashion and retail industry. Despite the rather minimal academic interest, I also found that fashion today is a common topic of public conversation in Sweden. Through a discursive reading a number of basic cultural themes, expressed as ‘statements’ in the Swedish fashion industry discourse were traced from a number of non-linear and fragmented common narratives. Together with 7 indepth interviews with fashion shop keepers (Fredriksson 2010), these statements became the empirical and theoretical starting point for the research design. The isolation of cultural themes resulted in a pattern of storylines presented below; units of cultural meaning that constitute empirical material for research. The statements reflect briefly some cultural values in the public conversation on fashion, design and retail business in Sweden today. The statements, which in further research will be turned down or developed into ‘microstoria analysis’ (Boje 2001), are as follows:

- 1) Taste is often disgust with the taste of others.
- 2) Style is about the things I do every day and can be incredibly varied. The main thing is that I’m true to myself.
- 3) Good design will last for a lifetime.
- 4) Fashion has always been the art of intuition.
- 5) Fashion and style have no roots in Sweden.
- 6) Retailers are mainly ruled by the stock market.
- 7) The fashion industry is a dirty industry.

### *1) Taste is often disgust with the taste of others (Pierre Bourdieu)*

Pierre Bourdieu (1991, 1993), who taught us the logic of distinction, has partly written the meta-narrative of fashion. According to Bourdieu, fashion and design depend on making distinctions. The ability to make distinctions is one of the most important assets in a consumption society. The market’s concern with the cultural status of trademarks that grow out of distinction projects leads to increasing prices

and stimulation of demand, while at the same time, cultural status is based on a contradictory relationship with the commercialism of selling.

*2) Style is about the things I do every day and can be incredibly varied. The main thing is that I'm true to myself. (Siemens' kitchen advertisement)*

We often describe ourselves in terms of style, taste and identity. The aesthetization of everyday life is a modern competence, which, in comparison with evaluative aesthetics, can be analyzed as individual skills (Featherstone 2007). Aesthetization skills are established in a society that offers individuals many ways to design and express their own lives. The aesthetization of everyday life includes our attitudes to our surroundings, to our homes and the people and objects we live with. Old hierarchies are turned upside-down, knowledge transforms into experiences and nothing is really good or bad any more, but rather a matter of interest.

*3) Good design will last for a lifetime. (Year of Design 2005)*

'But it shouldn't be possible to *buy* an identity today', the Swedish Minister of Culture argues.

Today, design is often described as something you could have more or less of. Good taste is harder to price. The cultural capital required for making the 'right compositions' can't be purchased as a lifestyle kit without reflection. Instead, contemporary consumption culture offers different possibilities for turning life into an aesthetic total project where clothes, habits and experiences together create an entire lifestyle. The possibility to *create* a lifestyle to *enjoy* presupposes an ability to *choose* from the offered abundance. These possibilities shape some of the cultural imperatives that modern consumers must handle.

*4) Fashion has always been the art of intuition. (National Council for Architecture, Form and Design)*

Fashion processes are often understood as present in a more or less glamorous obscurity, and no one seems to understand how and why different trends occur. However, the longing to reveal the secrets of fashion are not new since the magic of fashion has been in the focus of disclosure for a century. The Intuition Story is a specific gendered story, following the discourse on passionate consumption practice. Fashion is a phenomenon for predictions and forecasting, and this inherent dynamic is a crucial part in the forces of fashion structure.

*5) Fashion and style have no roots in Sweden. (Swedish fashion journalists)*

Some fashion journalists claim that the connecting link between our clothes and our creative history is missing in Sweden. Since the 'people into design' clarified that design is just a question of form, fashion was categorized as ornament and

decoration. When clothes turn into design, fashion has to be something that is 'fair, rational and non-commercial'.

'People in fashion have to stop apologizing for doing fashion', a journalist says.

*6) Retailers are mainly ruled by the stock market. (National Council for Architecture, Form and Design)*

Small entrepreneurs in the field of design indicate they have total exposure to market forces. Retail business fails as a channel for communication with consumers. Fashion is unfortunately regarded as a matter for market forces and this idea persists in the marketing area. It is almost impossible to establish a smaller design business, and fashion entrepreneurs are constantly reduced to the chain store concept. A turning point for 'fast fashion' is often discussed, as well as the lack of foresight and planning in the retail business.

*7) The fashion industry is a dirty industry. (Swedish fashion journalists)*

'Sustainability issues are not trendy, they are forever', says fashion researcher Mathilda Tham. The Sustainable Fashion Academy has an executive division for educating Swedish fashion and textile companies in sustainable branding. The explosion in over-design will, according to some trend analysts, be replaced by simplicity and quality.

'But consumers want more and more', says a retail manager, and adds: 'We can't know what consumers are thinking, but we measure how much we are selling.'

## **Setting the Scene II**

After this presentation of some cultural themes in the fashion and retail industry, I next focus on some of the the research questions. The sociologist Patrik Aspers (2001) has exhaustively analyzed markets from a phenomenological perspective. In a study of Swedish fashion photographers, Aspers shows that the fashion market consists of two different logics: 'the logic of arts' and 'the logic of economy'. The cultural meaning of these two logics is the basis for my interpretation of the isolated themes. I return to the opening quotation in this article and in accordance with my chosen research method, I trace a narrative from the newspaper article on Helen Svensson's passion for clothes and her dream of her own fashion store:

*A dream was fulfilled when she opened her own fashion store.*

This story describes a young woman's success in a tough fashion market. Several of the cultural themes are present in the story that communicates the meta-narrative of fashion and its mechanisms. In spite of the tough climate for entrepreneurs, Helen Svensson dared to realize her dream. In using a dream metaphor,

the implication is that this goal is unattainable for most people; such a success story, achieved in such a climate, shows the exclusivity and impact of fashion. This distinct gender-narrative (Mörck & Pettersson 2007b; Gradén & Petersson McIntyre 2009) also has to be analyzed in the context of the feminization of the fashion industry and the image of fashion as a ‘woman’s trap’ (Kawamura 2007).

Another story has the same theme. In the recently founded Swedish magazine, *Passion for Business*, a magazine for career women, the ‘queen of Swedish fashion’ Filippa Knutsson (Filippa K) expresses her thoughts about ‘the crisis, the new family and her plans for conquering the world’:

I have always been looking forward, aiming at the next level, and then I have worked hard to get us up there. To me, it has always been a matter of course that we should establish ourselves in Europe.

Filippa K, as a trademark, is often described, as the Swedish ‘wonder of fashion’. The trademark and Filippa Knutsson herself are inspirations for many women entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. Filippa Knutsson describes herself as a ‘barefoot designer’, meaning she is not a traditional designer. In the context of Swedish fashion, Filippa Knutsson combines the different logics of fashion and retail business. As one of the fixed stars in the Swedish fashion heaven, she is an important success story for design, fashion and retail. Her long-term thinking is part of her success story. The ‘dirty fashion industry’ is cleansed by her personal confessions of how she ‘lost her foothold during the fashion boom’. But with the advantage of an international background in a family of entrepreneurs, Filippa K is as an unattainable icon for most young women in Sweden with an interest in fashion. Filippa Knutsson describes her entrepreneurial spirit:

To me, it has always felt strange to apply for a job. For people with an entrepreneurial background, doing things in their own way is just something that runs in the blood. That’s just the way things are.

The contrast in these two different success stories – Helen Svensson and Filippa Knutsson – is evident in these narratives. The road to success differs, depending on whether you are born in an entrepreneurial family or if you have to succeed on your own. The success dream in these two stories is quite different as well: Helen Svensson dreams about her own fashion store and Filippa Knutsson dreams about European expansion. However, both women share the common attitude of passion. For example, the article about Filippa Knutsson is illustrated with a red development curve labelled ‘Filippa’s line of passion’, which is an illustration of the gendering of stories. Filippa Knutsson also states the importance of an active attitude towards the feminization of the fashion industry:

And I’m honest when I tell you that I have never felt that I was in an inferior position as a woman. Maybe it has something to do with the women-orientated fashion business. The world of fashion is after all a bit special.

There is a constant interaction between art, culture and the economy in contemporary fashion industry. The culture of retail business is a traditional and bureaucrat-

ic service organization that is often forced into self-reflection because of the relationships between results and tensions (Korszynsky 2002; Korszynsky & Lynne Macdonald 2009). Although the changing culture of work into the 'creative industry' produces new possibilities for self-expression, this industry is still characterized by low wages and insecure terms of employment (Fredriksson 1998; Leslie 2002; Mc Robbie 2004; Åmossa 2004).

### **Looking for the Microstoria of the Fashion Industry**

In the world of fashion, a cultural and creative identity is often more highly valued than money earned; it is obvious that the fashion industry produces a specific practice of self-expression. A cultural perspective on the interaction between different practices and logics in the fashion industry contributes to mapping and managing these oppositions.

In this article I have identified some of the cultural themes that will guide the continuing research process. When choosing the informants, designing questionnaires, preparing observations and collecting other empirical material, it is important to isolate and problemize the emerging themes. The inherent paradoxes between design, fashion and retail have to be analyzed as different logics within different systems. These cultural systems produce and reproduce different stereotype identities that the fashion industry has to manage.

In practice, those cultural stereotypes that produce claims on natural inherent characteristics, are often expressed in fashion design as 'the art of creation' and in retail as 'the art of selling'. Those characteristics represent two opposite logics that, as mentioned earlier, Aspers defines as 'the logic of arts' and 'the logic of economy'. But those characteristics imply even more meaning. As noted above, from a consumer perspective the art of creation can be interpreted as both a possibility and a cultural imperative. A cultural understanding of creation and selling as competences requires some contextualization because of the fact that the act of creation and the act of selling produce different practices in contemporary consumption culture. A positive pre-understanding of the idea of creation is connected to a more negative pre-understanding of the idea of selling. In the process of examining an appropriate research design, it is important to reflect on this relationship.

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