

Introduction

“You don’t buy clothes – you buy an identity.”

The model struts towards the battery of cameras, profile held slightly aloft, walking with the curious avian gait that has evolved to flatter the lines of her dress. She does not spare a glance for us mere mortals in the wings; her attention is utterly focused on the arsenal of lenses at the end of the catwalk, which will whirl her image into the global maelstrom of the media barely an instant after she has turned away.

She pauses at the end of her purposeful march, a thigh thrust forward, a hand on a jutting hip, smiling at last as the flashes crackle around her like summer lightning. When she has given her audience what they came for, she swivels imperiously, flinging a contemptuous vestige of inaccessibility in their direction, before marching just as determinedly back to the oxygen-starved planet where only models, fashion designers and billionaires live.

For many consumers, the model’s short stroll is the first image that springs to mind at the mention of the word ‘fashion’. The runway show – with its combination of creativity, glamour and artifice – is one of the elements that drive us, again and again, to buy clothes we don’t really need. It’s difficult to think of an industry that does not have recourse to marketing in one form or another, but only fashion has such an overbearing reliance on it. When clothes leave the factories where they are made, they are merely ‘garments’ or ‘apparel’. Only when the marketers get hold of them do they magically become ‘fashion’.

There is nothing trivial about fashion. Although there is little consensus on the figure, it is estimated that the amount spent on clothing, footwear and accessories around the world tops US\$1 trillion a year. According to Bain & Company, the global luxury goods market is currently worth US\$240 billion. Fashion and leather goods account for a large proportion of the sector, alongside perfumes and cosmetics sold under the licensed names of fashion designers. Watches and jewellery take care of the rest. This vast,

resilient industry is driven by a number of highly sophisticated marketing and branding techniques, which are well worth dissecting.

And it would be foolish of us to underestimate the importance of fashion in society. Clothes and accessories are expressions of how we feel, how we see ourselves – and how we wish to be treated by others. During my interview with the fashion photographer Vincent Peters (who has taken pictures of some of the most gorgeous people in the world, wearing some of the most expensive clothes), he said, ‘Fashion is too prevalent to be considered trivial. Even when you say you’re not interested in fashion, you’ve been forced to confront it. Fashion is everywhere. What you choose to wear or not to wear has become a political statement. You don’t buy clothes – you buy an identity.’

This identity is linked to brand values that have been communicated via marketing. Are you elegant, flighty, debonair, streetwise, intellectual, sexy ... or all of the above, depending on your mood? Don’t worry: we’ve got the outfit to match.

But it’s not only the outfit that is on offer. Over the past decade or so, fashion has stolen into every corner of the urban landscape. Our mobile phones, our cars, our kitchens, our choice of media and the places where we meet our friends – these, too, have become subject to the vagaries of fashion. It’s not enough to wear the clothes; you have to don the lifestyle, too. Fashion brands have encouraged this development by adding their names to a wide range of objects, fulfilling every imaginable function, and selling them in stores that resemble theme parks.

People will go to extreme lengths to consume fashion. Not so long ago, there was a clutch of articles about kids being mugged – even killed – for their sports shoes. While I was researching this book, an uncharacteristically sensationalist article in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* suggested that teenage girls were selling their bodies to raise enough cash to satisfy their addiction to fashion. On a less dramatic scale, few teenagers are unaware of the importance of the right brand, in the right colour, worn in the right way. And, as we’re all teenagers these days, adults are becoming just as obsessive. The caprices of fashion are both exasperating and alluring. Its alchemy is mysterious. Most people, even if they refuse to be seduced by it, are intrigued by fashion.

A different view

When I started working on this project, I could make no claims to being an expert. I was just your average trade hack, writing about complex but faintly geeky subjects such as marketing and the media.

My non-fashion background proved advantageous. I could ask naïve questions that a fashion journalist might not have dared to pose for fear of undermining their credibility. I was not in the pay of the industry I was analysing (unlike glossy magazine journalists, who are in thrall to their advertisers), so I could afford to be objective. My distance from the subject enabled me to regard it with a certain irony. I admit to the occasional smirk.

This was not an easy book to research. The fashion industry, as you might expect, can be haughty and insular, and suspicious of outsiders. It was unlikely to open its arms to a journalist who wanted to deconstruct its marketing strategies. The luxury brands, particularly, are built like chateaux, their elegant façades masking impressive battlements. At first I thought the public relations people working at brands such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton were merely dismissive. I was wrong – they were being tactical. Their inaccessibility is part and parcel of their image.

One thing is certain: fashion, even at the top end of the scale, is increasingly about big business. Designers are admirably creative people, but they work for an ever-shrinking number of global conglomerates. Under-performing brands are sold without a hint of remorse, no matter how talented and artistic the people behind them might be. The clothes a designer sends out on to the runway are worthless unless they increase sales of handbags, sunglasses and perfume. Thus, marketing has taken on a crucial significance, and no designer can afford to neglect it.

The designers are not always at ease with this situation. Lanvin designer Alber Elbaz – a man as softly spoken as he is sharply witty – relates an interesting anecdote. Elbaz learnt his craft working for the legendary American designer Geoffrey Beene. One day, Beene asked the young Alber what he thought of a particular dress. ‘It’s very commercial,’ Elbaz opined. Beene took him gently aside and said, ‘Alber, you must *never* say a dress is commercial. You must say it is *desirable*.’

Until recently, I considered myself almost immune to brands and their influence. I was certainly suspicious of designer brands that charged a fortune for their labels. I was convinced that their clothes were no better than those of any chain store. I scoffed when a well-known fashion journalist told me during the Paris collections, ‘I have two jackets with me, one from Zara and one from Martin Margiela. The Margiela jacket was probably five times the price of the Zara one – but I don’t mind, because I like what Margiela stands for.’

Working on this book enhanced my respect for fashion designers, past and present. There cannot be many creative professions in which you are expected to prove your talent with a large body of work at least every six months. In addition, many designers are involved not only with their own collections but also with those of other brands. Certainly, they have large design teams working alongside them – to imagine otherwise would be absurd – but they are the ones who take the flack if the press reception is chilly.

For those outside the industry, it’s probably easier to be cynical about fashion than it is to be admiring. As my research progressed, I found that I bounced like a pinball from one mindset to the other. I was surprised that many of the people involved in fashion marketing – the photographers, the art directors, the event organizers – retained a sense of humour about it. Yet they enjoyed grappling with an increasingly intellectual challenge. Apart from the stores they are sold in – and the bags we carry them home in – clothes have no packaging. They just sit on shelves, waiting mutely to be judged on their own appearance. All the packaging has to be done externally; otherwise, how would we know that this particular shirt represents a whole range of emotions and messages that we are supposed to be buying into?

Fashion branding may be an ephemeral business, but it is a complex and endlessly fascinating one. How does one turn a mere ‘garment’ into an object with seemingly mystical transformative powers? Well, let’s hear it from the experts.

Author’s Note: This book was originally written in 2005, with new editions in 2008 and 2012. The statistics and job titles quoted date from the period when the interviews and research were conducted. All quotes were taken from original interviews or conferences, unless otherwise stated in the text.