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Culture, structure, and the market interface: Exploring the networks of stylistic elements and houses in fashion

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how culture and social structure are intertwined in markets. Starting with the notion that markets are composed of both producers and cultural elements, a two-mode and dynamic social network approach is used to define social structure as a set of relations among producers through cultural elements, and culture as a set of relations among cultural elements through producers. The example of global high-end fashion in London, Milan, New York, and Paris between 2008 and 2013 is used. Data were gathered from a prestigious and influential design forecasting bureau which synthesized data about the stylistic elements selected twice-a-year by fashion houses for their collections. While at a granular level of analysis (looking at specific seasons), both stylistic elements and houses are less clustered than expected, they form in the long run a highly clustered structure, both culturally and socially. Intermediate-level analysis reveals that while elements are still less clustered than would be expected by chance, houses appear to some extent to be randomly clustered. This sheds light on a long-standing conundrum in fashion: why does it appear to be completely random, and yet highly legible?

1. Introduction

The "cultural turn" in sociology (Mohr & Friedland, 2008) saw a massive shift of attention towards cultural phenomena. This was accompanied by a methodological turn in which culture started being investigated with novel tools such as network analysis (McLean, 2016; Mohr, 1998; Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013; Pachucki & Breiger, 2010) that had traditionally been used to study patterns of relations among people and was now adopted to study relations among cultural elements such as words or concepts (Jones, Maoret, Massa, & Svejenova, 2012) or between cultural elements and people (Roth & Cointet, 2010). The use of network-based approaches to study both patterns in culture (its structure) and in social relations (the social structure) sheds new light on the age-old culture/structure conundrum: culture and social structure are interdependent, co-constitutive and co-evolving systems (Mohr & Duquenne, 1997) which can be represented as networks (White, 2008). However, the question of the type of relationship that links the constitutive nodes of these two networks remains (Gondal & McLean, 2013), notably *how* they are intertwined and intermingled (Godart & White, 2010; Mützel, 2009).

Markets offer a setting in which this question can be fruitfully explored. All markets have a social structural component that can be captured by looking at alliances formed among companies (Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999), collaborative teams of professionals (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008), or mobility patterns deployed across organizations (Godart, Shipilov, & Claes, 2014). In addition to this social structural dimension of competition, markets also have a cultural side. What the "culture of markets" actually means is ambiguous; it can refer either to the culture of market stakeholders—how they are socialized, what their beliefs and values are (Wherry, 2012)—or to the cultural aspects of producers' outputs. These aspects—for example design (Verganti, 2008) or media narratives (Kennedy,

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2008)—are crucial because they form the interface between the producers and the various audiences which evaluate them, such as consumers or peers (Cattani, Ferriani, & Allison, 2014; Godart & Claes, 2017). This exists in addition to the social structural components mentioned above (alliances, mobility, etc).

Although these cultural aspects of producers' output are present in all markets, they are particularly salient in creative industries such as fashion, film, and music (Caves, 2000). The study of cultural products—and of the firms that produce them—is a way to simultaneously understand the structure of social relations (social structure) and the structure of meanings (culture), essentially because the signs and meanings embodied in products ultimately connect customers and producers through chains of semiotic constructs (Barthes, 2006, [1967] 1983; Baudrillard, [1972] 1981; Mohr, 1998; Mohr and Friedland, 2008). In other words, customers buy cultural products not only for their use-value or function, but also (and mostly) for the meanings attached to them (Jarness, 2015). Producers' output in creative industries can be seen as "vessels of meanings that consumers acquire when they consume the object" (Holt, 1997: 328).

It follows that social structure in creative industries can be seen as the positioning of producers vis-à-vis their competitors; this positioning can be captured through their use of cultural elements such as movie or music genres, shapes, colors, fabrics etc. Culture on the other hand can be understood as how cultural elements are used. It is not an industry register (i.e., a list of elements) that forms culture, but rather how producers combine cultural elements and form a cultural structure from them. In network terms, the two-mode networks (Breiger, 1974) linking producers and cultural elements capture both social structure and culture. They are co-constituted and thus interconnected structures, each with its own logic.

Among the creative industries, fashion is a particularly salient empirical setting for understanding the joint structure of social relations and meanings because, first, fashion items are imbued with cultural elements—to the extent that some have argued that it constitutes a code (Davis, 1992)—and second, change happens more rapidly there than in seemingly comparable industries such as music (Ennis, 1992; Lena & Peterson, 2008), movies (Alvarez, Mazza, Pedersen, & Svejenova, 2005), or television (Bielby & Bielby, 1994) where change in cultural forms such as genres is comparatively slow.

Fashion houses—i.e., the organizations that produce fashion collections (Godart et al., 2014)—use stylistic elements to produce fashion items that will sell only if they are meaningful to customers. This is not to imply that fashion items (such as shirts, dresses, or coats) do not have functional uses—they do—but the utilitarian function of fashion items is overshadowed by their meaning (Crane, 2000; Davis, 1992). Faced with items presenting the same function, customers base their purchasing decision on aesthetic and stylistic cues, or may even purchase fashion items with no function (Holt, 1997).[1] In sum, looking at the production of fashion items is a way to assess the emergence of intertwined structures of meanings and relations.

To operationalize social structure and culture in the fashion market context, I rely on Breiger's (1974) use of social networks to model "duality." Building on Simmel's (1971) idea that duality (or dualism) is widespread in social life, Breiger looked at how a network composed of both persons and groups can be studied as either a network of persons connected through groups, or as a network of groups connected through persons. In social network terms, Breiger looked at how two-mode networks of individuals and groups can be analyzed as two one-mode networks on individuals and groups, respectively. This perspective was later expanded by Mohr and Duquenne (1997) to study the duality of culture and practices in poverty relief in New York between 1888 and 1917, and by Martin (2000) to look at how anthropomorphic animals are related to jobs in Richard Scarry's Busytown children books.

Specifically, I operationalize social structure as the social network formed by fashion houses through the selection of stylistic elements (trends) twice a year for fashion shows and collections, and the concept of culture as a social network of these same stylistic elements connected through fashion houses. Social structure and culture are the two single-mode sides of the two-mode network of fashion houses and stylistic elements.

Against this background, after specifying the relationship between social structure and culture in markets, the operationalization of the concepts of style and stylistic element is explained, and the data presented, based on the analysis of 14 fashion seasons between 2008 and 2013 in the four main fashion capitals of London, Milan, New York, and Paris. I then clarify the structural features of the relationships between stylistic elements and fashion houses, considering three different levels of analysis, aggregated (in which all fashion seasons are pooled), intermediary (in which seasons are pooled three by three), and granular (in which each season is considered separately). I focus on whole-network dynamics and do not discuss the impact of node-level measures of specific stylistic elements and fashion houses, nor their dyadic relations (Godart, 2015), two important topics which are nonetheless outside of the scope of this paper.

Although the fashion industry is used as a case to understand how two structures (of meanings and relations) are interrelated, along the way, a series of context-dependent problems are considered. Notably, I shed light on why and how fashion is seen to be characterized by seemingly irreconcilable aspects. While fashion houses' stylistic identities at the seasonal level seem to be clearly defined and adopted stylistic elements stay within commonly accepted boundaries (Cappetta, Cillo, & Ponti, 2006; Cillo & Verona, 2008), there is not only a "consuming death-wish" (König, 1973: 124) in fashion where stylistic randomness seems to prevail, but also a remarkable stylistic stability not only in the long run—in particular in recent decades where "retromania" (Reynolds, 2011) and the constant re-use of old stylistic elements rule the day—but also from season to season with the existence of the "ratchet effect" (Lieberson, 2000) where past trends drive current trends. Looking at different temporalities of stylistic dynamics helps to shed light on these apparent tensions.

[1] There is a whole literature here that I do not engage; specifically whether there is a homology between the elements used by fashion houses and those desired by customers. My sense, for what it is worth, is that this is a vipers' tangle from which once entered, escape is unlikely (see Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Wuggenig, 2007).