CHAPTER 5

FASHION KNOWLEDGE IN MASS PRODUCTION

Although elite styles are important to the formation of generalised dress styling trends, the elite fashions that appear in the mass media are inaccessible to most consumers. When people buy new mass produced clothing, they choose necessarily from the limited range of styles available in nearby retail stores that are also within their income-based price threshold. In turn, the styles available in retail stores are those styles that garment firms decide to manufacture. Since consumer choices are confined to the styles that are on offer, it is important to understand where the styling contained in everyday mass-produced clothing originates and how it relates to the fashion styles produced by elite designers. As Craik (1994:i) notes, the relationship between elite design and everyday fashion remains poorly understood.

By viewing fashion’s styling as forming structured spaces that link the elite fashion system to mass production, this chapter provides an account of the articulation of fashion knowledges into the production system. It explains how the fashion styles legitimated in the elite sector are appropriated to become the commodified styles in the mass production sector. The chapter demonstrates that the styles produced by the global garment manufacturing industries derive from elite fashion styles. It also shows how the protection of proprietary knowledge patterns the transmission of fashion ideas as they flow into the mass production system.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section theorises flows of fashion knowledge in the production system in terms of a combination of the fluidity or viscosity of the ideas that fashion expresses and the legal protections afforded to design originality. Section Two considers how the styles that will become mass fashions are identified. It establishes the logic behind the collective movement of fashion style trends. Section Three then traces the historical evolution of elite firms’ engagement with mass marketing, showing how that relationship has developed with changing

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1 This chapter ignores homemade and tailor-made clothes, second-hand markets, and Internet or mail order purchases, all of which are peripheral to its interest in fashion’s relations to mass production.
technologies, new social formations and an increasingly sophisticated comprehension of
the advantages bestowed by intellectual property rights. Section Four then describes
how firms external to the elite sector locate themselves in the stylistic frameworks led
by elite fashion, how they exploit the spaces created by elite fashions, and how their
interpretations and translations address consumer interest in different places and
different market segments. In Section Five different forms of engagement with the
mass-market are interpreted as constituting a hierarchy of authenticity stratified
vertically by levels of stylistic abstraction and horizontally by demarcated
fashionspaces. The chapter concludes that styling authenticity anchored by the elite
fashion system acts as a structuring power over the global mass production of clothing.

5.1 Capturing Fashion Knowledge

Once fashion ideas are privatised, they contain commercial value as knowledge-based
assets. Nevertheless, firms in the creative industries find it difficult to protect these
assets, despite the protections afforded by the regulation of intellectual property rights.
In the business of fashion, where the copying of ideas is rife, the central problem for
firms rich in design knowledge is not how to share knowledge (Gertler 2002) but how to
stop knowledge leaking out – how to prevent it from being exploited by competitors.
Accordingly, luxury firms’ have developed organisational structures and business
strategies designed to enclose knowledge assets. Conversely, mass market firms have
developed strategies designed to encourage the free flow of fashion knowledge.
Fashion industries are shaped by the problems of the ‘commons’ – the ease with which
designer firms collect ideas from the streets is reciprocated by the ease with which
street-level firms can adapt designers’ ideas for their own purposes.

5.1.1 The Protection of Complexity

Understanding fashion business requires therefore an understanding of the transmission
of fashion knowledge across space. Boisot (1998) understands the transmission of
knowledge, such as fashion ideas, as a flow constrained or facilitated by the idea’s
inherent complexity, which determines its relative viscosity or fluidity. Complex
knowledges are viscous, they are slow to diffuse, while codified or abstracted
knowledges are fluid and spread contagiously. In this way, more complex (elite)
fashion ideas enjoy more ‘natural’ protection from imitators than less complex fashion
ideas. Less codified, less abstracted ideas—such as those ideas contained in the complex, qualitatively rich and emotionally ambiguous creations of elite designers—are viscous and difficult to read or copy. Such ideas resist transmission. Generalised and easily codified ideas, such as simple fashion pronouncements (of what is ‘in’ this year), are more fluid and flow effortlessly through multiple avenues. The viscosity metaphor suggests that the velocity of movement and the breadth of the penetration of fashion ideas depend on their capacity for codification. From this perspective, elite firms can be seen as actively protecting their knowledge assets by promoting viscosity; that is, by creating fashion ideas that are so complex that imitation is very difficult, at least for the uninitiated. From this perspective, the appearance of impenetrable complexity in elite fashion can be seen as a competitive strategy.

5.1.2 The Transmission of Fashion Knowledge

As knowledge-rich firms protect the knowledge assets that are embodied in clothing through its design qualities, knowledge-poor firms attempt to capture that knowledge. Elite firms do not have the option of limiting fashion knowledge flows by restricting the flow of information, since media recognition is indispensable to their business models. In addition, the expansion of telecommunications technologies such as the internet has accelerated the ‘space of flows’ that transmit fashion ideas globally (Castells 1996, Virilio 1986).

The machinations of the elite fashion system are watched carefully by designers and production firms in multiple fashion markets across the world. This is facilitated by specialist fashion media (such as Women’s Wear Daily and Ragtrader magazines, and www.style.com or www.wsgn.com Internet sites) whose business is the dissemination of fashion information, for a price, to firms and individuals working in the fashion and clothing industries. Industry insiders also read voraciously the fashion magazines produced for general audiences. As in general readership magazines, the specialist industry media provides critical commentary on fashion — shows and events, reports of what celebrities are wearing, and reports on avant-garde street trends — that in aggregate provides a detailed picture of the fashion world, but that nevertheless contains highly codified (and therefore fluid, easily transmitted) information. Importantly, the

2 The price of subscription to such Internet sites (in the order of $AUD 1,000 per annum), makes these sources of information inaccessible to the general public.
media firms that circulate internal industry information are the same firms that produce
general readership fashion magazines (Table 3.2). This creates a common information
base across firms and individuals regardless of their relationship to the institutions of
fashion.

Some view the increasing volume of communications that characterise
contemporary social and economic change as flattening out geographical difference in a
manner that ‘annihilates’ space (Harvey 1990). However, the effects of
telecommunications innovations depend not only on the speed of transmission but also
on the rate and manner of the acceptance of the information it contains. Contemporary
media transmissions do not only speed up the diffusion of fashion ideas, but also change
the nature of the information that is publicly accessible. Television’s three-dimensional
depiction, for example, provides more information than a two-dimensional photography.
Similarly, the Internet has the capacity to transmit holograms. Despite relying on a real
world of material spatial fixity—the locations of wires, servers, and transmission
towers—advances in telecommunications tend to concentrate power over information
flows in central places (Kitchen 1998). These changes increase the fluidity of fashion
ideas and make it increasingly difficult for firms to contain them within institutional
boundaries.

5.2 Managing Fashion’s Uncertainty

Before examining the transmission of style trends beyond elite designer firms and into
the mass market, it is useful first to consider in more detail the mechanisms through
which firms select each season the designs that will become the fashion trend. Fashion
in its commercialised form is not a business activity based simply on exploiting
consumer interests and fads (Hirsch 1972), but is a business dedicated to the
development of strategies to mitigate the market uncertainty. To that end, fashion
businesses create mechanisms to predict the specific ideas that will be commercialised
each season. Because the emergence of general fashion trends is a social process, the
identification of style directions involves a socially embedded evaluation process
located in the fashion system, external to producer firms.
5.2.1 *Elite Fashion Shows as Peer Review*

Designers’ biannual catwalk shows are central to the process of identifying fashion directions. Through their high level of differentiation, the extreme or outlandish designs shown on the catwalk act as prototypes that highlight the differences between rival stylistic options. Shows are viewed by diverse audiences—including celebrities, critics, the media, fashion buyers and general audiences—and become the subject of debates about which fashion ideas will ‘work’ to generate mass sales. Fashion shows in this sense are the vehicles for the critical evaluation of new styles: they create a space for organised stylistic regeneration through peer review processes in which innovation is recognised and rewarded through professional and public recognition.

5.2.2 *The Role of the Cognoscenti*

Fashion evaluations are made by a social group of expert insiders—a self-proclaimed taste elite including designers, artists, journalists, photographers, models, celebrities and *flâneurs*—who perform collectively the task of identifying which designs are noteworthy and which designers are worthy of elite status. This elite, or fashion *cognoscenti*, provides the ‘aesthetic critique that facilitates upscale consumption’ (Zukin 1991:111).\(^3\) In Bourdieu’s (1993) terms, the *cognoscenti* can be conceived as operating in a field of fashion knowledge and in a socially and culturally privileged context (*habitus*), which breeds expertise by building cumulatively from an existing stylistic knowledge base.\(^4\) Through the interactions of this social strata, style cues and fashion trends are both developed and legitimised (Mort 1996). While there are no formal requirements for entry to this group, informal barriers are high, requiring a set of attributes—cultural capital—that is not easily acquired by outsiders (Bourdieu 1984).

The *cognoscenti* act as the gatekeepers of style: as they sift and percolate the array of styles presented at the opening of each new fashion season, their collective

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\(^3\) Bell and Valentine (1997:11) disagree, and accuse Zukin of ‘subsum(ing) cultural meaning under social and/or economic relations’. In Zukin’s defense, her analysis aimed to explore how cultural meaning frames economic relations.

\(^4\) For Bourdieu (1993), fields of knowledge are structured in a relational frame so that their composition at any point in time is determined by the complex relations between the agents within the field as well as through the intersection of the field (fashion) with related fields.
evaluations filter out less appealing styles and ordain a subset of styles as the chosen trends for the oncoming season. Perna (1987:35) sums up these interconnections at the institutional level:

The press and the designers watch the buyers; the buyers watch the designers, who in turn watch the buyers and the press ... the buyers, the designers and the press combine to determine what fashion choices the consumer will be offered next season.

Through this highly organised and collaborative filtering process, the industry focuses on particular style directions and eliminates less appealing styles.\(^5\) The process arrives eventually at a consensus on the parameters of acceptable styles for the next season. Because the evaluation process is collective and focused, the fashion forecasts emanating from different sources are never too far apart (Perna 1987). Since fashion accommodates multiple ideological sub-streams, there may be simultaneously fifty or more design themes that are deemed marketable in each season. This process sanctions and legitimises fashion trend expectations. These processes are the cutting edge of fashion and are place-specific: they occur in the Northern Hemisphere and in the central places of fashion.

5.2.3 Fashion Predictions and Uncertainty

While mass production firms are excluded from the elite’s assessment mechanisms, the style directions sanctioned at the elite level provide them with early market information. Although fashion-show based agreement is an imperfect mechanism and is often wrong (Blumer 1969), it is the only system-wide means by which actors in the fashion production can predict the fashion direction six months or a year in advance. Such information is crucial in the uncertain world of fashion marketing, since consumer responses to fashion are unpredictable and the behaviour of fashion markets can never be reduced to the mathematics of risk.\(^6\)

\(^5\) It is important to note that quantitative techniques for assessing consumer preferences cannot be applied at this early idea-generation stage.

\(^6\) Uncertainty is the condition where it is not possible to calculate the probability of an event occurring, usually because a situation is unique or the size of the group of interest is not known.
For risk-averse manufacturers, an agreed industry-wide fashion direction enables mass production to proceed as a set of variations on a shared theme. Mass market firms are quietly involved in supporting this process. *Marks and Spencer*, one of Britain’s major mass market clothing retailers, is a major sponsor of London Fashion Week. Similarly, the Chairperson of Australian Fashion Week is also the CEO of one of Australia’s largest mass clothing retailers, *Sussan Stores*. Both these firms specialise in following the fashion trend.

For more adventurous and knowledge-rich firms, product differentiation that diverges from the agreed direction increases the risk but also increases the likelihood of windfall gains if their designs strike an emotional chord and become fads. Since in the fashion industries successful deviations are emulated and quickly incorporated into the mainstream (Birnbaum 2000), aggregate production never strays too far from dominant styling direction. Nonetheless, diversions provide the momentum that propels fashion from season to season.

The result of these processes is widespread convergence of trend expectations, a synergy between consumer and firm expectations, and, though the media, coordination of consumer and firm expectations. The generalised fashion direction is therefore established in the fashion system rather than in the clothing production system. Moreover, the level of coordination has been made possible by technological advances in the communications and publishing industries that enable a global penetration of fashion information. Overall, by following the elite fashion systems’ predictions, the entire global production system has found a means to manage the uncertainty of fashion product markets.

### 5.2.4 Fashion Predictions and Production Planning

Fashion predictions are important because similar fashion trend expectations make mass production possible in organisational terms. For large mass producers operating in (Knight 1964:233). Risk can be calculated and transformed into the probability of an event occurring or not occurring. In sectors with more reliable consumer markets, mathematical risk models can be applied to market behaviour, the probabilities of different outcomes estimated, and the financial risks to investors quantified (Hacking 1991, Bernstein 1996). One explanation for poor investment rates in garment production in advanced economies is its resistance to reliable business risk analysis.
fashion-oriented markets, decisions about the next season’s styling must be made well before consumer reactions to new products are formed or known. Moreover, given the long production lead times in globalised production systems, production could not proceed without early agreement on the fashion direction. Birnbaum (2000) calculates that fashion production lead times range from 12 to 26 weeks, but if the manufacture of inputs to fashion specifications is included, a much longer time is required. Early selection of colour (the fashion ‘palette’) is crucial: chemical firms need time to develop dyes in fashion’s contemporary shades and to produce them in adequate quantities.7 The need to anticipate consumer’s fashion preferences is greater for firms with large volume production (the likes of The Gap or Liz Claiborne), because they cannot rely on purchasing inputs ‘off the shelf’ and have no choice but to assemble adequate quantities of inputs well in advance of production. They rely on predictions of the fashion direction rather than on actualised consumer tastes. Early decisions about product profiles are crucial also for the makers of inputs (fabrics, dyes and trims): they too reduce uncertainty by following the general fashion prediction and the lead of their major clients. Because they must commit to a fashion direction in advance, large firms must rely on the fashion media and their own marketing efforts to manufacture consumer interest in the fashion styles and colours they select.

In contrast, small firms operating ‘close to the market’ can wait and see which of the large firms’ styles catch on in the marketplace. However, since small firms working in the quick response sector purchase their inputs in relatively small volumes and as required, they are dependent on the colours and patterns of readily available inputs. If the makers of inputs follow fashion predictions, the small firm sector is locked into the stylistic directions set by the larger input supplier firms.8 Only small firms in the boutique ‘local designer’ sector, which can also access unique fabrics and trims, are in a position to avoid the pressures of mass fashion’s forward planning cycles.

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7 Until recently wool fabrics had to be dyed before sewing, while synthetic fabrics could be ‘piece dyed’ after manufacture. Therefore, wool has been harder to incorporate into fashion’s time imperatives.

8 By implication, the optimal size of a fashion firm is large enough to order specially made dyes and fabrics (to ensure differentiated products) but not so large as to influence the product profiles of suppliers (which would dissolve the advantage of differentiation by spreading the inputs to copyists).
To summarise, the elite fashion system establishes stylistic legitimacy and fashion predictions that enable mass production to proceed. Mass producers use such predictions to limit, manage and harness the uncertainty that is characteristic of fashion product markets. Fashion’s design demands reach back into the profiles of material inputs to configure the building blocks of production. These generate differences in the production imperatives faced by large and small firms. The practicalities of the process reinforce the tendency for both expectations and styles to converge across mass and elite markets.

5.3 The Transmission of Styles into the Mass Market

Commonly, the influence of elite design on mass production styles is described solely in terms of imitation, or the production of ‘fakes’ (Davis 1992, Coleridge 1988). This limited view under-values both the complexity and the significance of elite fashion’s relationship with the mass production system. The transmission of fashion knowledge from the elites to the wider production system is limited by its ‘natural’ viscosity, derived from the complexity of its constituent ideas, by its imperfect transmission, and by the effects of protection of intellectual property rights. As these strategies slow the flow of fashion knowledge to the mass production firms, they create opportunities for elite brands to deploy these knowledge-based powers and expand their influence into the mass market.

The massification of fashion within elite firms has advanced with broader changes in their position in global production networks and with increasing awareness of the power of fashion knowledge. Elite fashion’s progressively deepening engagement with the mass market through the twentieth century has been intertwined with technological innovations, industrial restructuring and the globalisation of markets and production structures. These changes are best introduced chronologically.  

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5.3.1 Sanctioned Copying

Before World War II, when elite fashion was anchored to Paris, sanctioned copying of Paris styles was a routine aspect of fashion. In the era of craft production, small tailoring firms could purchase the patterns for the latest Paris fashions to make replicas for their clients. Since production was barely mechanised, only a small number of such copies were ever made. Often the sale of dress patterns was linked to the marketing of fabrics, which at that time constituted the major cost component. Demand for copied ‘originals’ was stimulated by the emerging fashion magazine industry (Ohmann 1996).

Before the technologies of mass production had developed fully in the clothing sector, unsanctioned coping of clothing designs by firms outside the designer elite was not a serious problem for designers (Fine and Leopold 1993). At that time, Parisian designers’ position as the authorities of style was protected by closed relationships with fabric suppliers and by the technical limitations of both the fabric and clothing production processes. While clothing designs could be easily copied from pictures, fabric was difficult to copy and substitute fabrics were difficult to obtain (Korean and Japanese firms were yet to be a force in the market). Before World War 2, it was not uncommon for textiles interests to support *Haute Couture* design houses financially, since the demand for copied of Paris styles guaranteed demand for the fashion fabrics that were sold in conjunction with dress patterns.

The situation changed with technological improvements in textiles production, advances in media technologies (photocopying), the mechanisation of clothing production, and emergence of new entrants in the textiles industry. As the textiles industries that emerged in Japan and Korea in the 1930s became more technologically sophisticated, they began producing fabrics that could be used as substitutes for the (relatively expensive) French fabrics that accompanied Paris designs. This undermined the guarantee of fabric sales associated with sanctioned copies of Paris designs, and so undermined the economic relationship between elite design houses and textiles firms.

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10 Today, sophisticated composition analysis makes it easier copy fabrics. Nevertheless, elite firms still use fabrics that are difficult to copy and fabrics that are protected by patents (such as Dupont’s *Lycra*).
5.3.2 Licensing

With changes in the distribution sector, especially the emergence of Department Stores as centres of fashion, designers became involved in widespread licensing of the garment designs (Fine and Leopold 1993, Chapter 4)). With the mechanisation of sewing, the single copies made by dressmakers were replaced by multiple copies, made in local factories for specific Department stores.\footnote{Sewing machines were operating in factories from the 1890’s (Frances 1993), but fully electrified Taylorist production did not emerge until after World War I.}

Figure 5.1 Sanctioned Copying
Source: Perna (1987)
Copying of Parisian styles by Department stores in the United States and Japan became widespread before World War II and continued into the 1980s. Marketers made no apologies for the products being direct copies of Paris and Rome originals (see Figure 5.1). Improvements in communications and production technologies reduced progressively the time lag between the first Paris showing of an original design and its arrival in American department stores. By 1960, Paris’s August styles were flown to New York on August 23, presented in New York as ‘copied Paris originals’ on September 5, and introduced in ‘popular priced’ department store versions just a week later (King 1981 [1963]). In a long-standing tradition, design houses frequently modified their design, within limits, to accommodate Department store buyers’ wishes (Davis 1992:153). Such minor adaptations responded to retail buyers’ detailed local-level knowledge of consumer tastes. Licensing Department stores to produce multiple copies both perpetuated and transformed the sanctioning copy industry. Licensing developed in tandem with the introduction of mass production technologies (electric sewing machines and factory-based employment) that enabled large numbers of copies to be made in a short time. Designers (who were then based mainly in Paris) were generally not involved in production activities or quality control. The social and physical distance between designer’s elite Paris clientele and New York shoppers was so great that designers’ licensed copies were considered a minor aspect of Haute Couture.

The history of sanctioned copying reveals that the commercialised mass production fashion industries were from their inception (at the advent of electric sewing machines) and with Paris designers’ complicity, copyists and imitators devoid, largely, of independent stylistic innovation. The development of mass garment production in the twentieth century clothing industries is framed, therefore, by elite designers’ uninterrupted authority in matters of style.

5.3.3 Ready-to-Wear Designer Ranges

By diversifying into producing ready-to-wear garments in the late 1960s, elite designers and their production allies sought to capture a stake in the emerging mass markets that relied on copies of their designs.12 While more affordable than designers’ catwalk

12 Pierre Cardin pioneered Ready-to-Wear in 1959. Yves St. Laurent began his Ready-to-Wear label Rive Gauche in 1966 and opened his own retail outlets the following year, Ungaro’s
originals, designer ready-to-wear products remain exclusive. For example, ready-to-
wear outfits by *Armani* and *Costume National* featured in the January 2002 Australian
edition of *Marie Claire* magazine were priced at $AUD1600, and $AUD2675 respectively.\(^\text{13}\) Prices such as these reinforce exclusivity and create scarcity value (Hirsch 1977).

Like *Haute Couture*, the central sources of value in ready-to-wear collections are
aesthetic qualities (style) and related social status appeals that are activated by the
cultural knowledge of consumers. The high prices these garment attract derive from
their luxury status, the value of their design inputs, the quality of their production, and
the costs of acquiring and reproducing fashion knowledge. Ready-to-Wear garments
have become a lucrative aspect of elite business, attracting net margins of between 25% and 50% (Moore *et al* 2000).

Ready-to-wear production has contributed to the gradual transformation of the
relationship between the exclusive designs shown at Parisian fashion parades and the
commercialised designs sold to middle income consumers. By the 1960s, elite fashion
collections contained routinely a handful of garments that were designed to appeal to
consumers and which were amenable to mass manufacture (Davis 1992:152). The
emergence of ready-to-wear narrowed the distinction between elite and commercial
fashion and created a bridge between the aesthetic concerns of elite design and the
economics of everyday fashion. In this transformation, many elite designers (often
reluctantly, according to Agins 1999) became chief executives of own-brand ready-to-
wear fashion businesses.

5.3.4 *Diffusion Lines*

Designers’ exclusive ready-to-wear ranges remain too highly priced for less affluent
consumers, but through the media’s power of image creation, lower income groups also
desire such garments. As global changes in the textiles sector make copied fabrics more
widely available, and with the development of mass production techniques, elite firms’

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\(^{13}\) Since the Average Weekly Earnings of adult Australian women were approximately $AUD 700 per week (ABS 2001c), the styles featured in magazines were beyond the means of average households.
ready-to-wear businesses were threatened by copyists that made passable versions of their designs.\textsuperscript{14} To combat the copy industry and extend their own brand depth and market share, commercialised elite firms began producing cheaper versions of their own designs in what are known as ‘bridge’ or ‘diffusion’ lines.

Diffusion lines exploit the appeal of elite styling by offering fully sanctioned but inferior rendering of elite designs. These garments are usually designed and produced by a separate ‘second’ team of design personnel charged with designing garments in the style of an elite designer. The resulting styles are reminiscent of, but not the same as, the designer’s work (Agins 1999). Most fashion design firms expanded in the 1970s and 1980s from ready-to-wear to multiple ‘diffusion’ lines. Table 5.1 lists a selection of these labels.

Table 5.1 Couture, Designer Ready-to-Wear and Diffusion Lines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couture</th>
<th>Ready-to-Wear</th>
<th>Diffusion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prada</td>
<td>Prada</td>
<td>Mui Mui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Lauren</td>
<td>Ralph Lauren</td>
<td>Polo/Polo Jeans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yves St. Laurent</td>
<td>YSL</td>
<td>Rive Gauche</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dolce e Gabbana</td>
<td>Dolce e Gabbana</td>
<td>D &amp; G</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgio Armani</td>
<td>Le Collezione</td>
<td>Emporio Armani</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donna Karan</td>
<td>Donna Karan Signature</td>
<td>DKNY</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anne Klein</td>
<td>Anne Klein</td>
<td>Anne Klein II</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenzo</td>
<td>Kenzo</td>
<td>Jeans Jungle</td>
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Because the garment styles generated for diffusion lines are produced with the designer’s permission, they can be close to the original ready-to-wear product in stylistic terms. To protect the exclusivity of higher priced ready-to-wear ranges, diffusion garments are recognisably inferior, and incorporate lesser quality fabrics, trims and styling components (jackets are unlined, for example). They also have lower

\textsuperscript{14} Attempts to restrict fabric trade have relied on border protection to stem commodity flows, through the Multi-Fibre Arrangement. The intellectual property contained in fabrics is more difficult to protect. For example, DuPont is able to prevent the use of Lycra fabric, but has no power to prevent the production of technically similar spandex fabric.
production quality standards and simpler construction, so their production costs are lower compared to Ready-to-Wear. These styles are also likely to be manufactured at low cost (low wage) sites, where potential copyists with limited knowledge of fashion will encounter only a second-rate version of the original. Diffusion brands ride on the media profile and status of their parent styles, targeting less prestigious segments of the consumer market and tapping into new strata of effective demand – but without encroaching on the luxury market. They encourage further segmentation of the product market by consciously marking out multiple levels of quality within stylistic specialisations.

Because they combine robust demand with budget production, the net margins of diffusion lines are higher than ready-to-wear, estimated at between 60% and 85% of costs (Moore et al 2000). Diffusion has become an important source of revenue for elite sector firms: for example, in 1996, $4.7 billion (12%) of Donna Karan’s revenue was from its bridge line DKNY, while only $US 1 billion derived from the elite Donna Karan range (Agins 1999). Armani’s diffusion line, Armani Exchange, which is sold chain stores in the United States, accounts for about 15% of Armani’s business. Diffusion lines rely on the controlled and sanctioned flow of fashion knowledge from the elite to the mass fashion system. At the same time, they provide the financial stability that permits risk-taking in Haute Couture.

Because diffusion lines are made for mass marketing (Department Stores), their emergence further integrates elite designers into the commercial structures of mass retailing (Agins 1999, Davis 1992). Diffusion accommodates less affluent consumers’ frustrated desires for ‘real’ designer ready-to-wear. It diffuses the elements of elite styling into the mass market in a manner that preserves designers’ prestigious position in the landscapes of style.

5.4 The Transmission of Styles beyond Elite Firms

The influence of elite fashions extends beyond elite firms as independent clothing manufacturers take up the stylistic cues and fashion directions that are crystallised in the elite sector. Through the fashion system and the product decisions of suppliers,

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15 The first successful US Department Store diffusion label— ‘Emanuel’ by Emanuel Ungaro— was designed in the United States and made by Gruppo GFT under license from Emanuel Ungaro.
versions of elite styles proliferate through the global production system, but vary in the extent to which they replicate or diverge from the elite’s prototypes. Three forms of reproduction occur outside the boundaries of elite creators’ intellectual property rights: unsanctioned copies, imitations, and interpretations.

5.4.1 Copies and ‘Knock-offs’

Garment production has always involved copying. Sanctioned copying delivers profits to design firms, but unsanctioned copying enables others to capture a share of profits that derive from the elite fashion system. Unashamed copying of the ready-to-wear versions of designer originals takes a variety of forms, but essentially comprises ‘products of unauthorised plagiarizing and copying of Parisian and other Haute Couture designs by manufacturers wishing to get a jump on the market’ (Davis 1992:140, fn 15).

Copying or counterfeiting is widespread in the luxury goods sector, since there are few technological barriers to prevent the reproduction of endless replicas. Interbrand (1990:72) reported that in the 1980s some 92% of all luggage labelled as Louis Vuitton was counterfeit. In the early 1990s, the exclusive brands Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Cartier spent $US 7 million annually in more than 2000 actions against copyists (Lane-Rowley 1997). In the early years of mass production, when unsanctioned copies were of markedly inferior quality or appeared in distant markets, they were not a serious threat to elite firms. But the tolerance level has declined with increasing technological capacity for quality copying and as luxury goods firms extend their control of global marketing through diffusion brands. The proliferation of copies has created demand for specialist technologies designed to certify authenticity. The ‘Gucci imprint’, for example, applies hologram technology to guard against copies. The existence of duplicators has encouraged originators to develop faddish and ephemeral designs that are difficult to copy, and to develop models of circulation that restrict access, such as exclusive marketing agreements (Landes and Posner 1989). It has also prompted greater interest in global regulation of intellectual property. While the World Trade

16 At fashion shows, designers will not accept very small orders because they expect that the garments will be taken apart and replicated (Interview HK14). On visiting a garment firm in Fiji (see Chapter 10), the author observed a Saville Row suit being carefully dismantled so that patterns could be cut from its cloth. The factory owner complained about the high price he had paid for his new prototype.
Organisation’s Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property (TRIPs) was motivated, ostensibly, by concerns about counterfeiting, it does not address specifically the structures of imitation that suffuse the world’s clothing industries.\(^\text{17}\)

Unsanctioned copying disrupts the capture of profits derived from fashion knowledge because lesser firms ‘free-ride’ on knowledge assets that have become the private property of elite designers. Knock-off makers simply follow the leader: they enter the market late, after consumer preferences are revealed, and replicate those styles that are in demand. Because fashions change, they enter and exit the market too quickly, usually, for the wheels of intellectual property law to prevent their activities. Unsanctioned copying is also a low cost business activity: its firms keep up with fashion trends, but they do not require design knowledge or its associated cultural knowledge. Copying requires little more fashion knowledge than buying the latest copy of *Vogue* magazine, employing a technically skilled pattern maker, and pointing to a picture.

‘Knock off’ garments are most prevalent in ‘peripheral’ markets with less effective regulatory controls (Coleridge 1988, Birnbaum 2000); and in countries with weak traditions in regard to artistic creativity (Hawkins 2001). For cultural as well as economic reasons, Asian countries have less protection of design authenticity: Hong Kong remains a centre for imitation despite its strict penalties for breaching local intellectual property laws and its participation in international intellectual property agreements.\(^\text{18}\) However, low quality copies are also produced in defiance of regulation in Australia, Europe and the United States, where copied garments made under sweatshop conditions are sold in markets and smaller retail stores. As Castells (1996) remarks, crime is an essential feature of the globalised economy, and fashion production is particularly amenable to this form of ‘criminal’ activity.

\(^\text{17}\) The WTO discussions have centred on the implications of TRIPs for agriculture and pharmaceutical rather than consumer goods industries. Many poor countries view TRIPs as inhibiting knowledge (technology) transfers, encouraging transfer pricing, and contributing to inter-regional transfers of value from poor to rich countries (Revesz 1999:57, see also Wallerstein *et al* 1993).

\(^\text{18}\) The Mong Kok market north of Kowloon abounds with unlabelled originals (mainly overruns of contracted production) that are sold side by side with quality replicas. The originals can be distinguished by the quality of their zips (Interview HK12).
5.4.2 Imitations

A fine line separates illegal copying from imitations that occur (just) inside the limits set by the regulation of intellectual property. The position of that line changes from place to place depending on local intellectual property regulation and its administration. Imitations describe garments that are very similar but not the same as the garment they copy. Quality imitations are at least as much of a threat to elite firms’ ready-to-wear business as counterfeits, perhaps more so, given the difficulties in controlling their proliferation. In the Australian market, imitation is a routine characteristic of the products of fashion chain stores (Figure 5.2).

Imitation is less common in countries that protect their clothing industries with Design Right legislation. Since no such protection exists in the United States (Lane-Rowley 1997, Pickering 1998, Hawkins 2001), once a garment has appeared in the public domain, it can be freely reproduced (Coleridge 1988:281). Therefore, imitation is commonplace in the United States. Macy’s Department Store, for example, carried in the late 1980s an ‘Amalfi’ jacket that looked just like the original Armani, but at half the price (Agins 1999). In the US, imitation is not restricted to lower price ranges: at the peak of Armani’s appeal, US designer Calvin Klein also produced an Armani-like jacket, which he sold for 20% less than the original (Agins 1999). American menswear brand Tommy Hilfiger is a classic imitator, described by Agins (1999) as being to ‘all intensive purposes a clone of Polo Ralph Lauren’.19

Imitations preserve, as far as legally allowable, the design elements of the garment being imitated (so long as they can be incorporated cost-effectively). Like the diffusion lines of elite firms, imitations reproduce a dominant fashion idea but incorporate less expensive inputs. Because they compete directly with sanctioned (and therefore usually stylistically superior) diffusion lines, imitations compete on price in the same market segments as diffusion lines. Given their similar styling and lack of ‘name’ authenticity, to compete successfully imitations ideally have lower production costs than the

19 United States’ fashion designers are not renowned for their artistic originality. Many began their careers as fashion journalists or illustrators employed to draw (copy) the styles shown in Paris shows. Of famous American designers, Mainboucher, Howes and Hulanicki began their careers as illustrators for fashion magazines. Mary McFadden and Mainboucher had each been Vogue editors (Stegemeyer 1996).
equivalent diffusion brands. This highly focused competition drives down wages and working conditions in clothing production.

Figure 5.2  Imitation in the Australian Garment Market
In the case of copycat brands, imitation occurs at the level of an entire product range. Such enterprises produce copies that are just different enough from the original to avoid litigation. Crocodile brand in Hong Kong, for example, plays on the crocodile emblem of the high priced French brand Lacoste, while the Bossini chain, also based in Hong Kong, is a take on Italy’s Benetton. In both cases, the appearance of the garments as well as the décor of the brands’ retail stores reproduces the character of the original they imitate.

Effectively, imitations are quasi-copies that like counterfeits, free ride on the design, advertising and marketing investments of the styles’ original owner, the difference is that they do so within legal boundaries. It is nevertheless tempting to conclude that illegal copying is synonymous with Asian firms’ copy production and legal imitation with United States’ firms’ copy production.

5.3.3 Interpretations

Not all fashion styles that resemble the styles of one or other elite designer are copies or imitations. Across the world, the thousands of fashion designers working in local markets are attuned to contemporary design trends and produce their own interpretations of the fashion mood with varying degrees of skill, originality and creativity. Their stylistic interpretations generate independent or quasi-independent designs that are attuned to the general trends of the discipline. Depending on their relation to the mass market, such interpretations might extend creatively the complexity of fashion ideas (avant-garde designers) or might moderate or generalise them to accommodate local style preferences and customs (store home-brand designers). Interpretative design does not ignore elite fashion or the predictions of the fashion media, but incorporates the general fashion direction in unique readings. Interpretations can be understood as translations of the overall style trend that transform the content of styles to stabilise their meanings for a specific target audiences.

Table 5.2 provides some examples where designer’s interpretations have been assessed by media experts as emulation rather that imitation. Interpretations are nevertheless related, more or less closely, to dominant styles. The Australian designer Carla Zampatti, for example, produced a fashion range in 2001 that contained similarities to designs by elite designer Tom Ford of Chanel (The Australian 30/10/01). The Zampatti interpretations occupied a similar ideological space to Chanel, but, since
they retained a high level of complexity, Zampatti’s studied re-definition contributed sufficient design value to distinguish them as emulations rather than imitations.

Table 5.2  Examples of Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpreter</th>
<th>Commentator</th>
<th>Referent</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calvin Klein</td>
<td>Evans (2001)</td>
<td>Helmut Lang</td>
<td>‘..the influence of Helmut Lang is discernable but here it has been translated into shiny stretch fabric rendering the ensemble sportier in feel ..’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gucci</td>
<td>White (2000)</td>
<td>Halston</td>
<td>… models were ‘clad in Halston-style columns’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The division between emulation and imitation is fluid. For example, in the April 2000 edition of *Vogue*, the description of a recent *Prada* design included the advice “Don’t fret if *Prada* is beyond your pocket — this is one trend certain to be picked up and “interpreted” at every price point’ (Alderson 2000). The inverted commas indicate that the author views interpretation as a euphemism for imitation. Similarly, the CEO of an Australian mass fashion firm viewed his firms’ copying as ‘interpretation’ by virtue of the local evaluation of imported styles:

> We don’t design, we interpret. There is a difference. *Where do you interpret from?* Largely out of America … our buyers travel to the US six times a year to look at the stores we use for inspiration. People like *The Gap* … we buy samples, we talk about it, and we come up with what we think the future trend will be … If everyone agrees, then the numbers are quite safe. *Do you go out on the street to look at what people are wearing?* No.

Interview AU04

The media’s description of Australian chain store clothier *Country Road* as producing ‘semi-classic’ fashion in a ‘*Ralph Lauren*-like’ and ‘*Gap*-esque’ hybrid style (The
Sunday Age, 9/12/01:5) gives a strong sense that its products are a pastiche of imitations.

In general, interpretations created by street wear designers follow the couture trend but incorporate styling elements that reflect more pragmatic concerns such as comfort and durability (Craik 1994:50). In Australia, as imitators dilute fashion styles to make them palatable to (conservative) mass consumers, styling becomes less complex and more codified, and the differences between styles become less obvious.

5.5 Style Authenticity and Power

The multiple means through which elite-led fashion styling permeates the mass production industries can be conceived as constituting a hierarchy of style that is underpinned and stratified by intellectual property protections.

5.5.1 Intellectual Property Rights in the Production System

When fashion firms within the elite system adapt their designs for mass production, they enjoy considerable advantages relative to firms that operate outside the elite: they possess stocks of complex fashion knowledge, they control the intellectual property rights associated with that knowledge, they benefit in the market from social processes that create greater public recognition of their expertise, and they have early access to fashion trend information. For firms external to the elite fashion system, receptiveness to codified fashion trend information, and the capacity to use that information to innovate or create new knowledge (in the form of original designs), depends largely on their pre-existing (viscous, tacit) fashion knowledge endowments.

In practice, then, the diffusion of style from the catwalk to mass production comprises two streams, representing two mechanisms of knowledge flows: first, the mass marketing by elite firms of affordable versions of their own products; and second, fashion styling by firms without direct links to the elite sector. These two streams are intimately related through dynamic processes of adaptation that play one design against another. Figure 5.3 conceptualises these different knowledge flows and their outcomes as different categories of mass produced clothing. Catwalk Designs are the independent sources of commodified fashion. Yet they generate, within the intellectual property rights of their creators, sanctioned copies and ready-to-wear versions, then less sophisticated derivative styles. Outside the elite system are three types of garments:
direct copies or ‘knock-offs’ of the catwalk and elite ready to wear ranges; interpretations that apply new knowledge to rework the catwalk trends and create variations on the dominant fashion themes; and finally, imitations that are low grade, modified versions of the original idea. In general, the further a fashion design’s distance from the catwalk level, the less complex its knowledge content. The movement of fashion’s rhythms is framed by the endless cycle of actions and reactions as innovative firms respond to the copy industry that captures value from proprietary knowledge, and as the copy industry responds to the innovations of the elite.

Figure 5.3 Knowledge Flows and Mass Production Forms

5.5.2 A Hierarchy of Style

The different forms of fashion styling that have been identified elite – catwalk originals, ready-to-wear, diffusion lines, copies, imitations, and interpretations – vary in status attributes, complexity (abstraction), production quality and in their relation to intellectual property rights. This relation is depicted in Figure 5.4 as a series of related spheres transacted by style sub-streams. These patterns of replication are repeated for each of fashion’s ideological themes, creating multiple differentiated strata that relate to
multiple differentiated consumer markets. In this hierarchical formation, the designer originals shown in fashion parades are at the core of fashion, where they function not just as prototypes but as the inspiration for more widely diffused fashion ideas. Counterfeits (not shown in Figure 5.4) are positioned close to the originals. The originals are wrapped in their sanctioned ready-to-wear ranges that constitute a more commercialised but still exclusive version of the elite design. Next are interpretations that follow fashion and elite trends, but in multiple re-expressions targeting particular markets. Then the more diluted diffusion lines, and finally the most generalised imitations. Moving down the hierarchy, styles become less prestigious, less complex, less lavishly produced, less valued in the eyes of consumers and less expensive to purchase in the market.

Figure 5.4 Fashionspace as a Hierarchy based on Design Authenticity

While this hierarchy represents an abstraction of the relation of fashion styles to different parts of the global fashion system, it is not intended to suggest that the elite

20 The reverse status sometimes associated with counterfeits is ignored.
designers have a monopoly over fashion ideas. It does however suggest that elites occupy a commanding position over the processes that result in the legitimisation of fashion and its translation into the styles manufactured by mass producers. In terms of this hierarchy, elite designers’ success can be measured in terms of the extent of their influence over the range of similar styles that are manufactured globally by sanctioned or unsanctioned means:

What makes me happy is when I am imitated in a rather clever way, that is the right way … but if someone copies the details, I feel robbed of my money and my inventive rights.

Designer Mario Bellini, cited in Lane-Rowley (1997).

Therefore, while copying is a threat to innovate design, it is also the yardstick for identifying excellence. Nonetheless, the hierarchy of style reflects firms’ positions in relation to the control of intellectual property contained in the styles they produce. At the upper end, this generates firm strategies directed to protecting knowledge assets, while at the lower end it encourages firms that aim to capture value from high end knowledge assets.

5.5.3 Knowledge and Power

The contradiction for the control of intellectual property in clothing industries is that design trends almost always refer to other, earlier designs and draw on collective knowledge within the discipline of fashion. Despite the problematic status of claims of originality, firms that base their business on stylistic differentiation assert their intellectual property rights and defend rigorously the appearance of authenticity. Ralph Lauren has sued the US mass retailer The Gap for copying his work. However, Ralph Lauren was convicted in 1994 of copying the work of French elite designer Yves St. Laurent. In turn, Yves St. Laurent was found guilty in 1985 of stealing the designs of lesser-known couturier Jacques Esterel (Agins 1999:43). It appears that the attribution of authorship of a fashion idea depends, to a large extent, on possession of the economic and legal power to assert authorship. That power is related to standing in the world of fashion (cultural capital), to knowledge of stylistic trends, and to the capacity to enforce legal rights (which in turn depends on economic resources). It depends too on structures of public recognition that establish designer’s reputations (Bourdieu 1989). It
follows that designers with established reputations – established from their media profile – and firms that are part of luxury goods conglomerates are more able to assert ownership of intellectual property. The power relations between firms in the fashion industries reflect differences in knowledge assets, but also differences in their capacity to exploit knowledge assets through proprietary ownership and enforcement.

5.6 Conclusion

Through the media, mass consumers are conditioned to a particular set of expectations about fashion and dress style trends. Mass production firms throughout the global fashion and clothing industries are exposed to the same stylistic cues. For firms operating in the mass market, capturing consumer interest—and therefore demand for their products—implies following the stylistic expectations percolated through the elite sector and mediated externally by the fashion system. The elite fashion sector ‘fixes’ the uncertainty of fashion by providing a coherent set of ideas that inject stability into the international production system.

Fashion styles are unavoidably positioned in a relation to other fashion styles. The elite sector collects and interprets ideas from many places and reinterprets them in a stylised form. Subsequently, their styles are reinterpreted at various levels of abstraction by numerous other designers and firms. At the global scale, fashion is traversed by a vertical hierarchy that connects different levels of styling originality as well as different levels of production quality. Thus, fashion’s capacity to accommodate a wide range of interpretations and styles exemplifies contemporary capitalism’s capacity to thrive on the production of difference (Grossberg 1995:184).

If the ideas that underpin commercial mass-produced fashion are created centrally and transmitted geographically outward and socially downward toward a periphery of lesser firms, then this process constitutes a version of ‘trickle-down’ fashion diffusion, but one that operates through firms rather than individual preferences. ‘Trickle-down’ processes are plausible in business contexts because business motivations are less likely to be shaped by emotions and issues of identity and personal status. For firms, ‘trickle down’ is rational. However, such a view does not negate the existence a widely dispersed fashion landscape that contains multiple stylistic sub-streams (Wark 1991:62, Craik 1994) – it instead positions the production system in relation to fashion’s landscapes.
Understanding the authority of fashion makes it possible to classify every commodity within the international garment mass production industries in terms of its position in fashion’s hierarchy of style. That position would also provide an indication of the social status of the commodity, consumer valuations of it, and its position in the segmented market spaces of consumer-oriented economies. Thinking of these differences in stylistic terms enables the competitive relations between firms to be understood as a tension between differentiation and conformity, in a context framed by intellectual property. The depth of the differences and the power relations that those differences imply, anchor mass production to elite design, to the physical locations of designer firms, and to the changing rhythms of the fashion season. Contrary to Baudrillard (1994 [1981]), however, the replication of fashion designs does not generate copies of copies in an endless regress, but each occupies a distinct space relative to other garments and to the powers of the owners of their constituent ideas.

To conclude, fashion creates a landscape of fashion difference. Firms in the garment mass production industries are unavoidably embedded in a structure that enables fashion to operate in the capitalist economy. The spaces of fashion thus become a central structuring force of production, and a force that transcends the geographic spaces through which actual garments flow in trade. However, the power of fashion styling varies depending on when, where, how and by whom it is contextualised.