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Fashion Function Future (F:3) – a research programme

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We are all affected by fashion: as individuals when we use clothes and other products to create an identity and an image and as consumers participating in the wheel of consumption and economy. As researchers, we try to understand fashion and its actors and how research can contribute to a better society and prosperous industries. This issue of the Nordic Textile Journal presents both articles based on research conducted at the University of Borås and articles from other researchers who share our interest in sustainable fashion and the textile industry.

Once upon a time, Borås was well-known as a cluster for the Swedish textile industry. Although many textile and fashion businesses closed down as a result of the decline of the industry in the 1970's, the Borås region still hosts many fashion and textile businesses and is the home of the only fashion incubator in Sweden (Modeinkubatorn). Together with the Swedish School of Textiles, the University of Borås and other educational organisations focusing on fashion and textiles this region has once again become a hotbed for a dynamic fashion and the textile sector. Thus, it is no coincidence that a research programme called *Fashion Function Future (F:3)* was initiated at the University of Borås in 2010.

Fashion Function Future (F:3) – is a programme for research and artistic development, addressing issues and topics ranging from artistic design to distribution logistics, as well as the marketing and management of fashion and textile companies, where sustainability is a shared concern. The programme is based on an interdisciplinary environment that supports the development and balancing of artistic expressions, design methodology, technology and management, all related to the field of fashion and textiles. Several departments at the University of Borås collaborate to achieve this interdisciplinary approach and contribute with the knowledge required to shape F:3.

Although we are based in Borås, where tradition associates fashion with clothing and textiles, we realise the term fashion is more complicated than that and that it needs to be further investigated for our readers to fully understand the intention behind our programme. Our research is *Future* oriented, but the in-between term *Function* also needs some explanation, which we will come back to below.

To explain why fashion is not only the study of dress and clothing, Kawamura (2005, p. 1) coined the term "Fashion-ology", which she defines as "a sociological investigation of fashion, and it treats fashion as a system of institutions, that produces the concept as well as the phenomenon/practices of fashion". Fashion is an immaterial concept and clothes are the materialized objects of this concept. In this sense, Kawamura refers to the actors who are part of a specific system that defines what is defined as fashion and what is not. For clothing to become fashion, it is not enough that a collection



of clothes has been shown on the catwalk. The participation of multiple actors is required for something to be defined as fashion. Hence, fashion is a sociological phenomenon, a socially constructed process, because a social context is required. It is also one reason why research in fashion primarily takes place within the field of sociology and considers fashion a cultural phenomenon.

Although the fashion industry is an old industry, research focusing on fashion businesses from a management perspective is rather young. Parallel to the emergence of brand management in the 1980's, an interest emerged in the marketing of fashion (c.f Rogers and Gamans, 1983; Hines & Bruce, 2001). This happened in a time when fast-fashion took off and companies such as H&M and Zara conquered fashion markets globally. This triggered Teri Agins to write her book *The End of Fashion: the Mass Marketing of Clothing* in 1999. However, fashion marketing continued to grow as a subject; especially, luxury brands raised an interest among brand researchers in the late 1990's and have continued to do so after 2000 (Kapferer, 1997; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004; Okonkwo, 2009; Radon, 2010). Business schools such as Bocconi in Milan, Essec outside Paris and the London Business School even initiated special Master's programmes addressing luxury branding.

In 2009, the Swedish School of Textiles started a new Master's programme in Fashion Management and Marketing in collaboration with the London College of Fashion, where the Master's programme in Fashion Management at the LCF was a source of inspiration. This caused a need to strengthen research in fashion from a management and marketing perspective and also a need to reinforce the research profile in textile and fashion already established across several departments at the University of Borås. This collaboration came to form the foundation for the research programme *Fashion Function Future*.

Fashion is, as stated by Kawamura (2005), a system driven by certain fashion companies, designers, trend institutes, media, modelling agencies, PR agencies, and consumers – intertwined and interdependent. The system allows some clothes to be embraced and to become "fashion" and while others fail and are, probably, forgotten. In this sense, Kawamura distinguishes between fashion production and fashion consumption on the one hand and production and consumption of clothing on the other. A fashion company creates garments of a specific design, which will be produced at a certain quality level, at a certain price, and will reach the market and the customers as efficiently as possible. Hence, it is a quite traditional enterprise focused on technology, materials, distribution, finances and, of course,

design and creativity. Therefore, at the different departments of the University of Borås, we stand to benefit from research from a broad perspective in the fields of management, leadership, marketing and technology and are also able to apply it to the fashion and textile sector. However, in order to understand how different management models are to be interpreted in connection with the fashion industry, we need to recognize the fashion market as an aesthetic market and one which comes with certain particularities (Entwistle, 2009).

The importance of being part of a specific culture and of participating in specific events is not unique to the field of fashion. Principally, similar institutional systems for e.g. producers, designers, media, PR-agents and consumers are also valid for other product categories that are part of what we described above as an institutionalized system and what could be referred to, in a wider sense, as aesthetic cultures. The products in question are usually ones we do not consume solely for their function, as we do e.g. with a chair to sit on or a table to eat at, but also for the value of a certain aesthetic, which in many cases is endorsed by a famous designer brand and legitimized by defined trends. Researchers need to have an understanding for how an aesthetic culture affects the companies and people who are part of it, while these companies also experience the same management issues as any other company – in principle. Through participation and interaction in research projects and at seminars organized within F3, researchers from the fields of fashion and textile design, technology, materials, management and marketing are given opportunities to share knowledge and experience with practitioners from the field.

All clothes are not fashion: not only because they are not part of the fashion system, but also because they are worn primarily for their function. This is not to say that aesthetics is not relevant for functional products; on the contrary, they are significant to the wearers and users both as identity markers and because of different signal features provided by the appearance of the products. This applies to everything from workwear and sportswear to uniforms, traditional folk costumes and other textile products. But what is considered *function* and what is considered *fashion* change over time. Sportswear used to be worn primarily for its functionality, whereas today a lot of sportswear is affected by the fashion concept and sportswear companies compete directly with fashion companies. Manufacturers of products focusing on functionality have collaborated with the University of Borås for a long time regarding materials, design and supply chain issues. This research also provides a foundation for developing research in F:3 related to fashion products.

Fashion is one of the largest industries worldwide, prospering at the very heart of consumer society, and provides great opportunities for newly industrialized countries, while it also challenges our capability to solve many of the environmental issues related to it that cause severe problems. Fashion is responsible for some of the obstacles to achieving a sustainable society and environment. There are problems along the entire chain of production of garments and other products essential to the world of fashion, from issues related to the cultivation of fibres, pollution of soil and water, and exploitation of the work force and animals, all the way to issues related to consumption of fashion and clothing. The task of solving all these problems is overwhelming. Hence, the Future for the fashion and textile companies, as well as for the consumers, holds many great challenges.

In the creation of the new research programme in 2010, the challenges and opportunities facing the fashion industry guided our ideas for different projects. When defining sustainability, three areas were considered: environment, ethics, and economy. Although it seems the industry focuses mainly on the creation of a luxurious and glamorous world, there is an interest, forced or not, among fashion companies for improving matters and solving problems. Some leading companies of the industry have joined forces and have started to measure improvements in different ways, e.g. through the Higg-index. This is of course a necessity if they want to survive in the long run.

Fashion is a global industry to a great extent and one where even very small companies from e.g. Sweden have to deal with production both in other European countries and the Far East. Digital development is changing the ways in which companies reach their consumers and this is an opportunity for small companies, although it is not quite as easy as it is sometimes seems. There has been some discussion on the existence of "the Swedish Fashion Miracle" based on the success of several Swedish fashion brands (Falk, 2011). Rather than being a miracle, this is the result of creativity and hard work. Growing to become an international company is a great challenge to a small enterprise. Thus, economic sustainability is a subheading in our definition of sustainability and also the topic of some of the research projects within the *Fashion Function Future* programme.

Although we cannot present all topics, we have initiated research projects addressing development of fibres that are harmless to the environment, aesthetics of new materials, organization of local production, new business models based on re-design of old garments, the creation of more efficient supply chains without returns, the international growth of Swedish

fashion design companies, leadership in fashion design companies and for fashion retailers, innovation in the field of fashion, as well as studies of consumer behaviour from a sustainability perspective. In the textile and fashion value chain, from ideas to customers and beyond, the decisive stage is in the design process, which combines artistic skills and functional considerations in order to make fashion products logistically manageable, attractive to customers, and resourceful from an environmental and sustainability point of view. For more information about on-going projects, please visit our homepage: <http://www.hb.se/f3>

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