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**EXPLORING RESEARCH**

**SPACE IN FASHION**

**The ﬂuidity of knowledge between designers,**

**individuals and society**

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**Exploring Research Space in Fashion:**

***The Fluidity of Knowledge between Designers, Individuals and Society***

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***­­­1.0 Introduction***

Research involving fashion theory, or the consumption and use of fashion products, requires a study into material culture as the communication of symbolic values. Within the study of fashion, material culture is defined as a meaning-making process developed through the exchange of symbolic values embedded within fashion objects (Crane & Bovone, 2006). While the perception of fashion, as a social phenomenon, has been positioned by users and researchers in relation to modernity, its social relevance is beginning to see a shift from an over-emphasis on interactions towards adaptability and longevity within diverse social groups (Buckley & Clark, 2012). This paper addresses the interdisciplinary roots of fashion studies and introduces a research framework proposing the meaning-making process as a step towards achieving relevance and longevity. Following a sociological approach to fashion research, the role of fashion objects in everyday life is discussed as communicating design intent and extending into the construction of new meanings.

 *Overview of Framework*

Fashion is synonymous with change and assumes an extensive scope of operation that cannot be limited to or centered in the study of costume and adornment (Blumer, 1969). It needs, as defined by Simmel’s (1971) widely adopted theory of fashion, to examine the social implications of fashion objects as an influence over individual forms of self-expression and freedom. In order to discuss the situational context of fashion research, the framework is separated into three distinct spaces for inquiry. The framework reviews design practice, the social implications of fashion, and the influences of culture within three simulated spaces – *problem space, fluid space, and research space.* Within these three areas, the conversational aspect of fashion is introduced as a vehicle for design knowledge exchange. Although design knowledge is often associated with creative activities or the thinking processes of designers, it is suggested here that this knowledge is not strictly contained within the domains of design or designers. The role of the fashion object is examined as a tangible representation of design knowledge, instrumental in communicating symbolic meanings and significance.

Design knowledge, as residing in designers, design activities, and design objects, offers a connection between designers and individuals within their shared social worlds. The sources and domains of design knowledge are introduced within the context of fashion and this knowledge is defined by fluidity, in how it is shared and exchanged across the different levels and dimensions of interaction. Design knowledge is further related to the tensions involving the problem space of the design, fashion, and cultural systems. These tensions are identified as the problems of fashion, as they encase the conflicts between internal and external forces of the situation. How design knowledge affects the problem space, particularly in how it affords the individual with the fashion experience, is explored through the research space. The research space elaborates on the transmission, representation, and reinterpretation of design knowledge. Through the transactional system, the conversational activity of fashion culminates in the exchange of embedded, constructed, and co-created meanings.

** **Figure 1.** Framework of Investigation

Supported by a comprehensive review of existing literature, this paper proposes a framework for fashion research that explores knowledge flow as a meaning-making process involving designers, individuals, and society.

***2.0 Fluid Space: Design Knowledge***

Designers, as individuals, transform perception into a form of common knowledge to construct understandings and guide behaviors. Literature on design knowledge is discussed to define the role of objects in transferring knowledge from producer to consumer.

*Domains of Design Knowledge*

Design requires what is known as “projective ability” – the ability to understand the relationship between human beings and objects to create a social context (Narvaez, 2000). Relying on the designer’s own experiences, activities within design practice require a combination of skills, expertise, and knowledge to conceptualize artifacts relevant to the social environment (Friedman, 2000). The epistemological dimension of this knowledge shifts from tacit to explicit forms, moving and transforming thought into action, to question *what* designers know and *how* they come about knowing. Design knowledge, which is qualitatively different from knowledge in other disciplines, relies on experience, practice, and iteration to move tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge (Hoadley & Cox, 2009). Friedman (2000) defines designers as thinkers who move thought into action, and, further moving from *doing* to *knowing* requires the ability of designers to apply critical thinking and reflection. Following this practice or process of designing, designers increase their existing knowledge from ‘knowing through making or doing’ to contribute to what is known as design knowledge (Olsen & Heaton, 2010).

Cross (2006) defines these *ways of knowing* as embodied in the designer, the processes of designing, and in its products. Design ability is not strictly contained within the practice of designing nor is knowledge of design exclusive to professional designers. By acknowledging the rhetorical nature of design and the conversational aspect of design activity, design knowledge initiates a type of dialogue when transferred from designers to non-designers. Cross (1999) defines three sources of design knowledge:

* *Design Epistemology* – residing in people as the natural human ability of designers and of everyone, developing understandings for how people design, conducting empirical studies of designer behavior and design ability.
* *Design Praxiology* – residing in processes of designing, in the development and application of techniques for design.
* *Design Phenomenology* – residing in products, in the forms, materials, and finishes of design objects.

Narvaez (2000) defines design’s own knowledge as the result of the subject-object relationship that generates multiple perceptions of the world to become the intuitive knowledge of a society. The object represents the tangible materialization of a design, becoming the object of knowledge to the perceiver in its ability to communicate an interpretation of a social reality. Knowledge produced by the design object can be classified as follows (Narvaez, 2000):

* *Empirical-Analytical* – analysis of the object as a physical element, in itself and its properties.
* *Hermeneutical-Historical* – the object as a social and historical entity within an interacting system, producing symbolic and social significance through communication.
* *Sociocritical* – the object as a social evoker-transformer, generating social and individual changes to attitudes, habits, and values.

** **Figure 2.** The User as Perceivable Being

Design knowledge can be defined as reflecting the perceptions and experiences of the designer, through the process of designing, and transforming into a material object. The design object contains knowledge of the designer and communicates this knowledge to the perceivable user by reflecting emotional, volitional and cognitive interests (Narvaez, 2000). Users engage and experience the object, which assumes the role of communicating the specific ideas or functions created and shaped by designers (Kazmierczak, 2003). The object is cognizable and able to convey its existence when consumed and used by the individual. Therefore, increased interactions affect the extent to which users, as perceptive beings, perceive knowledge of the object. The user is implicated as being shaped by perception, allowing the ability to transform experience into creating a personal stock of knowledge. Through increased interactions with the object, knowledge embedded within the object encounters the user’s existing stock of knowledge to produce and regenerate as new ideas.

*Domains of Fashion Knowledge*Fashion knowledge is a form of expert knowledge that is socially constructed and culturally accumulated, embedded in the space of social networks framing the boundaries of interactions (Weller, 2007). Within the space of fashion, knowledge is increasingly difficult to constrain as social interactions accelerate its fluidity as a homogenizing force in dispersing trends across global markets. The transgressive and fluid nature of knowledge links producers of knowledge to its users in a socially integrated and distributed process (Nowotny, 2000). Socially robust knowledge is significant for the study of social situations, as it initiates changes to the knowledge culture by establishing relevance for future designs (Olsen & Heaton, 2010). Culture incorporates the material process of symbolic production in human beings and the nonmaterial process of knowledge production existing in members of society (Narvaez, 2000). As a socially constituted practice, fashion and dress require individual members to acquire knowledge of cultural norms and expectations (Entwistle, 2000). It is only within these norms that individuals are able to construct a space of personal freedom and develop knowledge of the inner self while complying with fashion’s standards (Nedelmann, 1990).

The fashion system contains the ongoing dialectic between imitation and differentiation which elicits the incessant changing nature of fashion (Simmel, 1971). This tension is reflected in the hierarchal network of fashion designers and brands, where the diffusion of trends and styles flows down from key innovators and leaders to the masses. Fashion’s cyclical pattern is driven by elite groups, made up of designers and consumers, seeking to set themselves apart from the non-elite (Blumer, 1969). However, developments in fashion media have widened the influential roles of bloggers, editors, celebrities, stylists and various style icons, further increasing the complexities of the fashion cycle. Design knowledge residing at the expert level, the core knowledge leading and sanctioning stylistic direction, becomes diluted when it is reproduced or imitated by followers. As fashion spreads from the elite to the masses, its knowledge becomes less viscous and fluid by moving into less complex social contexts (Weller, 2007). This signifies the distinction between design knowledge, the tacit form created and used by designers, and common knowledge, the codified or informal knowledge.

***3.0 Problem Space: Dialectical Relationships***

This section presents three systems affecting design, fashion, and culture. Each of these systems contains tensions between the micro-internal to macro-external levels, as they are mediated by the respective roles of artifact, product, and values. Owing to the constant changing nature of the three systems, they represent the problem space.

** **Figure 3.** Dialectical Relationships

*The Design System*Design’s significance lies in its process of being produced, received, and used within a social context to prescribe social relations (Dilnot, 1984). Its implications do not lie internally within the profession of design but in the social world that produces the conditions within which designers work. Design can be defined as the socially differentiated transformation of the designer (Hillier, *et al.,* 1984) and the design process can be seen as the pragmatic activity through which designers relate to the world framing their existence (Olsen & Heaton, 2010). This frame of reference is actualized within a specific social context, constructing and contributing to new social relations. Therefore, the different perspectives and perceptions of designers influence the process of design to affect or result in socially integrated outcomes. A designer’s ability to perceive the world and frame it into an activity forms the connection between the designer and the external world. The designer’s “concern with how things ought to be” produces artifacts that serve as the interface between their inner and outer environments (Simon, 1996). It is through these artifacts that the designer is confronted by social systems of symbolic production.

The materializing process of design results in the production of artifacts which rely on the receptivity of individuals in a social situation. Designers rely on their own experiences to serve as interpretations of the world and utilize these perspectives in how they develop solutions for perceivable problems. This implicates the social world as either passive recipients of design solutions or the stimulating force influencing the designer’s situated existence. Designers, as members of society, are positioned as part of the social world by sharing in common past and current experiences. However, in the role of producer, their activities place them outside of this world through their ability to contribute to and disrupt future situations. This creates the tension within the design system, which positions the designer and the social world on opposing poles. The designer’s influence in creating artifacts for the social world is challenged by its dependency on society’s acceptance of possible design solutions. Within this system, the artifact mediates the exchange of power and influence by forging a transactional connection between designers and the social world.

*The Fashion System*

Fashion is a phenomenon that evolves over the course of time and, at the height of its appeal, becomes an indication of the present (Nedelmann, 1990). It is a mechanism or process of collective selection that involves innovators, leaders, followers, and participants (Blumer, 1969). Dominant fashions can be defined as high or popular fashion that is adopted and reproduced into mass fashion (Rocamora, 2002). As a social activity, the continuity of fashion relies on *innovators* or *leaders* who establish or produce high levels of taste and *followers* or *participants* to standardize the judgment of this predetermined taste. Therefore, the individual is faced with the decision to follow fashion norms and achieve union in achieving group uniformity or to deviate from social standards into segregation and exclusion (Simmel, 1957). The adoption of a prevailing style forces the individual to choose between imitation and distinction, emphasizing the social impact of fashion.

Blumer (1969) defined fashion as establishing social relevance in its indifference to criticism, demand for adherence, and exclusion of those who fail to abide by its area of operation. In a recent study, it was determined that in most cases while individuals are highly knowledgeable about matters of taste they resort to social and institutional supports to reassure themselves in regards to aesthetic choice (Clarke & Miller, 2002). According to Simmel (1957), the individual exists between antagonistic forces of a dualistic nature that influence the natural tendency towards uniformity, similarity, and imitation. Following this perspective, fashion represents the imitation of a given example and forces the individual into satisfying a preset social condition. Individual choice to adopt or imitate a style becomes a calculating act, characteristic of a social happening wherein individuals develop common sensitivities and similar appreciations through experiences in a shared world of intense stimulation (Blumer, 1969). The fashion object assumes a central role in reconciling the coexistence of exclusivity and standardization within the dialectic of the fashion system (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Through the object, the conflict between imitation and differentiation shifts into a process of social interaction (Nedelmann, 1990).

Fashion, in terms of dress in everyday life, is the form by which individuals project a configuration of the self representing one’s existence in a particular time or history (Buckley & Clark, 2012). This implicates the act of dress as the presentation of self, embodying a performance that is as much an individual activity as it is social (Entwistle, 2000). The fashion system can be defined as containing the ongoing negotiation between individuals and society through the assigning of meaning and significance to design objects. Within this system, individuals are positioned at the boundary between expressing a personal representation of self and imitating the social standards for what is fashionable. The expression of self-identity constitutes the social group while simultaneously reflecting the group’s influences on aesthetic choice and taste, indicating challenges to the social order of power and dominance over the individual. This ongoing tension represents the dialectic between the freedom of individuals and the pressures of society within the fashion system.

*The Cultural System*

Culture provides clues of the phenomenal world to determine the types of objects available (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The fashion object embodies cultural phenomenon by contributing to the production and reproduction of society through shared experiences, values and beliefs (Barnard, 1996). Defining the social world as being made up of dressed bodies, the activity of dressing becomes the expression of social relations in producing recognizable and meaningful cultural codes (Entwistle, 2000). It is through culture that individuals are able to divide and categorize the phenomenal world, by assigning significance to objects (McCracken, 1986). The impact of culture on the social forms of dress is best seen in the case of the Mao-Era, during China’s Cultural Revolution, when aesthetic principles were overlooked and reflected a breach in the expression of beauty to enforce the non-existence of fashion (Barthes, 2006).

Culture is affected by social movements in creating a state of self-dissatisfaction that confronts the individual into changing and reevaluating values, attitudes, and behaviors (Ball-Rokeach & Tallman, 1979). The natural instinct of human experience, guided by perception, imagination, recollection and judgment, is to assign value to objects (Rinofner-Kreidl, 2012). Cultural meanings fulfill the needs of individuals by establishing values contributing to the construction of self (McCracken, 1986). Encasing the opposing forces of tradition and modernity, the cultural system influences changes affecting cultural values and the accumulation of meanings.

In the example of Mainland China, having undergone rapid economic developments and social reforms within the past three decades, the cultural system is conflicted as values are caught between the continuity of traditional inheritances and the adoption of western influences. The changing values within this cultural system are further complicated by differences found between generational cohorts (Dou, *et al.*, 2006), particularly concerning those born after 1978 who have formed a unique generation of single-child adults (Smith & Hill, 2009). Cultural production concerns the process of meaning construction, requiring an examination of a group’s collective actions and beliefs (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995). Therefore, the conflicts affecting cultural values will significantly impact the way that individuals or societies consume and understand design objects. The cultural system is dynamic in its organization and reorganization of shared values and serves as the backdrop and context for the study of fashion.

***4.0 Research Space: The Role of Design Knowledge***

The research framework was developed as part of an ongoing investigation into the changing situation of Chinese fashion. Focusing intently on the Post-80s & 90s generation (those born after the One-Child Policy of 1978), it was determined that young Chinese are actively involved in the local fashion culture as designers and consumers. The growing number of fashion designers belonging to this generational cohort supports Buckley & Clark’s (2012) proposal for focusing on the fashion of the everyday – the insignificant, the ordinary, and the overlooked. Interviews with several young fashion designers in Shanghai *(Zhang Da[[1]](#endnote-1), Niki Qin[[2]](#endnote-2), Yilei Wu[[3]](#endnote-3))* revealed insights into how fashion research can be applied more critically for humanistic inquiry. Although each of the designers differs in design approach and business scale, they expressed similar views and sentiments in regards to Chinese fashion:

* *Chinese consumers need to be re-educated on taste.*
Historical events prematurely stopped the development of traditional Chinese clothing, as Western styles were widely adopted. Chinese fashion designers in the 90s were focused on meeting the standards of Paris and Milan. In more recent years, designers are returning to the roots of Chinese aesthetics and reintroducing consumers to traditional Chinese design. It is about finding new ways for Chinese design and creating a new language for fashion.
* *Clothing is a way of expressing feelings to convey a story for each emotion or occasion.*
This requires an understanding of the consumer and providing the opportunity for consumers to understand the products. Clothing facilitates the ability to transform a wearer into the designer’s vision. However, consumers should freely “play” with the designs in new ways to inspire designers with their creative interpretations. Dressing is, therefore, a type of silent communication.
* *Sharing the same culture is an advantage for designers targeting local consumers.*
If clothing is how individuals present themselves and experience the world, then designers need to understand the specific lifestyles of users. In order to have influence on the local creative community of designers and users, it is necessary to have knowledge of local aesthetics, culture, tradition, and communication styles.

In response to these insights, the research space is presented as the transactional system of exchange between users, objects, and the role of design knowledge. As objects are consumed by users, knowledge shifts into the transmission, representation, and reinterpretation of meanings. This phenomenological perspective of design knowledge concerns relationships between products and contexts, presenting the research space of meanings. The transactional system presents a more detailed space for exploring how fashion facilitates the conversational form of knowledge exchange through the following:

* *Transmission of embedded meanings* – relationship between designers and objects
* *Representation of constructed meanings* – relationship between individuals and society
* *Reinterpretation of co-created meanings* – relationship between designers and individuals

**
Figure 4.1.** Research Space

*Embedded Meanings (Transmission – Designers & Objects)*

Knowledge created by designers belongs within the domain of designers, becoming design knowledge and thereby owned by designers. This knowledge is further cultivated and expanded through the design process and transmitted into the physical attributes of the finished object. The fashion object is a product of material culture that acts as the filter between the individual and the social world (Crane & Bovone, 2006). These objects are meaningful and knowledge-rich, transmitting knowledge across spatio-temporal patterns originating from designers through the mass production system and into consumer perceptions (Weller, 2007). Designers work from local knowledge communities that are defined by physical, geographical, cultural or industrial boundaries. By collecting, recycling, and borrowing ideas from these communities, they transform their tacit understandings into creative activities and processes to produce a knowledge base. This form of expert knowledge is encoded into objects through intentional choices in materials, colors, silhouettes, and details. The fashion object, therefore, acts as the vessel carrying and transferring knowledge between designers and users. It materializes the semiotic content and function of meaning, embedding design qualities that stimulate emotional responses leading to consumption.


**Figure 4.2.** Semiotic Function of the Design Object

Designers are the direct producers of material objects which contain symbolic meanings that are received and used by consumers (Rocamora, 2002). As the consumption process becomes less concerned with competing for the possession of goods, it shifts into the actualization of the self through a form of self-fulfillment (Baudrillard, 1988). To consume the product is to consume its meaning and, therefore, the knowledge transmitted by the designer. The design object connects the designer to the individual, communicating the designer’s knowledge in the form of conceptual meaning and intent. Therefore, it is the role of the designer to make content, information, data, meaning, and message perceptually accessible and translatable (Kazmierczak, 2003).

*Constructed Meanings (Representation – Individuals & Society)*

The mode of being-in-the-world marks man’s existence, in the manner that one can “name, modify, and change his environment through the manipulation of the body” (Kim, 2001). This schema defines the body as the unity of mind and self, relatable to other people and things, while the physical outline of the body demarcates the internal and external worlds. Accepting that one does not exist alone in the world, the body presents a common link between the unique perspectives of individuals in social situations (Scheler, 1973). Through the act of sensing, one is able to “transfer other types of conscious states to perceivable bodies, depending on the complexity of their behaviors and their relations to the environment.” (Heinamaa, 2012). The body is, therefore, the means by which one experiences the world and is made known and relatable to others. If clothing represents the human persona, then it connects the relationships between *(wo)man and body* to *body and society* (Barthes, 2006). The transactional relationship between the individual and object mobilizes design knowledge, as it comes into contact with the individual’s existing knowledge and perception, to be further disrupted when reinterpreted onto the surface of the physical body and presented to others.

According to Barthes (2006), fashion is a system that creates value in the arrangement of garments on a wearer. The conscious effort of the individual, through dress, translates the actualization of meaning that shifts with the reorganization of garments on the body. Each object forms one component of the system, which can be ordered in any number of combinations, and the linking of different objects is what constitutes the structure of dressing as the medium for self-expression. Fashion becomes a conversational activity, of projecting one’s appearance as a representation of the self onto the external world, connecting one individual to another. The act of dressing becomes a language by which human beings relate, establishing commonalities while delineating one’s sense of individuality.

The physical arrangement of clothing on the body demarcates the individual’s inner and outer worlds to “transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture” (Entwistle, 2000). Dressing becomes the activity connecting the individual and society by projecting a configuration of the self to be read and interpreted by others. Vieira (2009) defines the process of design as a tactile experience that serves both functional and ornamental needs, while clothing creates a code or visual language conveying a form of social identity. The decision to adopt a fashion is to represent one’s identity, emphasizing the relationship between personal values and the perceived value of the fashion object. In the hierarchal system of style selection, the individual’s decision in the selection process is influenced by the intrinsic value of the fashion object. However, this meaning evolves and transforms through increased interactions between the individual and object.



**Figure 4.3.** Transactional Relationship through the Design Object

Weller (2007) defines consumption as the intersection where individuals and fashion knowledge meet, providing a common platform for transforming the perceived value of the fashion product. If the semiotic function of the design object operates symbolically to generate meanings, then it is only fully realized through the active participation of a receiver (Kazmierczak, 2003). The individual, as a receiver of meaning, reconstructs the object’s meaning and assumes ownership over its new significance. The consumption process allows the individual to reconcile the tensions imposed by society, created from pressures to conform to its standards, by satisfying self needs in addition to attaining group acceptance (Baudrillard, 1988). This signifies the point of consumption as a means for individual and collective expression, where the sensory connections between the individual and fashion object function as symbolic representations of self-identity (Workman & Caldwell, 2007).

The consumption of the fashion object reinstates power and freedom to the individual, who assigns new significance or meaning, and the object assumes a new representation. This understanding replaces the original intent or codes of knowledge embedded by the designer, reiterating the fluidity of design knowledge in its ability to regenerate through increased interaction. The constantly changing nature of fashion can be seen as leading the individual to alter their perception of self and reinvent themselves through the extrinsic values associated with the fashion object.

*Co-created Meanings (Reinterpretation – Individuals & Designers)*

As a social phenomenon, fashion can be studied as a “meaning-making process” of expressing symbolic values in cultural contexts (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Meaning, when confronted and intervened by the individual’s own perception, assumes a new representational form (McCracken, 1986). This implicates the mercurial nature of the fashion object, which shifts meanings across different social contexts and cultural perspectives, as being dependent on how its end-user decodes and represents its knowledge or significance. Fashion’s trend cycles have distributed knowledge from the elite social groups to the non-elite masses, reconciling social differences through the standardization of dress. Fashion allows the individual a sense of freedom, to separate oneself from any possibility of comparison by emphasizing one’s distinction through clothing (Barthes, 2006). However, this freedom is opposed by the dominant influences of fashion leaders who dictate socially acceptable standards of style and taste. The individual is, therefore, placed in a position to not only modify and personalize the object’s meaning but to transfer its significance to others.


**Figure 4.4.** Reinterpretation of Meanings

Perception, requiring cultivation, is a precondition of meaning creation in the transaction between people and things (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Design objects provide cognitive interfaces within society to function as an interpretive structure mediated by signs pointing to meanings (Kazmierczak, 2003). Although the meaning transforms once received, it requires some comprehension of the designer’s original intent for the success and effectiveness of the design. This demonstrates the shared responsibility of designers and individuals to allow the design object to maintain its proper meaning and reach a socially accepted meaning. It is in this way that meaning creation becomes a co-creative effort between individuals and designers.

Taking the traditional example of fashion, the designer creates an object containing aesthetic or conceptual purpose. This is then adopted by a social group, usually made up of fashion elite, who standardize trends by demanding mutual imitation from its members (Simmel, 1957). The space of individual expression and representation of fashion becomes limited and constrained within the styles and trends set by society. While the traditional model follows a top-down dissemination of fashion knowledge flowing from key designers or brands, abstract forms of knowledge are fluid and able to spread contagiously which suggests that fashion norms are no longer restricted by a given example (Weller, 2007). Therefore, there is a need to explore the function of meaning creation in how the individual understands the fashion object, how these reinterpretations are related back to designers, and how the reverse flow of knowledge affects future creative processes of designers.

The designer and individual co-exist in the social world, often sharing in similar cultural backgrounds to establish commonalities leading towards the universality of design. Through the process of designing, the designer intentionally explicates specific affordances to communicate intentions to the user (Almquist & Lupton, 2010). Although the individual is given freedom to reinterpret the meaning or utility of the artifact, clues are given to transfer its original meaning. The designer’s own knowledge, while embedded into the object, is redirected into a neutral space allowing it to develop new meanings. This can be illustrated with the example of fashion, where the designer’s knowledge is used for the creation of new innovations in style. As this knowledge moves down the hierarchy of the fashion system, it becomes “less prestigious, less complex, less lavishly produced, less valued in the eyes of consumers, and less expensive in the market” (Weller, 2007). The negative social impact on a passing or dying trend stimulates the need for individuals to reinterpret the fashion object to reinstate its significance and relevance. By refashioning or reconfiguring its meaning, the individual is exercising autonomy in the cultivation of a personal style. The continual negotiation of meanings serves as the connection between individuals and designers, changing the perception of fashion objects and contributing to new values.

***5.0 Research Space of Fashion***

Design objects function as semiotic tools for establishing symbolic and significant meanings. The interpretive nature of design objects suggests the need to focus less on designing things and more on designing the inferences leading to meaning-making (Kazmierczak, 2003). In a system like fashion that is characterized by rapid movements and changes in adopting or discarding styles, the design object’s life span is increasingly shortened. This questions the instrumental role and ability of fashion designers to act as an influence for consumer perceptions and understandings of design. Technological changes and advances in media communication flatten geographical differences, accelerating codified forms of fashion knowledge transfer by flowing impersonally and non-specifically (Weller, 2007). When these fashion codes are no longer confined by time or space, the knowledge loses viscosity by transcending the previously demarcated boundaries between leaders and followers. The former position of designers, as influential producers and contributors of material culture, is challenged by the dynamic interplay between users who define new rules toward or against conformity. Consumption, therefore, becomes a transactional system of exchange where users set in motion new symbolic meanings that trigger social responses.

*Review of Framework*

The domains of design knowledge are defined as originating from people, processes and products. Design, as a conversational activity, involves the different perceptions of designers who engage in reflective dialogues. According to Schon (1983), practitioners accumulate tacit knowledge and intuitive knowing through critical reflections on experience. The repetitive nature of practice facilitates the conversation-like activity of design, producing expertise in judgments for uncertain situations. Knowledge residing within the domains of design epistemology, praxiology, and phenomenology is contained within the fluid space of inquiry. The fluidity of this space is suggested by the way in which knowledge shifts from tacit to explicit forms and is able to be communicated.

The three separate systems of ongoing dialectics are introduced as the problem space of fashion, which involves design, fashion and culture. Within the design system, the role of designers is opposed by the influences of the social world. Similarly within the fashion system, the freedom of individuals is challenged by style norms determined from various social groups. Therefore, the fashion system exists only in relation to the design system and is actualized against the context of culture. Taking the current situation of China, movements in the social environment have affected the value systems of individuals to effect changes in behavioral norms and social interactions (Smith & Hill, 2009). The cultural system is specifically introduced here to provide the context for designers and users, within a shared cultural background, undergoing similar shifts in cultural values from traditional to modern.

Buckley & Clark (2012) propose the case-study approach to “research the things, people, and ideas that have remained unobserved, to locate and interpret the intimate.” This places fashion research at the intersection of the personal and social, leading to the study of social forms of knowledge; a perspective supported by the research space of this paper’s proposed framework. The research space, as a system of meaning-making, results from how design knowledge affects the dialectical relationships of the problem space. Knowledge of designers are transferred and communicated into the creation of objects, which are consumed and adopted by users. The ways in which users integrate fashion objects into their everyday lives is explored within the transactional system, producing a more localized and personal approach for researching the social functions of fashion.

 **Figure 5.** Relationship between Spaces of Inquiry

*Fashion Research as Humanistic Inquiry*

Designers, as active members in this shared sociocultural context, are uniquely positioned as being influenced by external forces of change while simultaneously influencing change through design activities. This significantly affects the fashion system, as movements toward individuality and independent thinking begin to disrupt the tension encased in the dialectic between imitation and distinction. Within this new cultural environment, designs begin to take on new meanings which affect how designers use their own perceptions to develop foresight in designing. The design, fashion and cultural systems are, therefore, interdependent in how they relate and interact.

Design knowledge increases in fluidity through interactions between individuals and social groups, creating a mobilizing effect. The fashion object, containing knowledge encoded by the designer, provokes individuals to reassign its symbolic significance in relation to their own self-perceptions and social contexts. This form of design knowledge instigates changes altering the individual’s position in the world, not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in the process of meaning-making. In this way, fashion research extends into the humanistic inquiry of individuals and the methods through which they can establish meaningfulness in design.

This paper supports the study and research of fashion against historical and sociological perspectives. However, the rapid movements defining the fashion system greatly decrease the personal value and relevance of fashion objects. This leads to questions of whether fashion objects can increase relevance and longevity at the individual level if design knowledge is more effectively integrated into the consumption process. This paper introduces a framework relating design knowledge to the systems of design, fashion, and culture. The implications of this framework expand on the ways that design knowledge, as containing meanings, is further communicated in the relationships between designers-objects, individuals-society, and designers-individuals. Adopting a humanistic approach to research is proposed to better comprehend the specific cultural situations within which the fashion phenomenon takes place, developing a more defined understanding of how fashion facilitates the communication and process of meaning-making.

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1. Zhang Da is one of the leaders of Chinese fashion design, with his own atelier in Shanghai. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Niki Qin is the founder and design director of Moodbox. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Yilei Wu is owner and designer of ½ Eternity. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)