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Rethinking the Laggard as the point of decline in the Fashion Cycle

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Abstract: In the fashion cycle, the laggard is the late adopter, a consumer who is slow to take the fashion risk of the early adopter, and is slow to adapt to dominant fashion trends. But what happens when the accepted networks of urban culture of shopping, going out and the visual communication of fashion, no longer dominates our understanding of what is fashionable? In 2020/21, we have an interesting example of how the fashion industry and the fashion consumer have adapted to the pandemic and lockdown. The paper will focus on the laggard as the accepted point of decline in the fashion cycle, and explore how the pandemic has forced a re-thinking of the conventions of fashion consumer adoption, leading to an extended product lifespan.

The laggard is the point in the trend cycle that is closest to obsolescence; therefore, it is the point when product lifespan is ending (Rogers, 1962). This research interrogates the laggard as a convention of the fashion 'trend and acceptance' cycle, by surveying the reality of lockdown clothing behaviors alongside fashion industry strategies. The findings indicate that lockdown has intervened in the normative fashion cycle to the extent that it has led to a recalibration of the laggard category, which in turn has extended the lifetime of a product. A deliberate de-acceleration of the fashion cycle has occurred both in the strategies adopted by the fashion industry, and in the pattern of consumption. It is argued that pandemic has forged new ways of thinking about fashion, and brought about not just a rethinking of the 'end' of the cycle but a more caring attitude to fashion as a product.

Introduction

The impetus for this research was the recognition that as pandemic culture and lockdown continued through the first and second wave, attitudes to fashion were changing. I observed the ebbing of fashion consciousness, and there seemed to be a malaise or lack of concern for following fashion trends as directed by the fashion leaders. As we are emerging from lockdown in 2021, it is timely to reflect on the trend cycle and how the pandemic has disrupted and affected both the fashion industry and consumer behavior.

Fashion by definition has a cycle of popularity and decline, there is not a timespan associated with this cyclical model, but inevitably, new popularity replaces the point of decline. The laggard joins the cycle at the tipping point; that is, the cyclical moment where it is being devalued as 'fashionable' product. As the lowest point of consumption, it represents the time when the cycle is slowing down and at its least trend conscious. The link between product lifespan and the fashion cycle is that renewal is

a ceaseless part of the process. The premise of this paper is that pandemic has not just highlighted the laggard category, but its impact is such that it has caused a rethink.

Contextualizing the laggard and product lifetime

Theoretical perspectives on the laggard in fashion emphasize how slow consumer acceptance of new styles and the late diffusion of a new style, are interrelated. First published in 1962, Rogers' *The Diffusion of Innovations* is, "the most widely accepted and applicable theory on the adoption and spread of innovations, the diffusion of innovation theory is a key foundational theory." (Miller, 2015, p.1559) The term laggard describes the process of decline and is the final point at which a consumer accepts a fashion trend. Rogers (1962) theory focuses on the process of societal acceptance and the dissemination into the mass population. Design leadership drives the cyclical system, and the neoteric entry of innovation restarts the product cycle. In fashion terms, the translation of the innovative

characteristics of the early stage, leads to mass fashion adoption. The majority adoption of a trend is about 68% of the consumer market, leaving 16% for the laggard. (Matzler et al, 2013) The latter percentage is when the consumption is reducing and closest to obsolescence. Gladwell (2002) and Barnes (2013) updated Rogers' theory by arguing that the emergence and expansion of digital media has resulted in the widening and quickening of trend diffusion. Thus leading to an expansion of the early and mass adoption portion of the cycle. Barnes (2013) aligns its impact with the rise of Fast fashion in the noughties. Fast fashion was a new model in the supply/ demand chain where the aim is to maximize the fashion product at the peak of the trend. Ease of purchase through e commerce, the expansion of types of transmission, for example blogging and e marketing methods such as influencers, meant rapidity in the early stages of the product cycle. (Barnes, 2013) The rapidity of turnover of fashion trends alongside profuse production of fast selling items has resulted in a shortened cycle meaning that the laggard category is occurring more regularly.

'Purposeful lagging' and pre pandemic trends.

It is useful to review pre-2020 fashion tendencies beyond the fast fashion cycle, in order to contextualize pandemic culture. In the 20-teen years, both fast fashion and casual dressing were on the increase. At one polarity, fast fashion continued to maximize the consumer awareness of fashion trends leading to a surge in purchase in the early adoption phase; at the other end, an increased percentage of the population were choosing indifference to fashion leadership. The latter could be termed 'purposeful lagging', that is, holding onto, and continuing to purchase and wear repetitive trends. Athleisure, a hybrid of sportswear and leisurewear is an example of the increasing informality of dress and a trend that was bucking the accepted cyclical system. Mackinney-Valentin (2017, p.64) describes the increasing emphasis on casual dressing as a style which highlights, "blandness rather than distinction". She comments it "may be read as deliberate lagging." That is, consumer indifference expressed as a, "relaxed attitude to fashion." (2017, p.59) This phrase describes the slow adopter of Rogers' theory, as the laggard is the most ambivalent of all fashion consumers. If protracted, as McKinney-

Valentin is suggesting, then the 'indifferent' or laggard consumer also has the ability to slow the cycle. Therefore counteracting fast fashion rotation and extending the cycle by prolific adoption at its tail end.

Mackinney-Valentin's observation of the increasing propensity of casual dressing ties in to the emergence of the fashion trend of 'normcore'; an umbrella term associated with both a style of clothing and an attitude to dressing. Normcore is a term (said to have originated in 2013) which describes the rise in ubiquity of 'everyday' clothes such as jeans, sweatshirts, hoodies, trainers and t-shirts, as a global style adoption. (Duncan, 2014) It signifies an acceptance of maximal casual or informal dressing, which was not gender specific. Often associated with 'street style', and athleisure, its 'sameness' is considered to signify a rebellion against expressive individualism (a 'letting go' of a 20th century ideology of distinction through dress), and simultaneously strengthening the visual culture of a millennial generation. Therefore, a paradox has occurred in the decade 2010 to 2020 in relation to fashion and senescence. A rapid supply and demand cycle occurred at the same time as a slowing or prolonging of a trend that was outliving the normative cycle.

Pandemic and new strategies

Pandemic created an instant disruption to the established fashion system. This section will focus on two strands of changed behavior in relation to the laggard. One relates to the fashion industry, and the other to consumer behavior.

One of the earliest strategies of the fashion industry was to consider extending the lifetime of their product. For example, luxury brands recognized they need to prolong the serviceable life of existing products.. Bellettini in April 2020 (President of *Yves St Laurent*) commented, "The fact that stores worldwide have been closed for some weeks, and some production sites, too, has impacted the shelf life of collections...." (Bellettini in Samaha, 2020) As one of the first couture brands to take a decisive rescheduling/ cancelling of the biannual fashion shows, the artistic director of YSL Anthony Vaccarello, is reported to have described the decision as, "Slowing down and living the moment". (Vaccarello in Samaha 2020) As pandemic culture continued, other examples of adjustments emerged. For

example, reselling. Prior to pandemic the decline of the sales meant entering laggard category leading to the removal of the product from retail outlets as deadstock. However reselling means reinvigorating the lagged product to be 're-presented' for sale. For example, The *RealReal* brand announced in October 2020 that it was collaborating with Gucci to launch an online collection of pre-owned Gucci items and new items sourced directly from the brand. More recently, *Rixo* (March 2021) launched an 'archive' online site boosting the profile of 'old or dead' stock to the status of 'collectibles'. Both resale examples have reduced the emphasis on product innovation and leadership, in favor of lengthening the lifespan of existing products of the previous season. Therefore creating a new way of utilizing the previously laggard category of product.

The second strand concerns consumer behavior. In 2020, normcore was reaching the end of its fashion trend cycle but pandemic created a resurgence of interest. Maguire (2020) proclaimed, "Streetwear was declared dead. It's still here", and Butler (2020) reported, "Retailers and brands said they had been taken by surprise by the level of demand online during the spring and summer as the nation ditched its traditional work wear and changed into something more casual to work from home during lockdown." Renamed as 'loungewear' or 'comfort clothes', the continuation and acceleration of casual clothing resulted in an extension of the product cycle. At the same time, new trends were forming through online media. Social media communities began to spring up as a response to lockdown. For example in the early months of first wave and lockdown, Cottagecore or countrycore spread across the media forums of Pinterest, Tik tok, Tumblr and Instagram. It visualized an idealized rural idyll and, "offers a vision of domestic bliss without servitude". (Slone, 2020) The floral frock encapsulated a pastoral and gentle approach to how ordinary life could be re-imagined. Using vintage purchases or homemade garments, cottagecore visualizes (through social media postings) a lifestyle away from the realities of urban living and intrusive regulations. Other trends driven by social media have emerged - survivalist, dark academia, and e boy; and more recently, Gorpcore - the adoption of hiking brands as fashion for the 'daily exercise from your front door'. As shared trends through online media, they created an e

world that turned away from the directives of trend innovation of the traditional fashion system.

Laggard tendencies - Pandemic consumer behavior and attitudes.

In pandemic culture (from March 2020) we have been able to witness how the fashion industry has shifted tactics to tackle a rapid decline of fashion consumption, but also the potential loss of interest in what is fashionable and the normative fashion cycle. Using a qualitative questionnaire method and surveying 55 respondents in the 18 to 25 age groups about their lockdown clothing behaviors and attitudes, three key relational areas have emerged.

Change in behavior

The majority of respondents reported that lockdown had an impact on both their fashion buying habits and their style. One respondent commented, "With the most exciting activity available being a walk, the desire to 'dress up' has vanished". In addition, "Before it was fashion over function and now its function over fashion." As we moved into multiple lockdowns so attitudes shifted, "My style now consists of me wearing pajamas and tracksuits, whereas in the other lockdowns I would make an effort to get dressed."

The difficulties of lockdown in relation to fashion as a directional leader is clear, "Making a fashion statement is hard from home ", exclaimed one respondent, another commented, "I feel like fashion has become lazy." In describing their lockdown clothes the majority of respondents used the term *loungewear*, describing it as tracksuits, or a combination of individual items including - hoodie, pajamas, joggers, t -shirts, leggings, shorts, and jumpers. It is clear that the overall style is the same as 'normcore' but the updated term describes the behavioral function. The respondents use expressions such as, "baggy", "oversized", "very casual", are repeatedly used, and the most common descriptors were – "comfy", "cozy" and "gentle"; the terms "fashionable", and "expressive" fell exactly halfway in their priorities; and the lowest three descriptors were "controversial", "assertive" and "glamorous". Only one of the 55 respondents kept their pre lockdown style, 54 changed to the (more) casual informal dressing described above.

New ways of thinking

The main behavioral shift of the respondents is evident in the division between the public and private self. Many respondents commented on their public persona and the importance of 'being seen', Typical comments are, "I will style up just to go out to the supermarket "(6) and, "I only wear fashionable clothes when I leave the house." This relates to their feelings about the purpose of fashion and its performative ability. As one respondent commented, "having nowhere to go has taken away the opportunity to express yourself through style ".These comments emphasize how important the public arena is for sartorial expression. Perhaps also explain the rise of alternative online fashion cultures such as cottagecore as an alternative to sartorial expression in real life. For example, "I appreciate fashion more because I miss being able to express yourself with different outfits and show people" (45) and, "As much as I enjoy lounging around in baggy/comfy clothes, I cannot wait to express myself through fashion once again." This comment reinforces the survey where 'being fashionable' was of a lower priority in lockdown, and casual clothing was performing a different role than in pre lockdown culture. However, trend awareness is still evident in their answers, but it has shifted even more towards social media as an influence. "I've just become more aware of how influential social media is on fashion because everyone is at home spending time on it, if someone posts a tracksuit on TikTok within an hour it can be sold out." One respondent commented, "Instagram trends are becoming normalized."

New attitudes and caretaking

The ubiquitous pandemic style of dressing has also reframed attitudes for some respondents. A degree of care about their buying habits has emerged. "Lockdown has definitely made me realize I don't need a new outfit every time I go out". In addition, "The pandemic has made me appreciate my more fashionable pieces of clothing as I do not have as many opportunities to wear them." Some respondents feel as though it has released them from a system, "I feel like the lockdown has made me reflect on my true style and what I do and don't like, perhaps something that I wouldn't have usually had time to do while not being in lockdown." It is clear from the questionnaire results that casual dressing had played a less important role in the expression of the self, and in doing so has extended its lifespan and raised its profile, "I have definitely learned that comfortable clothes can be made stylish."

Conclusions

As we are still within the fractured space of pandemic then this research has yet to use a historical lens but is an attempt to review it mid to late term. Pandemic has shown that the laggard category can be something more than a percentage of disinterested consumers and a product ready for obsolescence; it has revealed a potential for growth. In numerous ways, pandemic culture has slowed the normative fashion cycle and challenged the accepted framework (Rogers 1962; Gladwell 2003; Barnes 2013) of fashion forward trends as the impetus. The 'stay home' guidelines removed the drive to 'dress up' to go out, which in turn forced a slowing or a reconfiguration of fashion culture.

In conclusion, the pandemic has brought about a conflict, a tension between the existent 'foundational' theoretical understanding of how product cycles work (Miller, 2015), and the realities of practice during this unprecedented socio/economic juncture. The scope of this research was limited to an exploration of the laggard in relation to the fashion cycle and lifespan, but has wider design application in that it exemplifies how innovation arises through disruption. The consequence of extending a product point of decline is that it lengthens its lifespan. In turn this lessens the desire for the 'new'. A significant result of this study based on user experience is that it has raised awareness of care - about the clothing we own, the clothing we desire to own, and from the industry perspective, caring about those laggard items which seemingly are no longer of interest.

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