

Vintage or Fashion Clothes? An Investigation inside the Issues of Collecting and Marketing Second-hand Clothes

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Abstract

This paper presents issues related to the collection of second-hand clothing and the reasons for marketing vintage items. The work is structured around three main points. Firstly, it is related to the contemporary idea and understanding of clothes. Secondly, the study investigates the figure of contemporary clothes collectors and the different reasons for collecting. Thirdly, the paper defines the figure of the clothing dealer, in the elitist scene of the fashion market.

To conclude, the paper explores issues concerned with the relationship of collecting to consumption and the ways in which collecting can contribute to the creation of identity in areas like the dimension of time, space and gender. In particular, it has been based on recent debates concerning the nature of clothes (understood both as material culture and economic value) and how the vintage collector and fashion dealer respond to it.

Keywords

Collecting; Collectors; Marketing; Vintage; Fashion.

Introduction

In Kinsella's recent book *Shopalcoholic Sister* (Italian title: *I love shopping con mia sorella*), she describes an amusing episode concerning the main character of the book, Becky Bloomwood, and her shopping addiction. The hilarious episode is related to a unique Angel bag and it is set in Milan, the capital of fashion. The episode is very significant and appropriate for our topic because it describes well the desire of possessing an object more than the need of the clothes or accessories themselves: it is a tormented desire that is fulfilled only after the acquisition of the object, wished for which has become essential in order to bring happiness to Becky.

It is an Angel bag, a real one. I thought it would have been impossible to find it. Solemnly, the shop assistant put it on a beige suede pedestal and then steps back to admire it. Nobody speaks anymore. It is like a member of the Royal family has suddenly arrived. Or a movie star. I cannot breath. I am as if paralysed. It is beautiful. Absolutely beautiful! The leather seems soft like butter. The angel is painted by hand in delicate aquamarine tones. And, on the bottom, the name 'Dante' is written with little diamonds. I swallow, trying to regain control of myself but my knees

are jelly-like and my hands are sweating [...] 'I could buy it' I suddenly think, 'I could buy it!'. (Kinsella, 2004, p.41)¹

In the context of this study, it is appropriate to start by referring to that passage, since the paper deals both with the collecting and the marketing of second hand and vintage clothes. These activities imply an almost uncontrollable desire of possession. In fact, people who collect, as well as, people who market vintage clothes share quite a lot in common with Becky Bloomwood. Both, people who collect vintage clothes and people who sell fashion clothes, aim to succeed in a kind of transaction (give-receive), which involves clothes. However, in the first case (clothes collectors) the transaction is concerned mainly with the possession of the items and self-expression through the collection itself, while in the second case (fashion dealer) is concerned with the money value of the clothes. Unquestionably, the sense of self-satisfaction and self-definition is pivotal in each case.

Bearing this in mind, the paper aims to present these two different perspectives: the one of the second-hand clothes collectors and the one of fashion dealers, the motivations that bring people to be a collector and the reasons that cause people to sell their collections. It also intends to specify and explain the difference between these two behaviours. Consequently, this paper is organised in three main parts. After an initial section, which briefly sets a distinction between clothing, costume and fashion, the paper frames the context of the 'clothing' from a material culture perspective and a consumer view. It, then, will continue by analysing concisely the reasons both of collecting practice and of consumers' behaviour. Moreover, six in-depth interviews of second-hand clothes collectors and vintage clothing dealers (mainly from Leicester and Nottingham) are presented and analysed. The final and conclusive part summarises the main points and attempts to explain what distinguishes collectors of second hand clothes from vintage fashion dealers.

Clothing and Fashion: from a Material Culture Perspective

The Polysemous Nature of Clothing

Clothes are crucial in the construction of the self and the others (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Clothes provide with the first information about people: they are a sort of public business card, and together with food and objects satisfy one of the primitive human impulses. In this respect, "the development of the sense of the self is closely connected with the perception of one's own body" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1990, p.27) in relation to the material world, and the world outside each individual. As a consequence, "clothing accomplishes the impulse of decorating and clothing the human body" (Bliss, 1990, p.18). Therefore, in order adequately to frame a psychology of clothes collectors and dealers it is necessary to view as clearly as possible man's place in nature (Bliss, 1990). Moreover, it is essential to consider their polysemous nature (cloth as an item to possess, cloth as an item to show, cloth as an item to sell) and their power as social identities markers (second-hand clothes collector, fashion dealer, customer).

The Cloth, the Costume and the Fashion Item

First of all, in speaking of clothes it is important to make a distinction within the clothing itself and more exactly between the cloth, the costume and the fashion item. This distinction is based strictly on the given understanding and perception of clothing, in other words, on its social and cultural meaning. As we have already mentioned, clothing satisfies one of the main human needs: to cover and protect the body. Clothing depends on different parameters, linked to

geographical, historical and social needs. Additionally, clothing depends strongly on the innovation and on the creativity of a culture.

On the contrary, the costume² is a cloth associated to a specific time and space, it does not answer to any social needs but it can be the symbol of a culture. The costume, in other words, has a much durable life span, because it freezes the moment of its use to the transmission of specific cultural symbols and maintained local traditions. It would be enough, for instance, to think of traditional costumes.

Finally, when tradition, creativity and innovation are combined in relation to clothing, we have to deal with so-called 'fashion', which, therefore, indicates more a movement, a kind of social tendency. Being a sort of attitude, fashion is very changeable, according to social and aesthetic rules. In addition, fashion does not necessary answer to the need of covering the human body as much as the need of exhibiting, through the human body. To quote Leeds-Hurwitz (1993, p.105), the word *fashion* refers to "the clothing dictated by designers as appropriate at any given time." Fashion is the index of a change, of a social alteration, which is mainly concerned with the need of a specific society of expressing itself. And, the result of this change and alteration are the fashion items, which symbolise and concretise the occurred social changes.

Therefore, clothes can be considered according to three different, social perspectives. Clothes could be regarded "as *artefacts* as lumps of the physical (natural) world transformed into artefacts by social process (culture); as *signs and symbols*, creating categories and transmitting messages which can be read' and finally as *meanings*, as things to which both individuals and societies attach differing moral and economic values, as a result of their historical experience, both personal and communal" (Pearce, 1995, p.16). Within our contemporary consumer society, clothes, however, become more sign-marks of people identities, which reflect inner worlds as well as define a social status (Martin, 1999).

The culture of collecting: collectors and clothes

It is pivotal to define the figure of the 'collector' and the reasons behind collecting. Different theorists and scholars (Belk, 1998 & 1995; Pearce, 1995, and Bianchi, 1997) have given different definitions, which, however agree on the point that collections for collectors, represent an extended self, and concretise the passion for possession (Belk et al., 1988 and Pearce, 1995). In relation to this, it is also possible to affirm that people who collect are very much concerned with the need to continuously and visibly re-define themselves, in the material, outer world. And this kind of interaction with the material world of things is essential to people because without it, people's lives could not have a tangible definition. It is therefore evident that "collecting is a fundamentally significant aspect of this complex and fascinating relationship" and "both the practise and poetics of collecting are concerned more with how individuals experience the process of collecting in their own lives, how they report on their relationship to it and how this can be analysed" (Pearce 1995, p.31).

Collections are nothing other than groups of objects intentionally selected and assembled together and sharing "an intrinsic relationship to each other in a sequential or representative sense, rather than each being valued for its own qualities" (Pearce, 1995, p.20). At this point, however, it is legitimate to ask why is there this spasmodic need of self-definition through collections? Why do people decide to define themselves through the selection and grouping of determined objects and again, in relation to our study, why do people define their own identity through second-hand or vintage clothes?

Possibly, the answer is very basic and it rests on the belief that objects, somehow, are active agents in the self-definition of people's identities, because they are the products and achievements of other individuals (in which possibly collectors somehow, identify themselves with) or because those objects reinforce the sense of self-reassurance and stability.

Often it happens that a collector decides to sell his/her own collection and becomes a dealer. The thin line between a collector and a dealer is crossed and the crossing indicates a switch of values: the material, economical value of the collection becomes stronger, while the need for self-reassurance diminishes. The collector is ready to face the outer world. A sort of emotional detachment contributes to this change, to this emotional growth. A collection ends when the last piece is added at it (Belk 1995). However, it could be more appropriate to state that a collection ends, when its owner decided to find the last piece, and when the collector decides that it is time to express himself/herself in a different way, to come out from a constructed, safe world and share it with outsiders. The quest for the self-definition and possession becomes something else: if, before there was an implicit quest for self-reassurance, at this stage it becomes a quest for public acknowledgement in the 'fashion market'.

Collecting and Consuming: From a Cultural Consumption Perspective

Regarding the consumption of clothes, Tarrant tells:

Until the mid-eighteenth century clothes were an expensive commodity and were regularly left in wills to relatives and friends. Despite fashion changes very few people would consider buying clothes at the rate that we do today, even in wealthy circles. Cloth was very expensive and in an age of profligate living, such as the early seventeenth century, an extremely wealthy man like Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, could die heavily in debt because of the style of living considered necessary to his position [...] much of money was lavished on clothes. (Tarrant, 1983, p.32)

Cultural consumption is a social activity and an everyday practice (Storey, 1999). It is what and how we consume may serve to say about who we are or who we would like to be. It may be used to produce and maintain particular lifestyles; it may promise compensation in times of loss, or provide a symbolic means to celebrate success and mark achievement; it can provide the material for our dreams; it can mark and maintain social difference and social condition. Whatever else it is, this paper argues that cultural consumption is the practice of culture.

Self-expression

Campbell (1983) calls Romanticism, the intellectual and artistic movement which played a crucial role in the development and rapid growth of consumer society in the late eighteenth century. As he (p.52) comments, "Romanticism [...] led to the creation of a distinctive ideal of character, one which, although most obviously applied to the artist, was also meant to serve for the consumer or 're-creator' of his [or her] products."

This is an important historical development of a growing separation of the subjective inner-world of the self and the objective out-world of nature. Campbell (1995, p.120) sees "self-expression as a crucial experience to the development of a consumption ethic," and thus "the essential activity of the consumption is not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the

imaginative process of seeking pleasure.” This leads to a concern with the “meaningfulness of products”, rather than a concern with the “meaning of a product” (Campbell, 1995).

Shopping

A key moment in the changing connection between commerce and identity occurs with the development of the department store in the nineteenth century (Williams, 1982; Storey, 1999). The department store became a familiar feature of city shopping and the extended socialization of needs.

It brought into being many of the aspects of shopping we now take for granted. As Bowlby (1985, p.3) explains, “people could now come and go, to look and dream, perchance to buy, and shopping became a new bourgeois leisure activity - a way of pleasantly passing the time, like going to a play or visiting a museum.” In this way, as Williams (1982, p.67) remarks, the discourse of commerce had shifted from an insistence on the “immediate purchase of particular items” to an attempt to generate and provoke the “arousal of free-floating desire.” In other words, “with the advent of department store shopping became detached from buying and with this development came the pleasure of looking” or “just looking” (Storey, 1999, p.146).

But what do these developments in the practice of shopping have to do with questions of ‘self-formation’ (the making of identities)? The answer is that articulating the ‘self’ through the cultural consumption of commodities is a social practice that has to be learned, for example, how to dress. In this way, the department store promoted the idea that a middle-class self was something that could be purchased (Storey, 1999, p.147).

Possession

The interpretation of collecting as a particular form of possessions has stimulated the interests of scholars of consumer behaviour (see Belk et al., 1988 for a review). From the traditional economist’s view, we value possessions solely for utilitarian purposes, or as symbols for establishing status in the social order. In contrast, consumer researchers have sought to understand how we use possessions to establish, maintain, or even change who we are. People use material possessions to narrate their life stories and to define a sense of personal identity. Regarding this phenomenon, Belk (1988) has identified the extended self-concept to explain how people literally incorporate material possessions into their self-definitions. According to Belk et al. (1988), objects of the extended self are not only of our identity; they are often used to construct an identity. Thus, the possessions of the extended self capture ‘who I think I am’ (and, possibly, ‘who I would like to think I am’). We become attached to possessions, which are especially useful for telling our stories. Possessions enter and leave the life narrative as the contents of the biographical record change. People become attached to just about anything from photographs and jewelry, to vintage clothing or cars.

Material possessions surround us. By keeping and caring for such possessions (clothes), we maintain our biographical records. We invest into a particular possession because, the more attached we become to it, the more it stands for ourselves.

For this reason, “possessions may be perceived as symbolically obsolete,” (Belk, 1995, p. 66), and obsolete items may appeal to “collectors” even more strongly because of their obsolescence (Thompson, 1976). Still, someone who possesses a collection is not necessarily a collector unless they continue to acquire additional things for the collection (Belk, 1995).

Collecting Defined

In a consumer society, one way to acquire things is to buy them. In this collecting form of consumption, acquisition is a key process. However, collecting differs from most other types of consumption because it involves forming what is seen to be a set of things - the collection (Belk, 1995).

Belk (1995, p.67) defines that collecting is the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences. In this process, the discovery of “a collection set” transforms the over-familiar, the overlooked, into a new object of wonder (Bianchi, 1997, p.276). This means that a collector has his or her own, not necessarily explicit, criteria for comparing the objects, which attract his or her attention. It is on the basis of these criteria that the collector selects the objects, which he or she perceives as worth collecting.

Second-Hand Collectors or Vintage Clothing dealers? – Initial Findings

This section is based on the analysis of six in-depth interviews made to collectors and dealers (See Appendix 1). We designed an interview protocol and all interviews were carried out between December 2004 and March 2005. They were recorded by a digital voice recorder and then transcribed and coded. Individuals were selected on the basis of their availability and relevance to this study. In order to give a fair and uniformed view, we selected three second-hand clothing collectors and three dealers. The questions are based on the following main points (See Appendix 2):

- Reasons for people to collect second hand clothes and accessories;
- Purposes of marketing such items;
- Differences between clothes collectors and dealers.

Reasons for People to Collect Second Hand Clothes and Accessories

It emerged from the interviews that people are interested in collecting second-hand clothes and accessories mainly because of a need of self-satisfaction, as well as a need of emotional and nostalgic compensation. For instance, B.B (a lady from Leicestershire who collected for forty-five years head squares from all around the world),³ explained that she started to collect in the 1950s, because, although she was a textile designer working for a firm, she never got to have any of her own designed scarves. In addition, she was interested in the way the “design would fit in the square” and liked this kind of items so much that she “wanted to have a comprehensive collection.”

Second-hand clothes collections are special to their ‘custodians’ (to use the self-definition of one of these collectors) because the nostalgic, historical feeling that makes such items special, precious and irreplaceable is almost similar to archaeological items. Actually, C.B. explained: “vintage clothes are almost like cultural documents” and because clothes are “essentially disposable, [she believes] that they should be looked after as archaeological artefacts are looked after.”

In choosing their items, collectors accordingly stated that they look at the wearability, the style, conditions, material and manufacture.

Purposes of Marketing Such Items

According to the interview data, there are four major purposes of buying and selling vintage clothes as follows:

- Good to sell
- Something that appeals always to everybody (not to a specific market segment)
- The business of nostalgia and image of a new fashion
- Recyclable

The owner of a vintage clothes shop in Leicester, S.R., said that she had always been interested in vintage clothes because they are “good to sell” and they are “unique.” D.B., the manager of another vintage shop in Leicester shared the same view with S.R. and explained that it is fashionable to collect “original” items from the 70s, because people do not like any “reproduction.”

Regarding ‘self-expression’, S.R. and D.B. both emphasized that her shop aims to “offer a different thing [since] not everybody wants to wear the same thing” and that “it is good to celebrate the previous decades and keep history alive.” Concerning the quality, all dealers agreed that “the fabric of vintage clothes is better than the modern one it is so important to ‘recycle’ such good items [and they seemed not too keen in] ‘modern’ shops because people just come and go!”

Two dealers from Leicester seemed to be more interested in specific periods: this is because it is possible to create the business of nostalgia and image of a new fashion. Actually, it was evident that items from ‘the 70s’ now are very popular, among costumers, for sale or for hire. As D. B. explained: “some fancy dresses get used so much so we will not sell them. Those items are only for hire, because we can get much money back.”

From the interviews it was clear that dealers would sell everything and they market customers of ‘all sorts’ from students to ‘mature people’ with a strategy consisting of mainly word-of-mouth, leaflets, and websites (only for picking up information).

Differences between Clothes Collectors and Dealers

In terms of differences between collectors and dealers, it was evident that, due to emotional attachment, sense of ownership and nostalgia for past times, collectors tend to wear the clothes and accessorises. The actual act of wearing such things, makes collectors themselves feeling special, by acquiring and reviving a bit of history and past romanticism, like actors in a theatre. Indeed, a quotation from D. T-B. summarises well this attitude: by wearing vintage clothes people “wear something that looks individual and stylish [and] bags, earrings, compacts have a historical resonance and make you speculate about the women who owned them, and the period in which they were manufactured.”

On the contrary, vintage fashion dealers seem to be more disenchanted people. They share most of the selective criteria with collectors. As C.R. said: “we buy ‘good condition’, ‘stylish’, ‘wearable’, ‘collectable’, ‘unusual’ and ‘interesting fabric’.” However, the exchange value of the items is preponderant: items, in fact, are bought and collected in the shop, in order to be sold again and to “find a good home for them again.”(C.R.). The borderline between collector and dealer sometimes is still not well defined. For instance, S.R. the owner of a vintage clothes shop

(Leicester) defined herself as a 'collector and dealer, who likes to collect but also to sell' the items in her shop.

Conclusions

To conclude, this paper has highlighted the difference between second-hand clothes collectors and vintage fashion dealers. It has suggested that both collectors and dealers share (although in different ways and at a different level) a sense of gratification and nostalgia towards second hand clothing. However, collectors nourish a stronger emotional attachment towards items, which compensate an emotional deficiency or symbolise their alter ego. Indeed, people who collect "have the capacity to bring their emotions and imaginations to bear on the world of objects and are able to nourish these qualities by objects" (Pearce, 1995, p.175). Conversely people who are involved or own vintage clothing shops have proved what Belk stated: "collecting things and displaying things should flourish among individuals in a consumer culture in which consumer goods have become the central focus of our dreams and desires" (Belk, 1995, p.139).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank for their help and suggestions: Prof. Susan Pearce, Richard Sandell, Konstantinos Arvanitis, Thomas Jacobi, Katrina Allen and all the people who were contacted and interviewed for this research.

Notes

¹ Translated from Italian into English by Anna Catalani. The original book is in English.

² 'Costume' is the term now generally applied to all types of clothing whether everyday, ceremonial, fancy, folk or theatrical, which have been worn in the past. Some purists suggest using the term 'dress' for what people wear every day and would reserve costume for theatrical and fancy dress. In this paper, we will use 'clothes' or 'clothing' which would be more comprehensive terms. With the clothes go the accessories: hats, handbags, shoes, stockings, handkerchiefs, gloves, fans, parasols and all those dozens of little items that the well-dressed person has always needed. For a further discussion this distinction, see Tarrant (1983).

³ B.B. donated her collection to the *Fashion Gallery* in Leicestershire. The collection of 1307 head squares ranges from the beginning of the 1900 until now.

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Appendix 1

	Name	Age Range	Education	Occupation	Location
1	B. B.	60-70	Degree (textile designer)	Volunteer in the Fashion Gallery, Leicestershire	Leicestershire
2	C.B	20-30	Degree	Costumier of the Golden Cage Shop	Nottingham
3	S. R.	40-50	N.A.	Owner of Pulp Fashion Vintage Shop	Leicester
4	D. T-B	40-50	Degree (PhD)	Writer and Lecturer	Loughborough
5	D.B.	20-30	N.A.	Shop Manager of Vintage Clothing Shop	Leicester
6	C.R.	40-50	Degree	Owner of Celia Vintage Clothing Shop	Nottingham

Appendix 2

Name:

Age (please tick):

20-30 []

30-40 []

40-50 []

50-60 []

60-70 []

Education:

Occupation:

Location:

- 1) Why are you interested in clothes and accessories? And why in vintage clothes and accessories?
- 2) Are you interested in a specific time range? (40s, 70s...)
- 3) How long have you been collecting/selling vintage clothes?
- 4) Do you consider yourself as a collector of clothes? If yes, why do you collect them?
- 5) If no, how would you define yourself in relation to your shop?
- 6) How do you gather the clothes and accessories? (Presents, buy, etc..)
- 7) Which are your criteria in choosing them?
- 8) Do you sell all the clothes you have in your shop?
- 9) would you dress some of the clothes or accessories of the collection or of the shop?
- 10) Have you ever refused to sell some of your clothes to somebody, if yes, why?
- 11) Why do you find them special?
- 12) Why do you think it is important to collect/to sell such items?
- 13) Who are your customers?

Thank you very much for your help!