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The aesthetics of luxury fashion, body and identify formation

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Abstract

In this paper we theorize and empirically investigate how female consumers' attitudes and preferences relating to bodily appearance are linked to their perceptions of the aesthetics of fashion. Our theoretical work is informed by three streams of research: aesthetics of production, aesthetics of reception and aesthetic labor. These three converge to illuminate our study. Using the ZMET technique, we uncover four themes: fashion as wearable art, body and self-identity, bodily appearance and high fashion brands, and aesthetic labor through fashion. Our focus on the aesthetics of fashion and identity formation provides a segue into the broader discussion of the growing importance of aesthetics in understanding consumer behavior.

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Introduction

In this paper, we theorize and empirically investigate how consumers' attitudes and preferences relating to bodily appearance are linked to their perceptions of the aesthetics of fashion. We address the link between embodiment and consumer experiences and identity formation in order to elucidate the contours of aesthetic experience.

As some fashion researchers (Davis, 1992; Dwyer, 2004; Entwistle, 2009) have noted, there seems to be a natural relationship between bodily appearance and fashion choices, but this link has not been adequately investigated within the field of consumer research. Our study attempts to examine key issues that lie at the intersection of aesthetics, fashion, and the body based on consumer narratives, and explores how the underlying themes emerging from such narratives provide empirical and theoretical insights into bodily appearance and the aesthetics of fashion.

Our theoretical approach integrates and goes beyond recent work by consumer researchers on the aesthetics of the body (Joy & Sherry, 2003; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995), fashion theory (Barthes, 1983[1967]; McCracken, 2005; Scott, 2005; Solomon, 1985), gender subjectivities and gender-based appeals (Kaiser, Freeman, & Chandler, 1993; Sengupta & Dahl, 2008) and identity formation (Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009; Wang & Calder, 2009). Our empirical work employs a modified ZMET approach (Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, & Christensen, 2007; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995), an analytical technique using qualitative data based on visual images as interpreted by consumers. We focus on three theoretical notions that collectively form the basis of our study: aesthetics of production, aesthetics of reception and aesthetic labor.

In the field of culture and fashion theory, there has been a fair amount of attention paid to fashion and bodily appearance as a way to recognize the aesthetics of production that includes dress, clothing, and costumes (Entwistle, 2000; Miller, 2007). In addition, consumer researchers have begun to pay attention to developments relating to the reception of aesthetic images (Schroeder, 2002; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). On a more sociological level, the notion of aesthetic labor enters the picture,

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indicating that consumers live in an “aesthetic economy” (Postrel, 2003) and that norms of attire and appearance are influenced by socio-cultural forces. These different strands of research raise a set of questions that guide our study:

1. What meanings do consumers derive from fashion images and what metaphors do they use to describe their bodily experiences with and exposure to high fashion?
2. How do consumers integrate their perception of bodily appearance, aesthetics of fashion, and identity?
3. What type of aesthetic effort is exerted by consumers to look good in their attire and adornments?

Theoretical framework

Before presenting our theoretical framework, we offer some working definitions of fashion and aesthetics. Given the vast literature on these subjects with many divergent views, there is no single definition that will do justice to their full meanings. For our purpose, we define “fashion” as the most admired style in clothes and bodily adornments. By implication it is “the cultural construction of the embodied identity” (Steele, 2004). Likewise, the term “aesthetics” refers to visual forms of objects and sensory experiences associated with, texture, harmony, order and beauty (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). Neither fashion nor aesthetics are timeless and therefore, the aesthetics of fashion is constantly evolving based on prevailing tastes and cultural dispositions (Slater, 2002).

The Fashion System and the Aesthetics of Production

An early proponent of “the fashion system,” Roland Barthes (1983[1967]) provided the foundational theoretical work on fashion as a semiotic system of language and signs. His study included a thorough examination of fashion magazines and focused on the “written garment.” He examined clothing/fashion as an integral part of the visual sign system, and analyzed the relationship between images and text in the production and diffusion of fashion culture. He was one of the first theorists to elaborate the notion of fashion as a sign system, which also underscores the practice of media culture as it relates to fashion.

McCracken (2005) used a cultural production framework and considered the fashion system from a structural/cultural perspective, for the system can be manipulated for symbolic purposes through a transfer of cultural meanings. In general, there are cultural/social contexts that provide the broad canvas in which fashion meanings are incorporated. This is what McCracken calls the meaning transfer system within a cultural framework. Meanings are also generated through interactions with reference groups to which the individuals may belong. Ultimately, individuals ascribe their own meanings to objects based on their own judgments and evaluations. It is quite possible that these different levels of meanings—cultural, group-oriented and individual—may be in conflict with each other. Thus consumers resolve these issues by developing meaning structures that best define their own self-identity. Consumers modify and adapt these lessons to their “life

projects” and “life themes.” Thus we see an interplay of tensions between the dominant fashion discourses and consumers’ own preferred styles and personal notions of body appearance. This leads us to the aesthetics of reception.

Aesthetics of reception—bodily discourses and identity formation

In almost all cultures, the aesthetic notions of the body are central to one’s identity (Joy & Sherry, 2003). Some researchers have found a linkage between consumer choices and identity based motivation (Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt et al., 2009). The cultural logic of the role of the body in reference to self-identity varies depending on whether the body is viewed as celebrated or commodified (Joy & Venkatesh, 1994). Bodies are also viewed differently based on sub-cultural idioms and representations. Thus, for example, adolescent discourses on sexuality are associated with their bodily tropes. Fashion designers think of the body as malleable and subject to artistic engagement through identity-enhancement trappings. However, in the world of advertising gratuitous sex appeals have also raised some concerns because of their implications to bodily discourses (Sengupta & Dahl, 2008).

Consumers are exposed to culturally dominant meanings in the fashion world and attribute their own personal meanings to fashion objects (Solomon, 1985; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). They derive meanings from the fashion world and also directly or vicariously experience fashion objects—directly by adorning them and vicariously through exposure to fashion models or attractive people or through magazine displays and media exposure.

Aesthetic labor and fashion

While theories of the phenomenology of body aesthetics point to its central importance in consumer culture, fashion theorists describe how clothing and dress have contributed to the intensification of aesthetic norms of the body.

Contemporary theories of fashion have shifted their focus from the liberatory and celebratory notions of fashion to normative expectations. In examining this close relationship, Miller (2007) concludes that while “sartorial fashion” provides a serious aesthetic basis and clothes are integral to artistic discourse, they are also subject to the demands of aesthetic economy and body culture (Postrel, 2003). One consequence of this is that consumers follow and welcome the standards and guidelines set by their reference groups. Another consequence is that this has led to feminist critique which views fashion as exploitative of the female body. As noted by Hanson (1990), “Fashion calls attention to illusions grounded in embodiment...[A]ttention to dress is inseparable from attention to the body... and both are subject to the political economy of male gaze and historic resentment.” These discourses lead us to the concept of “aesthetic labor.”

Aesthetic labor is a construct that helps us integrate these different streams of theorizing. This has been also been addressed recently in the consumer literature (Pettinger, 2004). With the entry of women into the professional workforce, fashion ideas are no longer limited to private/personal situations. The term, aesthetic labor, is used by Warhurst and Nickson (2001) contextually to refer to embodied capacities and attributes “that

enable employees to ‘look good and sound right’ in their jobs.” These authors focus on service industries where appearances matter as service professionals are performing their duties. This is especially important in fields where style and design are considered significant, and where emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) figures prominently. As a consequence, aesthetic labor may result in the exploitation of (female) embodiment in workplace requirements, especially in service dominant environments. Thus there is corporate production of aesthetic labor as part of the aesthetics of the organization. However, one counterargument to this is that there is no reason to believe that only females are exploited and men are not, for it is really a function of the type of work done and not who (or which gender) does it.

In the balance of this paper, we empirically investigate how the attention to the body plays a crucial role in aesthetic experiences of consumers in relation to their conceptions of fashion. It has become a truism in studies of fashion that garments cannot signify without a body, real or imagined, and that even an unworn garment refers to the materiality of an eventual wearer (Entwhistle, 2000).

Methodology

Visual image elicitation

In this study we employed a modified ZMET technique to better understand fashion and bodily concepts that guide consumers in their perceptions of fashion and aesthetics of body (Ringberg et al., 2007; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). ZMET has been widely used by consumer researchers for it combines cultural models of narrative understanding with cognitive principles. ZMET is useful in delving into and providing in-depth understanding of key perceptual concepts. It consists of a series of steps combining different projective techniques to explore how individuals understand consumer phenomenon and products. We had informants collect ten to twelve images of what high fashion meant to them. We used these images to probe issues related to the body, beauty, and actions taken by individuals to look good. Such a visual elicitation technique is designed to uncover rich descriptions of the people, the context, and products in the picture. The resulting narratives reflect the transportation experience (Wang & Calder, 2009) of consumers engaged in aesthetic practice. Recent advances in cognitive research have shown that the bulk of people’s thoughts and feelings are below the level of consciousness, the result being that those within easy reach represent the tip of the iceberg (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

We believe that by allowing the informants to express themselves through pictures and by shifting the focus from the person to the images, we can overcome some of the hesitation people have about discussing topics that are central to their concerns. It allows them to connect to submerged feelings, symbols, and metaphors (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008). Since most thoughts occur through images and have an embodied content (Joy & Sherry, 2003), the ZMET technique is well suited to plumbing the link between fashion, art, and the body.

Since the images were chosen by informants themselves, participants were actively involved with the project. A

consequence of this type of engagement is that interviews are long but are productive. In our study, the interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. Each image conjured a story, and informants were very involved and enthusiastic when they described why they had chosen certain images and what they read in these images. Fig. 1 provides all the images that were used by participants that we report in this paper. In Fig. 2, we link our empirical findings with the theoretical concepts discussed earlier by using the ZMET framework that includes *originator* constructs, *connector* constructs and *destination* constructs (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Unlike in the theory testing procedures customarily found within the nomological framework, ZMET approach begins with basic theoretical constructs that motivate or ground the study and subject them to empirical analysis where the goal is to examine how the theoretical constructs unfold from subject inputs.

Our informants were primarily between the ages of 20 and 50. The participants were chosen through a snowballing technique and were given detailed instructions appropriate to the ZMET process. Given that all our informants are women, our study represents a female voice; future work should be extended to male consumers, to understand their expressions and preferences. Table 1 provides a brief description of each participant.

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and then used for analysis. Analysis involved close reading of the transcripts, including identifying central and meaningful themes as they emerged. The themes were refined until we were satisfied that they were captured in the quotes (Spiggle, 1994). The organizing theme that integrated our interpretation was the aesthetics of the body through perceptions of fashion.

Empirical analysis and results

Four themes emerged from our analysis: (1) High Fashion Clothing as “Wearable Art,” (2) Body and Self-Identity in the Context of Trendy but Timeless High Fashion Values, (3) Synechdochal References to the Body via High Fashion Brands, and (4) Aesthetic Labor, Body Image, and Fashion Models. Under each theme, we present the visual images selected by our subjects (see Fig. 1a–q).

Theme 1. High Fashion Clothing as “Wearable Art”

The first striking theme to emerge from analysis is the notion of “high fashion clothing” as wearable art. This contrasts with the general view of fashion as not being in the realm of art because, as a form of bodily adornment, it is fickle and impermanent. Those who have supported the idea of fashion as art emphasize the visual beauty of clothes (Miller, 2007; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The body is central to such an engagement; indeed, it constitutes the basic canvas for all human performance.

The following excerpt from an interview with Alicia (30-something office worker) clarifies the importance of the body in the creation of high fashion as “wearable art.” Alicia showed us two images (see Fig. 1a and b) and noted:

“Haute couture is undeniably an art form. The first image I have chosen is Monet’s ‘water lilies.’ The use of color and texture in this painting makes it enjoyable and although the

structure looks deceptively simple, the combined techniques make it interesting to view. I believe luxury goods are created the same way. The second image communicates this well. The yellow dress the woman is wearing looks like a daffodil. The structure of the dress is that of a blossoming flower. It is definitely wearable art.”

Clearly the body is implicated in the description of the dress and the reference to nature. Worn by a tall, attractive model, the daffodil dress comes alive. The structure and construction of the dress, which looks deceptively simple, is as complex as the creation of the world-renowned work of art, Monet’s *Water Lilies*. There is sensuousness and beauty in the dress, which

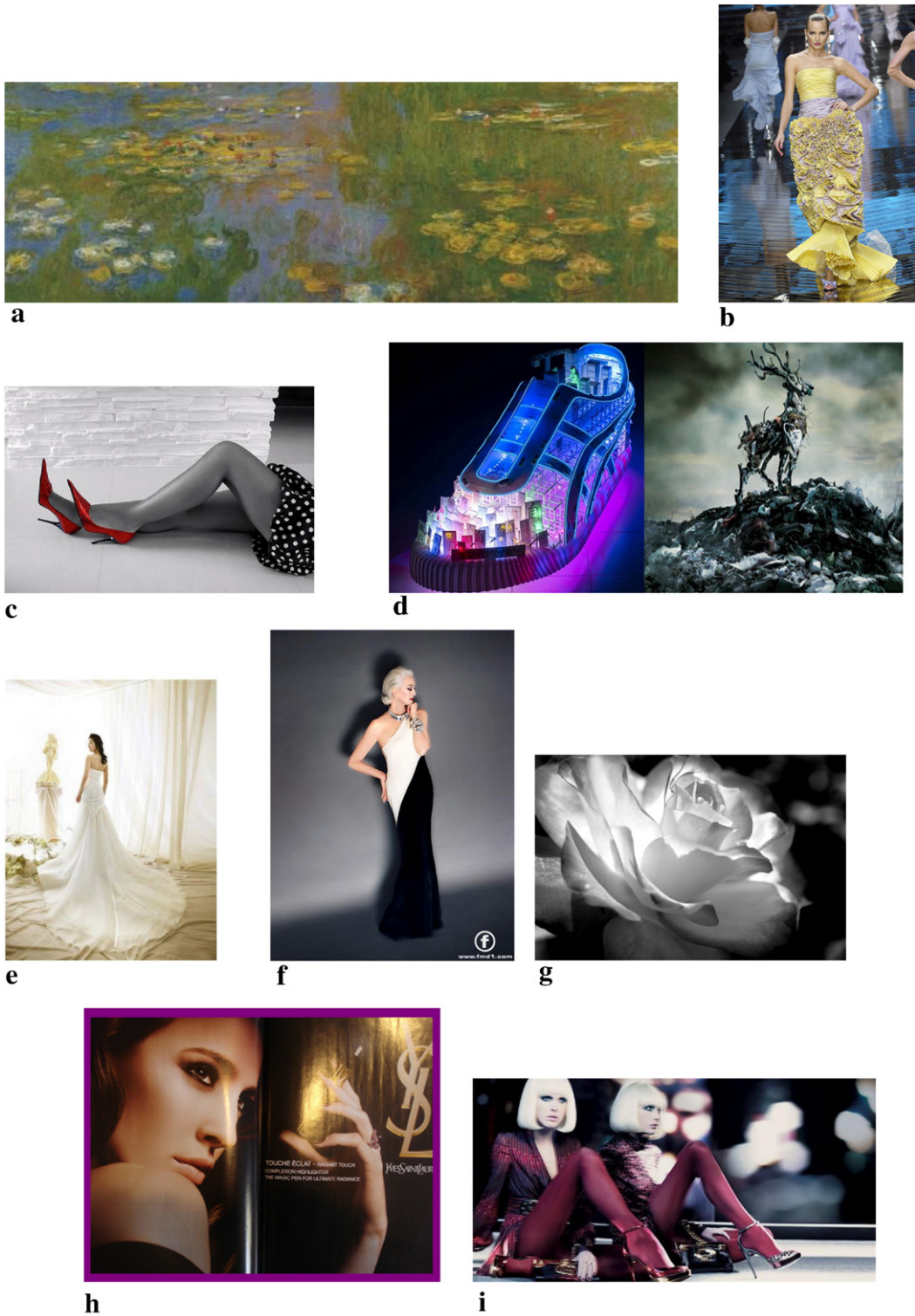


Fig. 1. Images.

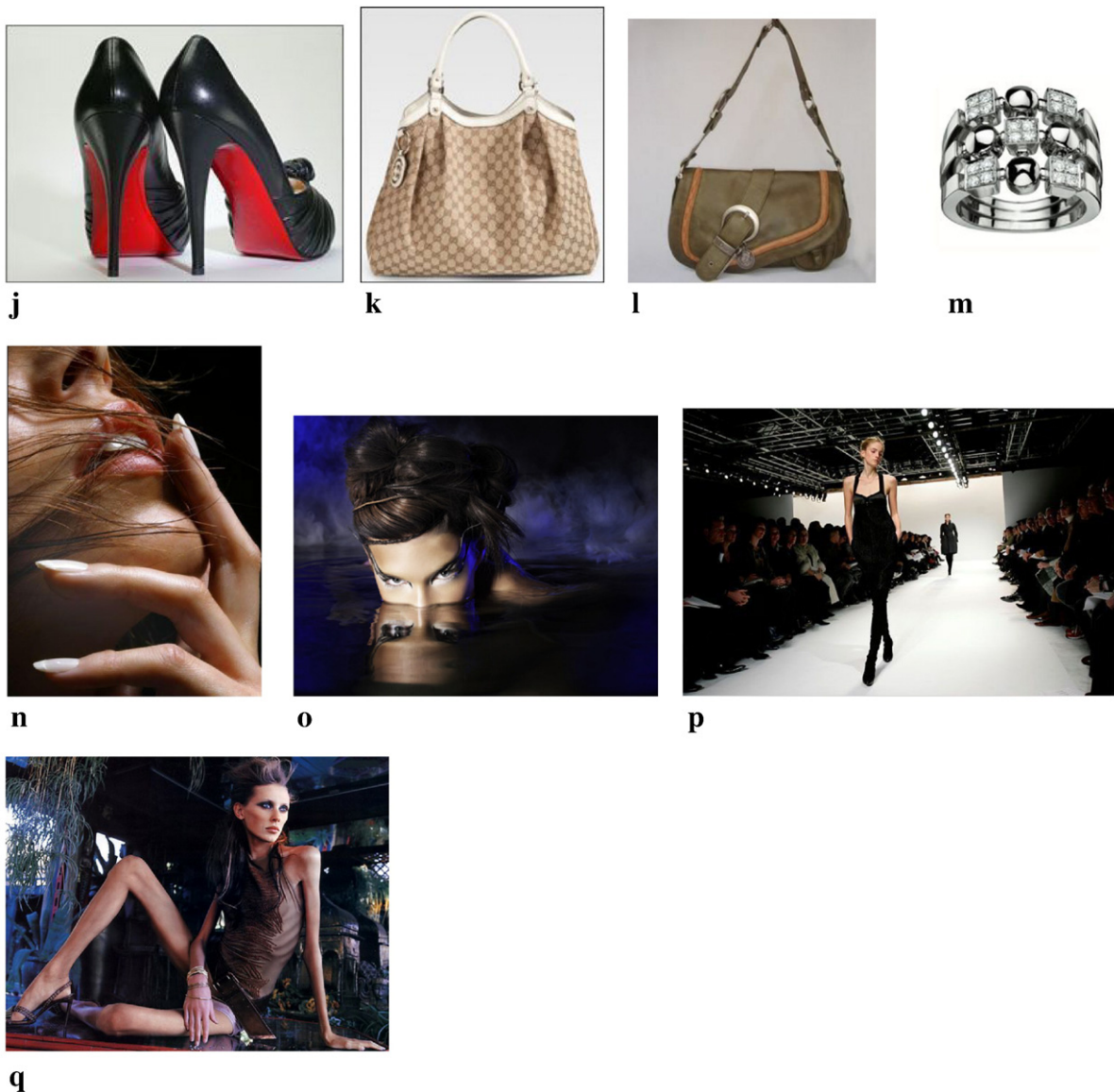


Fig. 1 (continued).

echoes some of the concerns of recent contemporary art with its refocus on beauty (Beckley & Shapiro, 2002). The dress is attractive, allowing consumers to form some identification with the products and have an emotional attachment to them. Alicia's comments reflect the condition that Miller (2007) discusses when she asks the question, "Is fashion art?"

Melissa (35-year-old teacher) makes a subtler reference to the body when she talks about artistic creations of fashion designers:

"The image of the illuminated shoe [Fig. 1c] displays an artistic creation assembled with elaborate pieces that seem to be delicately and complexly placed. My initial thought was that the creator of this piece had taken an everyday necessity and transformed it into a beautiful work of art. The second image is that of a deer [Fig. 1d] which had been created through the amalgamation of many abandoned items from a garbage dump. There is nothing beautiful about trash; yet when combined into a form, it becomes purposeful

and picturesque. This creativity is what makes high fashion clothes an art form."

The deliberate and constructed nature of couture is what Melissa refers to. By extension it calls attention to the individual who wears such a beautifully crafted ensemble to look like a work of art herself.

Sarah (a 50-year-old consultant) likewise refers to high fashion as elegant works of art.

"High fashion clothes are often beautiful, emphasizing being slender, curvy, soft, delicate and feminine. The dress of this woman (image of woman in white wedding dress—see Fig. 1e) is delicate with intricate lace—but there is a wonderful symmetry and balance that is strikingly beautiful."

There is a projection of an image of beauty exemplified in this picture—almost impossible to attain if an individual is not

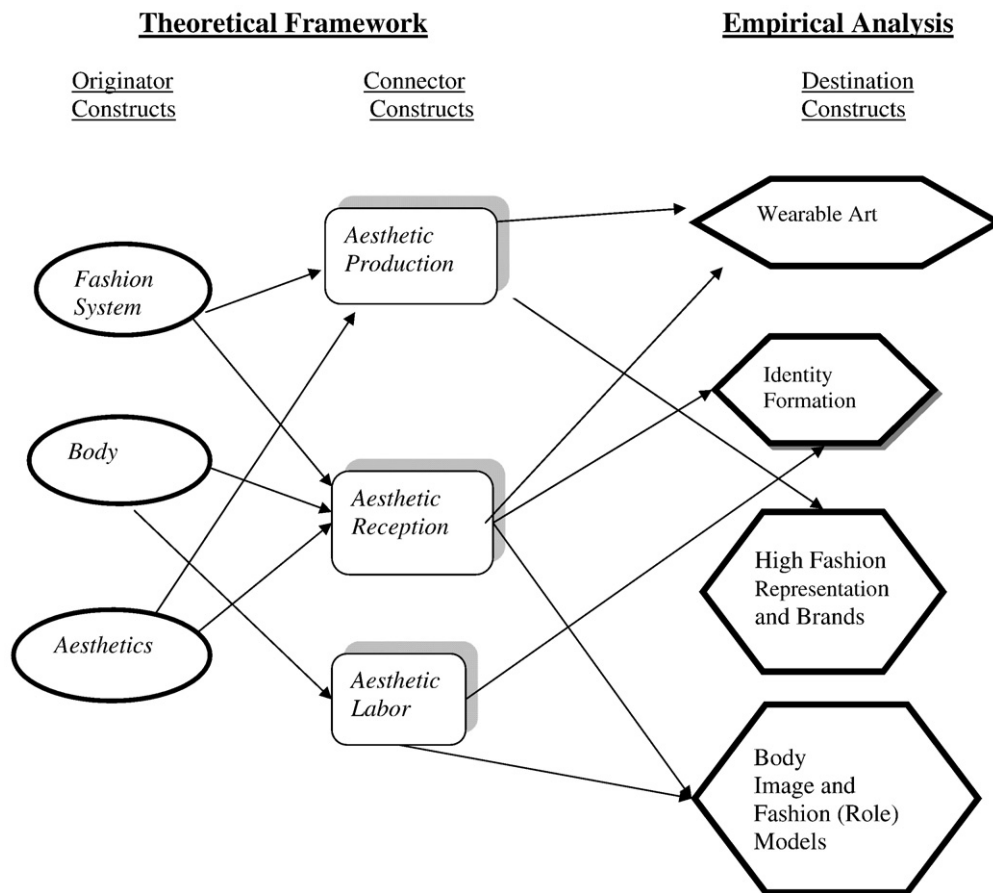


Fig. 2.

six feet tall and a size two. But this is also the image many women dream of for their wedding day.

Our informants' comments on the idea of fashion as wearable art are in sync with the descriptions offered by fashion theorist [Hollander \(1993\)](#). He considers it axiomatic that "dress is a form of visual art, a creation of images with a visible self as its medium."

Theme 2. Body and Self-Identity in the Context of Trendy but Timeless High Fashion Values

Fashion calls attention to the physicality of the body as well as the culturally evolving discourse around it. While fashions go through a life cycle, luxury fashion is portrayed as "timeless." Similarly, while the body does age and change, the concepts of beauty and sex appeal are not fickle. Referring to the picture of Carmen Dell Orefice, (see [Fig. 1f](#)) Tina noted:

"She is such a classy lady. She is the epitome of what is high fashion. She is a classic beauty—she does not seem to have faded away. At seventy-seven she is still doing photo shoots."

Linda (30-year-old homemaker) added:

"I believe the theme of timelessness can be seen in two distinct ways. The most literal interpretation of the theme is that luxury goods are in fact timeless—like watches and

jewelry. The second meaning is more abstract. What I mean is that while high fashion trends and designs will continue to change, the fundamental values of luxury, prestige, and sophistication are in fact timeless."

While timelessness is an important quality in the fashion world, remixing and refashioning is a continuous process. In this sense, fashions change, but the meaning or substance of fashion may not, or at least not as rapidly; that is, on the one hand, what is artful and trendy today might cease to be so in the next decade, and on the other hand, something about fashion consciousness may be timeless. This is what [Appadurai \(1996; 85\)](#) refers to as the tension between the aesthetics of ephemerality and the aesthetics of duration.

Tanya (40-year-old fashion writer) spoke of the late 1980s "when everybody dressed in black—it was severe and matched the somber mood of a time of recession." But black is classic and timeless. Tanya's knowledge of the fashion world gives her some insight into how colors and palettes are recycled in society based on the fluctuations of the economy. So black can be viewed as both timeless and trendy.

Cara (20-something student) also links high fashion to beauty and sex appeal ([Fig. 1g](#)).

"The image that represents beauty is a picture of a rose. The image of sex appeal is represented by a woman lying on the

Table 1
List of participants.

Name	Age	Occupation
Alicia	30 something	Office worker
Melissa	35	Teacher
Sarah	50 something	Consultant
Cara	20 something	Student
Linda	30	Housewife
Tanya	40 something	Fashion writer
Brenda	20 something	Student
Tara	30	Administrator
Seville	40 something	Shop assistant
Tina	20 something	Student
Sabrina	40 something	Graphic designer
Katelyn	30 something	Store manager
Katie	30	Fashion store assistant
Amanda	35	Photographer
Zara	40 something	Executive
Jenny	20 something	Student
Zinnia	30 something	Housewife
Shayla	40 something	Manager
Katrina	20 something	Student
Mabel	50 something	Housewife
Emily	20 something	Student
Maeve	20 something	Student
Kendra	20 something	Student
Jennie	20 something	Student
Sheila	30 something	Housewife
Mara	40 something	Store assistant
Leyla	30 something	Bank teller
Emma	50 something	Salesperson
Bonny	20 something	Student
Brianna	40 something	Office worker

ground with a focus on her legs and red high heels. Sexual connotations are quite evident. Currently beauty is viewed as being thin for women, tall, and sexually appealing.”

In all discussions of the body thus far, there is an underlying reference to culturally constituted meanings (McCracken, 2005). Culture shapes our bodies, thoughts, feelings, desires, and values. It allows us to express ourselves in aesthetically pleasing ways, just as it helps us to define how to continually remake our bodies and ourselves. Culture, however, cannot exist without the animating power of embodied thought and action.

For example, Brenda (20-plus student) showed us an image of a powerful woman holding what looks like a surgical needle in her right hand (see Fig. 1h):

“Her eyes indicate strength and confidence. She is assertively looking over her shoulder, possibly demonstrating the instrument in her hand to someone. The instrument could be interpreted as a surgical needle. The authority and prestige that doctors have can be reflected in the way she holds it. A woman in high fashion clothes gives off this aura of power.”

Brenda’s description certainly gives us the feeling of strength and power that women have in society today. Brenda seems to imply that the image of socially constructed power defines self-identity. In this context, as the next theme shows, high fashion brands are a way to enhance this notion of identity through bodily experiences.

Theme 3. Synecdochal References to the Body Via High Fashion Brands

The next theme deals with the aesthetics of fashion as it relates to the products that refer synecdochally to a woman’s body. Tara (30-year-old administrator) showed us her image of high heels (Fig. 1i) and noted:

“This image symbolizes the confidence that women have with high fashion shoes. A pair of heels can add “oomph” to any outfit and I think women feel empowered because they are taller when they wear heels. Fashion models demonstrate confidence, composure, and poise when they strut on the catwalk and consumers are able to see themselves in the outfits and shoes in particular.”

Tara’s view is compelling. What looks like an effortless strut by models is an art form that is painstakingly learned. Being a model takes a lot of effort, which we recognize as aesthetic labor that is performed to please various clients.

Seville (40-something shop assistant) had a slightly different take on the high-heeled shoes—an image of a shoe by Christian Louboutin (see Fig. 1j):

“Consumers purchase these shoes because they want to be seen in them. I think the fashion brand wears the consumer rather than consumer wearing the brand. People are more likely to notice the product because they see the red soles on high-heel pumps— a dead giveaway it is a Christian Louboutin shoe.”

Seville’s comments on the distinctive style of particular brands suggests that inanimate objects can become animate and even dwarf the importance of the individual wearing the brand. She also refers to choices based on the beauty of the shoes. Here we refer to the work of Kirmani (2009) who argues that there is a close relationship between one’s self-identity and brand-related consumption.

But Cindy (30-something graduate student) talks about how the brand can give the wearer sex appeal:

“The soul of the luxury brand is its design, which has to be both timeless yet modern, and exude sex appeal. Choo and Christian Louboutin conjure up images of privilege and luxury. Despite the success of the sneaker, high heels remain, as enhancements of stature, status, and sex appeal.”

Like foot binding, corsets, and body piercing in the past, women continue to tamper with their bodies in the name of beauty—the high heel is particularly damaging to women and contributes to back and knee problems. These marks (on the body) are material, and they issue from power-saturated discursive and material fields (Parkins, 2008).

Other items that have great appeal and reflect the body are handbags and jewelry. Many women want to own designer handbags. Tina, a young (20-something) student, observed, while showing off her Gucci tote (see Fig. 1k):

“My father bought me this for my birthday—Gucci Sukey large tote. It’s just a canvas tote with some cream leather

trimming using the famous Gucci monogram fabric. Maybe it's a bit played out. Logo bags are not nearly what they use to be. It was only \$850—but it drapes so well on my shoulder and makes me look graceful.”

Tina's description of the Gucci tote is an observation about the physical glamour that fashion brands lend to the body. She is neither tall nor beautiful, but she perceives that this bag slung over her shoulder gives her a new look that is aesthetically pleasing.

Sabrina (40-something designer) also noted that she had bought a Dior Gaucho bag because it made her look glamorous (see Fig. 1l). While Sabrina is mindful of the cost of looking unique and glamorous, she is lost in the beauty of the gaucho bag, which to her epitomizes what is classic. The body is implicated in her statement that “it goes with everything,” whether she is covered up in winter or dressed down in summer.

Sarah (quoted earlier) also told us how she “fell in love” with a ring she bought at Bulgari (see Fig. 1m): “I bought a three-band ring in 18K gold from Bulgari. Its iconic and linear design features the central spiral and two lateral rims with the double logo engraved. I bought it for my 50th birthday. The ring really dazzled me when I first saw it.”

Sarah's comments about how wearing the ring changes her as a person reveal the transformative power of high fashion brands. It bespeaks the kratophany of sacred consumption (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989). It makes her a calmer and gentler person.

Focusing on a body part—the lips in this instance—was how Katelyn (30-year-old manager) talked about the body (see Fig. 1n). She showed us an image of a woman's face—the focus was on her lips and expression:

“The appeal of this picture comes mainly from the provocative way the woman's head and fingers are positioned. The way her head is tilted back suggests vulnerability and yet it is also an inviting gesture. Also, the way her fingers are loosely placed over her chin with one finger lightly caressing her lip is very provocative as well. Her mouth is slightly open, which emphasizes her inviting position. The girl as well as the red lipstick against the black background grabs your attention. It represents sex appeal in an arresting fashion.”

Katelyn is very astute about showing us how sex appeal is important to the way in which a woman sees herself, as well as how others—particularly men—see her. The reference to the body is clear, body part by body part, although the overall glamorous look that is appropriated is holistic. However, the glamorous look is not always liberatory, as shown in our next theme, aesthetic labor.

Theme 4. Aesthetic Labor, Body Image, and Fashion Models

An emergent theme that relates to issues of embodiment is the persona of the fashion model, which becomes the canvas that designers manipulate as they develop and display their

designs. As Katie (30-something fashion store assistant) observed:

“They [fashion models] are walking ads for the designer and help to attract the attention of potential customers. The majority of high fashion brands seem to prefer the nondescript models. The lighting and shadows are strategically positioned to highlight certain features of the model and her specific look. It definitely looks like the work of a highly skilled and highly paid photographer and stylist” (see Fig. 1o).

There is a difference in relationship between body and clothing in fashion representation and in the lived world. De Perthuis (2005) argues that there is a co-dependency between the two to the point where one cannot be understood without reference to the other. On the other hand, according to Barthes (1983[1967]), all that is natural is dissolved into the artifice of fashion. He makes the distinction between the manufactured garment and the represented garment, which does not contain the modalities of the worn garment. “The fashion model's body is divested of anything that is functional—so that the body refers only to the garment.”

Attention is drawn to the face of the model on the catwalk (as opposed to a photo shoot) to represent a high fashion brand, although the model is the personification of the consumer's dream. The body of the model is very important to the presentation of the image. Amanda (35-year-old photographer) has this to say:

“The model always uses particular body techniques—for instance, the positioning of the eyes. She never looks at anyone in the crowd who are seated below her on the catwalk. She looks into the camera and almost looks as if she is above the rest of us. This is true of her walk as well. It is very contrived and communicates a particular image” (see Fig. 1p).

The model represents the fashion house/brand in the ads, but she can be hired by several brands to display their products. While good looks and height are important, the versatility of the model to represent different ideas and fashion themes is central to her success in the fashion world. There is an element of consumer fantasizing here. Models must invest in styling their bodies and personalities in order to be successful in their business.

Another take on models and their bodies is more negative, and is referred to by Zara (40-year-old executive) (see Fig. 1q):

“Eating disorders have become epidemic and are now the most deadly of all mental illnesses. The high fashion standards of beauty are rarely obtained and should continue to receive criticism of how they are manipulating body image for various reasons.”

Zara's profound ideas are echoed even in the fashion world where some countries (e.g., Spain) have made some requirements in terms of weight and size. The body becomes a caricature of the self when a model is 5-feet, 11-inches tall and weighs 110 pounds. If we take the position that Barthes (1983

[1967]) does, that there is a difference between the photo shoot body of the model and the lived body, then we will have to ignore what the model does in her lived existence. Her lived body should not really matter. But this is not the case in practice as females are under constant pressure to dress up in their professional or working lives, as noted by Hochschild (1983).

For example, a related theme that emerged from our interviews had to do with how participants drew inspiration from the fashion world in order to look good. In some cases, it became an obsession, as is reflected in the earlier discussion of anorexic models. It led to some participants talking about having cosmetic surgery in order to look good. In other instances, they were just inspired to wear attractive clothes and to have makeup that brought out the best in them. Zara continued:

“I would like to work out sufficiently to look good like these runway models. I try to do weights at least three times a week.”

Zara’s preoccupation with her weight and looks is normal, although inspired by media. But this is not always the case, as Zinnia (30-year-old housewife) notes:

“I am starving myself daily and watching everything I eat. I also work out for long hours and yet I cannot look like these models [at least my body].”

Zinnia is only 5-feet, 5-inches tall and loves to wear designer clothes. Her focus on her body is “objective,” something to be worked on. She feels that once she has gotten it to the point that makes her happy, then it will feed into her definition of self.

However, Shayla (40-year-old manager) takes body obsession to another level and says:

“I would like to look like Cindy Crawford. I am willing to go under the knife to chisel and hone my face etc..”

Here the danger of total dissatisfaction with her body is apparent. She feels compelled to do plastic surgery in order to look beautiful. Her self-worth seems to be tied into this requirement of looking good (Sengupta & Dahl, 2008).

In all of these examples, we see that individuals view the body as both an externalized object to be worked on by the self, as well as an integral aspect of the self. The pressure for self-management, especially when it comes to keeping a trim body and looking good, is very high. There is a lot of aesthetic labor that goes into sculpting oneself and one’s appearance. Often, negative emotions and dissatisfaction with one’s looks trigger aesthetic labor.

Discussion and study implications

This article has queried the bodily aspects of aesthetics under the theoretical framework that integrated the ideas of aesthetics of fashion and the body. Several themes emerged from our empirical analysis: high fashion clothing as “wearable art,” body image and self-identity, high fashion values, references to the body via fashion brands, and aesthetic labor and body image.

We provide a discussion of our results by integrating them into our theoretical framework. Using ZMET terminology proposed by Zaltman and Coulter (1995), we categorize the constructs identified in the theoretical framework as *originator* constructs and *connector* constructs and the themes emerging from our empirical analysis as *destination* constructs (Fig. 2).

In one informant’s description of fashion as “wearable art,” we find the inextricable link between two meanings of aesthetics, one concerning form and appearance, the other concerning art and representation (Kumar & Garg, 2010). This association between art and aesthetics seems to attract consumers to the realm of fashion. At the same time, the “wearability” of fashion suggests the privileging of bodily appearance. Other responses confirm such an artistic meaning of fashion, which materializes on the body. Thus the body becomes the geography of human persona (Damhorst, 1999; Joy & Sherry, 2003; Krishna, Elder, & Caldara, 2010). There is also a view that the body undergoes changes over time while fashion can be timeless. However, the symbolism of the maturing body can be augmented with the help of bodily adornments such as watches and jewelry. This affords an aesthetic continuity for the consumer as she grows into and through the world of fashion.

The aesthetic view of fashion is further advanced not only in clothes that people wear, but also in various other products such as high-heeled shoes; they betray an expression of art form and empower the wearer of the fashion. Jewelry is also incorporated into self-identity. Thus, one can see how bodily adornments enhance self-identity and social position and give the individual a certain stature. In all such instances, the wearer looks to a combination of clothes, jewelry, shoes, and other adornments as objects of desire and fulfillment, enhancing the somatic value for the consumer. Identity formation is thus a material process through which continuous changes are made. Further, while such identity-based motivation (Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt et al., 2009) is compelling, affectively it can be both clarifying and confusing (see also Cho & Schwartz, 2010). As a measure of the deep impact of the fashion world, our informants look to fashion models as incorporating aesthetic values while at the same time they are troubled by the unattainable goals projected by the models.

There is also a notion of self-identity associated with the aesthetics of reception and the aesthetics of production that come through in our findings (Yang, Zhang, & Peracchio, 2010) issue). The aesthetics of reception takes into consideration how consumers appropriate meanings of high fashion clothing and accessories into their lives. The location of the subject is not always obvious (as in the dress that unfolds like a daffodil) as it is in the interaction between the participant and the location. When Alicia looks at the yellow dress that resembles a daffodil, she is not quite sure how she will look in that dress, although she does say that it is definitely wearable art. She is not lost in this dress, or de-centered in her encounter with this object. The dress is beautiful as is the daffodil with which she is familiar. The mutually constitutive effect of the garment and discourse is necessary to acknowledge in her attempts to make the garment intelligible. Interpretation and imagination are required, but cannot be divorced from the material reality of the dress

(Parkins, 2008). The dress can also be seen as “decorative art,” with its elaborate cutting, sewing, and draping.

The description of how designers create magnificent works out of ordinary or unremarkable materials (Melissa’s description of the deer made of trash) reflects the aesthetics of production. Keep in mind, however, that it is Melissa’s take on the subject; it is her understanding of what designers do. In a sense, she is able to understand the subjectivity of the designer as it is present in the produced works.

Fashion presumes a “bodily form” even as it rejects the material biological substance of that body as irrelevant (De Perthuis, 2005). De Perthuis maintains that fashion shuns ordinary men and women in its schema, because fashion would have no power if it were to allow the body to be any shape or size. Fashion does not promote the ideal body (as opposed to natural body) but an imagined body. Dwyer (2004) likewise argues for a post-structuralist evaluation of the fashion model’s body, not as an object of desire for women to yearn for, but a body of desire produced by precise disciplinary training. Such a notion of desire is opposed to the view of desire as something that an individual feels or a circulation of inner heat or fire (Belk, Ger, & Askergaard, 2003).

These three levels of aesthetics, forming the aesthetic framework that progressively emerged from the findings, reveal that the body is internalized in different ways when considering the consumer experience and conceptualization of high fashion. The aesthetics of production, through aesthetic labor, conceptualizes the *body as a work in progress* and focuses on how the subject, through the acquisition of body skills (like learning to walk on the catwalk) or physical alteration (like wearing makeup or performing surgery), can become the fashion object. The aesthetics of reception, on the other hand, builds largely on a *dialogical relationship between the body and the subject*. Indeed, informants referred, critically or not, to the challenge of keeping up with the fashion standards. Finally, the aesthetics of the work of art shows a relation opposite to that of the aesthetics of production. The *synechdochal* relationship between the object and its owner or wearer reveals that the object becomes the subject.

Our study explores some ways in which aesthetics can be applied to everyday aspects of people’s lives. It points to the aestheticization of everyday life through fashion and bodily adornment (Deng, Hui, & Hutchison, 2010). At the same time, we found the tension between the aesthetics of ephemerality and aesthetics of duration. Although our focus is on fashion, we envision many avenues for study and application in consumer research, from the design of products such as ceramics and dinner/kitchenware to the design of personal technologies such as mobile phones and other devices. Advertising is an apt venue as well, given both the centrality and nascent understanding of sensuous, embodied appeals (Sengupta & Dahl, 2008; Yang et al., 2010). Everything consumed at some level can be viewed through an aesthetic lens, particularly when bracketed from the realm of utility. New product development and innovation are ripe for examination from an aesthetic perspective in our field (Hoegg, Alba, & Dahl, 2010). The fact that sensory perceptions and feelings are central to aesthetic judgment also makes the body

central to any discussion of aesthetics (Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2010). Future research might investigate the role of aesthetics not just in craft-like products, but in a variety of technological devices that are part of modern existence. Our study is limited to female consumers in the Western context. Future studies may need to explore male consumers and also non-Western cultural contexts.

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Appendix A. Methods Used to Gather data

The method we used to gather data was a hybrid of the ZMETt technique and phenomenological interviews.

Snowball sampling

We first invited eight women (students/staff) associated with the university to participate in our study. They were chosen because they displayed varying levels of interest in high fashion and luxury brands. Once they had completed the ZMET technique we used the themes that had emerged from the stories that they told to pursue further how high fashion affected their understanding of themselves as well as their shopping experiences. Spiggle (1994), as well as Thompson (1997) provide a detailed analysis of how to proceed with this approach including categorization, abstraction of categories, comparison of instances within data, emergent themes and so on.

The participants in turn provided us with names of others who they thought would be interested in being part of this study. This is how the snowballing technique proceeded until we felt that enough information was garnered on the topic. In Table 1 we have listed participants of ages ranging from 20 to 50 and holding different jobs. Again, the interest in high fashion varied across these participants although all were willing to participate.

ZMET Instructions

We gave all participants the following instructions for the ZMET technique:

- To collect 10-15 images of what high fashion and luxury brands mean to them. We gave them about 10-14 days to do so. They were encouraged to gather images from various sources that they sought fit including personal photographs, books, magazines and so on. In our study most of the images were sourced from magazines, the Internet and photo albums.
- Then on an individual basis we interviewed each of them using the long interview process (McCracken, 1988).
- We used the following steps in our study : they were asked to rank order the pictures in terms of what they mean to them.

The most representative image was the one they ranked the highest. They were also asked to identify an image that would be the opposite of this –building on the premise described by Zaltman (1997) that we know something by what it is not.

- Participants then proceeded to tell a story for how each of the images related to high fashion and luxury brands. As Zaltman and Coulter (1995) note, the participants are in control of the stimuli which allows for elicitation of deeper meaning.
- They were also asked if there were missed issues and if so to describe an image that would represent the issue. The idea here was to address issues that might have come to mind after the gathering of images or during the interview process.
- They were asked to sort the pictures into categories because it helps to establish the major themes or constructs relevant to the participant. They then were asked to choose any two pictures in a category (composed of three images for instance), and describe why they were similar and different from the third. Here a combination of Kelly repertory method and laddering techniques are used to literally sort out how they made sense of the pictures and to understand the values associated with their choices.
- We also obtained sensory images from each participant – they were asked to use the other senses to convey what the topic meant to them. i.e. what it smells like and what it does not smell like etc.
- They were then asked to create a collage of the most important issues/images to them. Since most participants were adept digitally they were able to produce collages without the need of a technical expert. The idea here is to stimulate and help express their thoughts rather than focus on aesthetics.

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