Fashion Market Encounters: Towards a Theory of Institutionalized Seduction

Søren Askegaard, University of Southern Denmark
Deniz Atik, Izmir University of Economics
Stefania Borghini, Bocconi University

**Short Abstract:** Grounded on the dialectical interplay of Italian fashion context, this study develops an institutionalized concept of seduction that aims at overcoming a neglect of this notion in consumer research. We analyze data of both fashion consumers and fashion professionals with focus on processes of seduction and auto-seduction, and we conclude by drawing attention to the broader consequences of theorizing seduction in a marketing context.

**Extended Abstract:** Fashion as an institutional system and a market process is a (if not the) central part of contemporary consumer culture (Baudrillard 1970). Fashion translates symbolic meanings into consumable signs that consumers can adopt through a variety of rituals (McCracken 1986), however, in doing so they are necessarily altering and to a certain degree personalizing the meanings of the fashion item (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Murray 2002). Consumer research has contributed significantly to the understanding of the fashion consumer as an active and individuated agent, exploring and exploiting marketplace resources for personalized life projects. If the agentic consumer has been in the forefront of the consumer research on fashion, so far less attention has been paid to the dynamic interplay between the different agents in the fashion market.

From Peñaloza (2001) onwards, CCT has increasingly focused on marketer-consumer interaction. Kozinets, et al. (2004) added a significant dimension to our understanding of producer-consumer relationships through their discussion of ludic agency. Most importantly for our arguments, they draw on inspiration from Deighton and Grayson’s (1995) analysis of the constellation of playful consumption and marketer seduction to suggest that play and playful consumption is “simultaneously seductive and subversive” (Kozinets et al. 2004 p. 660). This observation, we would argue, is equally valid for fashion consumption.

Seduction has been very rarely used in consumer research. Seductive elements of marketing and consumption tend to be downplayed if referred to at all. Of major works in the social sciences, only Baudrillard’s (1979) rereading of Kierkegaard’s philosophical and aesthetic discussion of seduction and Lipovetsky’s (1987) treatise of fashion and modernity stand out. None of these works, however, can be said to represent any firm theorization of seduction and none of them include any empirical validation. Beyond the work of Deighton and Grayson (1995), no single work has made any attempt to theorize or empirically demonstrate seduction in marketing and consumer research literature. Deighton and Grayson underline the social construction of seduction and set out to explore the paradox of seduction, that “it induces consumers to enjoy things they did not intend to enjoy” (1995, p. 660). Their model asserts that social systems emerge from individual transactions, whereas the opposite is equally true from a broader sociological perspective. Secondly, their restriction of seduction to processes where the new social consensus is narrow-based prevents the model from saying much about seduction in connection with broad social institutions.

Our analysis tries to remedy these weaknesses by introducing an institutionalized concept of seduction. Institutional theory has recently been used in consumer research on fashion and beauty (cf., for example, Scaraboto and Fischer 2013, Giesler 2012). As far as data gathering is
concerned, the research underpinning this article consists of 36 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted by two of the three authors with middle class professionals both on the producer and the consumer side. Sixteen employed women representing fashion consumers, along with six fashion designers and fourteen other fashion professionals representing the industry were interviewed in total. The data were collected in a major European city, by most considered one of the absolute capitals of the global fashion industry.

We analyze the data with focus on various dimensions of the seduction process in an institutional perspective, drawing on a combination of the conceptual apparatuses of Baudrillard (1979) and Lipovetsky (1987), but also on institutional theory as applied in fashion (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) and on Castoriaidis’ (1975) notion of institution as a part of the social imaginary. More specifically, we isolate four plus two processes of seduction: We find processes of seduction and auto-seduction in the data concerning of consumer agency and reflection as well as among the fashion professionals. Fashion agents, consumers and designers, thus seduce both each other and themselves. Additionally, we reflect on two further processes of seduction that can be derived from the data but more specifically from existing literature on the fashion system, namely inter-consumer seduction and inter-designer seduction. In these last two cases, seduction becomes a part of the status games inscribed in the workings of the fashion institution. We discuss our findings first and foremost in relation to the work of Deighton and Grayson (1995) in order to expand their analysis and provide building blocks for an institutional theory of seduction in marketing and consumer research, and relate this to the recent discussions of institutional theory in consumer research. We conclude by drawing attention to the broader consequences of theorizing seduction in a marketing context.

References


