

**PhD thesis**

**Peter Zsolt**

**Fashion trip**

**Miskolc  
2010**

## **I. The purpose of this research and determination of its object**

My research has unfolded from investigating the consumer society, namely from the fact that people's cultural consumption, just like the popularity of dressing, follows social rules and is based on general human characteristics. Debates on the consumer society were resurrected in the eighties when new research was started on the revolution of consumption, in addition to (or instead of) the revolution of production. The point of view in this research has changed from that of economic history to that of cultural history, which led to referring to the word „fashion” (See Colin Campbell).

It also seemed worth going thoroughly into literature in the aspect of social psychology. It is also fashion that has proven to be the driving factor of the cult of genius of the Romantic era, just like that of the cult of stars in the consumption society.

Exploring the reasons for spreading, acceptance, interference, and the superficial cavalcade of patterns leads to an interpretation for the value system of the consumers - we only have to try to understand the motivation for how something becomes fashionable. As for the literature, I was examining Wilde and Proust because of their thirst for success, high society status and high life, and their being dandies. On the other hand, their tastes that had become more and more clear-cut during the passing years are all a great example for the development of the romantic ethos and the individual. These are all essential elements for spreading the sense of having the right for consumption.

After collecting the big theories about fashion during my research, I came to the assumption that the weak side of all these hypotheses is that they all make it a point to be universal. Although defining of the mechanism of how and why the society was attracted to certain styles was appropriate at the time when these researches were done, reviews and criticism of these theories made a few decades later proved to be their palpable and rule-of-thumb refutations. The reasons for these theories becoming obsolete can be attributed to the change in our civilization. Simmel is a good example for how we can adapt to the changes of an era when shaping a theory. When looking for samples, he takes into consideration not only the elite but also middle classes. By the end of the nineteenth century Proust had already shaped his voice from pulp literature written for the middle classes.

After getting acquainted with the sociological fashion theories, I tried not to use them universally, but interpret them as references to the corresponding circumstances and ages. In addition, I attempted to frame my own theory for explaining the consumer civilization. I sought the reasons for the sustainability of the consumer society, what the psychological reasons for its functioning are, and how some modern fiction books reflect all of this.

Theories for imitation open a lot of doors since our basic attributes are the developed conformity, cooperation skills and the ability to learn. In my research I refer to sociologist Gabriel Tarde who says imitation is the basis of the development of a society. The second theory of the human soul, accepting and renewing social norms and patterns, as well as of the competition among social classes is based on the dichotomy of assimilation and segregation (Georg Simmel).

Acts driven by fashion can be rooted in both the dichotomy of fit and pursuit of imitation and that of assimilation and segregation. There is something else that also plays a big part in such acts: neither of the aforementioned authors have emphasized that these acts can be motivated by the thirst for power after adopting the necessary formalities. This applies to politics (but not only that) where greed for power is fundamental. That's why I put increased emphasis on researching the outward appearances of politicians during the transition era from the socialist to market economy. Fashion is a determining factor in other fields as well, such as science or the above mentioned literature. Both Wilde and Proust could put down their success to their eccentric snobbishness as well, and today successful celebrities have more and more weight on their shoulders as for social responsibility. Power derives from success, and not in the contrary (P. David Marshall).

Consequently, the purpose of my research and analysis was to get the reader to find it an acceptable proposition that there are quite a few motives in fashion (imitation, assimilation-segregation, power-accomodation), and out of them the dichotomy of power-accomodation is the strongest nowadays. I supported my hypothesis in my doctoral thesis by carrying out a questionnaire survey in which I tried to establish categories after interviewing twenty-something year-old youngsters about their attitude to fashion. A revealing category of these was the 'desire to have power over others' – at least in some of the groups.

I took some of the terms from different disciplines in my thesis, for example 'fitness index', 'transmotivation', and the evolutionary theory of beauty from social biology; the aforementioned dichotomies from sociology; altruism and 'clique theory' from social psychology; and theories on aesthetic experiences in literary scholarship, etc.

My publications written on this subject before this thesis cover mostly the Middle Ages and the Baroque era, and don't contain any illustrations due to technical problems. In my doctoral thesis, however, the text is organized around the pictures. A great example for such an approach to paper-writing is *History of Art* by Gombrich, where the pictures are not mere illustration.

As for numbering the pictures, it's not only the traditional editing technique that is omitted, but also I use the numbers of the pictures as cross-references. This means that these numbers refer back (to the pictures) and in advance (to other texts) as well.

## **II. The structure of this thesis, and summary of the research**

### **Structure**

The thesis is based on three psychological observations: imitation, desire for detachment (segregation), and power. The main subject of Chapter Two is the dichotomy of power-accommodation. It is introduced with the 'signs of the consumer society', and ends with listing of the 'functions of fashion' from a functionalist point of view. Finally, the thesis is complemented with the analysis of the Hungarian society, and of the roles fashion played in Hungary from 1945 until now.

I chose sociological methods for the scientific research on power and success: I used a questionnaire so that I could examine the values of young people. I tried to support my proposition that there are opportunities to achieve one's goal through fashion (consciously and unconsciously alike), and these opportunities are used by people with different characteristics in different ways.

In the chapter that is involved in examining functionalism, the applied method was content analysis, where the objects of research were tabloids. I also covered the world of advertisements, the relation between advertisements and fashion, as well as the context of Sociology of Knowledge. As for the latter, I did research into the relationship between science and fashion, and science and arts.

The last chapter is an analysis of the development of the everyday culture, the mass culture and the subculture in Hungary. I deal with this subject from the aspect of one's achievement of middle-class status and that of the

characteristics of the modern consumer society, just like in all the other chapters of my thesis. I state that social-psychological progress in Hungary has occurred in a reverse way, if at all, contrary to the Western societies.

### **Collection of materials**

I collected materials and sources for my thesis by using different methods. I did a survey with a questionnaire which is one of the traditional methods of sociology, although I didn't need too many numbers for the elements because I didn't aim to make a map of the whole society, only of the motives. I also used theses written by some of my former students, where I had worked as a consultant, and where we had applied methods of examining psychological attitudes (we had to evaluate advertisements showing different female and male types). Some other university theses were written by applying content analysis for the evaluation of the use of stereotypes in women's and men's magazines. There were also empirical theses of diagnostic character, aiming at exploring the reality of subcultures (for example: graffiti), where the stress was not on the theoretical questions but on becoming acquainted with the circumstances in Hungary.

The other way of collecting materials was also empirical, but this was not carried out by using scientific research methodology like in the above mentioned cases. I searched for examples as well as refutations of the established theoretical hypotheses.

During the collection of materials – considering the comprehensive review from the consumer lifestyle, the use of objects and their values, to the arts – I focused on papers with the subject of fashion-sociology, since I hoped to find a theoretically less judgemental and committed determination

of the mass culture than that made by the Frankfurt School.

The trends in the studies on fashion sociology are mostly about analyzing the world of the catwalk floors, and also concentrate on clothes rather than the consumer civilization in which I'm more involved in. Apart from some exceptions – like Valerie Steele's book 'Fashion, Sex and Power', who hasn't been discovered in Hungary yet – I only used the fashion analyses by the classic authors for my thesis.

Finally, I used the Internet a great deal, which proved to be very useful for collecting examples for the mass culture, as well as getting detailed information about certain fields, e.g. the history of wellness. The internet served as a quick information source, and the knowledge I got from such search was also built into the text of my thesis.

### **Subhypotheses**

In addition to examining the three psychological aspects of the main theme in my thesis, quite a few minor questions were raised, from which new propositions emerged. In some cases I reverse some of the generally accepted stereotypes. For example, I think that the industrial society doesn't alienate people but enhances the structures built upon trust. (In my thesis I mention a survey done from an economic aspect, which proves the relation between trust and industrial civilization. Max Weber, as well as a contemporary author Fukuyama have already covered this subject). The statement 'We live in an alienated society' also means that our civilization is of a structure built on high trust.

A well-known thesis on the consumer society states that this kind of society encourages extremities, which is paralleled with the decline of civilizations according to the mainline

theories. On the other hand – in fact, I don't have anything to say about the decline of our civilization –, my theory is that as the consumer society develops, it integrates and merges with extremities in a peaceful way: it doesn't persecute or destroy them, unlike the former civilizations.

I also try to expound a theory about beauty in my doctoral thesis. The theories of beauty experience are explained in detail at the beginning of my thesis, while I explicate my own hypothesis in the middle of the text (Chapter II.2). My hypothesis was influenced by a book by sociobiologists, E. Voland and K. Grammer (1993), which hasn't been published in Hungary yet. According to them, what we find beautiful, cannot be determined by the popular theory which says that perception of beauty is unrelated to universal laws and determined only by societal norms. I tried to expound from their statements in my thesis that there is correlation between the perception of a biologically fertile person as beautiful, and the development of the consumer society. It is even more noticeable in the world of labor, where this connection comes from the image of success and one's relation to the labor world. (The closer we get to leisure time -, or in societies where free time is guaranteed by privileges of certain classes, or in the case of tribal societies where it is pointless to talk about work hours – something that is considered beautiful gets farther from the evolutionary logic. )

In the process of the development of the consumer society the linkage between fashion and morality plays a prominent part, at least at points where this 'encounter' is possible, for example when it comes to solidarity. Under the headword 'Fashion ethics' I expound a hypothesis stating that the motivation behind solidarity can, of course, be rooted in the human nature, but fashion enhances it as well. When raising this question and verifying my proposition, I cite a few facts

from Tolstoy's biography, as well as some cases of social-psychological research (Synder and Omoto, 1992), by way of example.

I use the concept fashion-ethics further in my thesis. This proved to be a big challenge to find the solution to something that even Max Weber couldn't answer by his own admission. He wrote that he had the idea of what had put the civil society into shape, and this was the protestant morals, but he had no idea of what would be able to sustain it after the 'disenchantment of the world' takes place, that is when the role of religion becomes weaker.

My thesis covers subjects relating to Hungary, and the part fashion plays in gaining success since it is not only knowledge and talents but also luck that is also needed by us all (see what Sándor Márai discovered).

I compare the successive stages in the development of the consumer society to the ranking of integrity, profession, success and sexuality, and I try to demonstrate how these elements could build upon each other. That's why I examine apparently miscellaneous subjects from the protestant ethics, through the publication of Playboy magazine to the semiotics of the Barbie doll.

My thesis also covers the expansion of the consumer society values to the Eastern regions. In the Eastern European post-socialist countries the condition for the successful integration in the consumer civilization is the rise of masses into the middle-class, however this process appears to take place in reverse stages compared to the Western countries: it is getting sexual attraction that seems to be the first step, and only after this comes the desire for success, and then seeing gains in performance. This applies to both the individual's personal

development and to historical scales. Raising the issue of the universal middle-class development throughout Europe, as well as the development of the consumer society in the first chapters and in the middle of my thesis is linked to the last chapter related to the observed phenomena in Hungary, where I also try to examine the characteristics of acts related to fashion - the phenomena of the typical 'citoyen' and 'bourgeois' both in Hungary and in the Western cultures.

### **III. Conclusions**

During writing my thesis I always found examples for motivations of imitation, assimilation-segregation, and power-accomodation. These motivations are given the rein to by different human communities to different extents. Such communities can be some isolated group, a certain cultural age, a whole civilization, or a literary current.

In all levels of analysis, no matter how different the scales were, I did have the opportunity to make assumptions from a fashion-sociology – social-psychology point of view. Of course, these motivations can be found not only in fashion. However, I didn't try to find all the psychological answers to the transition in civilization in my doctoral thesis, I only focused on pointing out the reciprocal relation between fashion and culture. The part fashion plays in a consumer society has not only increased, but one can also find the recipe for success through it. Perhaps that's the reason why those who can dictate fashion (either through institutional frameworks or outside of them) are so attractive in our eyes. Even fashion objects like dolls can be alluring in this sense. And perhaps it is not the glitter that we find the most attractive in all this but the promise of acquiring the opportunities to mingle and also to distinguish. This opportunity is more open to all people nowadays than before in the past societies.

#### **IV. Other publications of the author in the field of the dissertation**

- Playboy-polgárosodás, - Vázlat a polgárosodás útjairól 2000,  
1992. febr. 17-22.
- Szeretünk, Barbie! - Vázlat a polgárosodás útjairól 2000,  
1992. aug. 15-17.
- A divatetika, *Valóság*, 1993. febr. 63-72.
- A divat jelentősége az elmúlt ötven év magyar társadalmában,  
*Elméleti Szociológia*, 1995/1. 40-44.
- A reklám a harmadik korszak elején, *Dimenziók*, 1995. 2-3. 12-23.
- A divat vázlatos szociálpszichológiai története, *Világosság*, 1998. 11. 58-76
- A "Big Brother" szociálpszichológiája, *Médiakutató*, 2002 tél 19-29.
- A siker szerepe és kockázata az ismerkedésben In: Gutman Bea  
(szerk.): Pénz, karrier, csillogás? Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó  
2009. 51-95.
- A társadalmi kommunikáció szociológiájáról  
In: Béres I. - Horányi Ö. (szerk.): Társadalmi kommunikáció.  
Osiris 1999. 245-253.
- Divatszociológia, Pro Die Kiadó Budapest, 2007. (248 p.)  
ISBN 10 963 86914 76
- Szociálpszichológia – Proszociális és antiszociális alapviselkedések -  
Miskolci Egyetemi Kiadó, Jegyzet, 1999 (219 p.)  
ISBN 963 217 8181
- Médiaháromszög - A tömegkommunikáció szerveződése -  
8. kiadás EU-SYNERGON, Bp-Vác 2005 (230 p.).  
ISBN 963 216 7228