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Collective production of creativity in the Italian fashion system

Emanuela Mora *

*Centre for the Study of Fashion and Cultural Production, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore,
Largo Gemelli, 1, 20123 Milano, Italy*

Abstract

Defining the fashion industry in the same way as other cultural industries, as a system for controlling innovation through gatekeeping processes, this study examined the processes that generated and selected innovations in six Italian fashion companies and among a sample of fashion consultants providing services to these companies. Two major problems faced these companies: (1) that of introducing new products three or four times a year but at the same time retaining stylistic elements that had been successful in previous years; (2) a high level of uncertainty regarding the potential market for their products. Three types of influences on creativity in these companies were identified: strategic (exercised primarily by managers), technical (exercised by skilled employees) and procedural (exercised by a specific type of manager that oversaw the entire process of production). The continuous negotiation of meaning at different levels of the organization led to “a diffuse creativity production process” in which managers and employees with many different types of skills participated. Service professionals outside these organizations created semantic frames within which novel elements in the products of these companies could be read and recognized by consumers, thereby increasing the immaterial value of these products and reducing the uncertainty surrounding their introduction to the market.

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1. Introduction

Cultural industries have been defined as systems for controlling innovation through gatekeeping processes (Hirsch, 1972, p. 640), a definition, which fits the fashion industry, since a new collection is produced through a sequence of gatekeeping activities, that were identified by Blumer (1969):

* Tel.: +39 02 7234 2505; fax: +39 02 7234 3665.

E-mail address: emanuela.mora@unicatt.it.

The managerial staff of a fashion house is able to indicate, out of a whole collection, a set of about thirty patterns, among which there is a small number of patterns, usually from six to eight, that will be chosen by buyers, but is not able to predict the small number on which the final choice will be focused (p. 278).

All industries, not only cultural ones, attempt to introduce innovations in the market, and to select those that consumers are most likely to accept. What distinguishes cultural industries from manufacturing industries in general, is the fact that, while in the latter innovation contributes to their success, that is, to increasing sales of their products (which is the aim of all companies), in the culture industries innovation is the goal of production and the actual content of the product itself, since the value of a product consists in satisfying consumers' desire for novelty and change. The necessity to predict which proposals will rouse consumers' curiosity introduces in a cultural industry a structural uncertainty that staff try to reduce. Standard tools of marketing and advertising that other kinds of businesses rely on are not necessarily useful. Desire for novelty and change is by nature volatile and difficult to satisfy.

Several researchers during the past 15 years (see, among others, Davis, 1992; Wilson, 1985; McRobbie, 1998), have argued that the basic function of fashion is to express a subject's personal and social identity. One of the motives influencing people to follow a fashion is a desire to renew their image, a desire corresponding to one of the most important cultural imperatives that characterizes modernity. Consequently, modern fashion makes the regulatory power of culture particularly visible:

Culture, in the forms of beliefs and ideologies, taken for granted assumptions, or formal rule systems, also prescribes strategies of self-interested action (. . .) and defines the actors who may legitimately engage in them (Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990, p. 17).

When we examine Italian fashion as a cultural industry, it can be interpreted as the product of negotiations between the interests of collective actors (manufacturers and media, above all) and those of individual actors. In other words, it operates as a system for the production of social meaning (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 11). Around the desire for change and innovation, shared understandings have developed, which paradoxically institutionalize – and consequently, rigidify – this desire in predictable and rather conservative forms.

1.1. Research on the Italian fashion industry

Research on the Italian fashion industry by the Centre for the Study of Fashion and Cultural Production in Milan demonstrates that the work carried out by fashion industry professionals, both inside companies and in the larger world of services and facilities that gravitates around the fashion industry, is oriented toward the search for innovative but predictable solutions to this desire for change, which represents their culturally embedded economic and strategic goal. The major aim of our research was to understand the activities of all the professions and jobs that together shape the world of fashion and accomplish its goals. Because it is evident that this world is based on interconnections and synergies among industrial companies, service providers and mass media, we focused on understanding the complex system of relationships among these groups. With the help of informants, we began by creating lists of jobs, including technical and executive roles in factories, planning and organizational positions sometimes in the companies themselves and sometimes in specialized agencies, and jobs related to communication, which are almost always performed by professionals and service companies. It was not an easy task to

produce exhaustive lists, because Italy lacks a codified and homogeneous training system. In addition, specific firms and companies develop professional roles and skills that fit their organizational culture, but that are not standardized and applicable to any other firm or company.

First, we mapped professions, training processes and schools (Grana and Ottaviano, 2003). Then we identified 35 descriptions of different professional profiles and 104 different, local denominations, used in different schools and firms. Despite the large number of interconnections among production, communication and advertising personnel, and despite the proliferation of big industrial groups which incorporate different brands and companies, the fashion universe remains highly fragmented in Italy. It lacks clear, shared strategies about the development of the economic sector, which is characterized by rivalries that appear to external observers and to researchers to be no longer sustainable in an economic and cultural context in which Italian firms have to confront new fashion systems, such as those of China, India and South America.

In the next two stages of our inquiry, we tried to elucidate the different cultures in which those who operate in the fashion system function, in order to understand, at least partly, the reasons for some of its most contradictory aspects. Basing our inquiry on non-standard survey methods, such as organization case studies, in-depth interviews and shadowing, we decided to use two different kinds of surveys, one concerning those who work in clothing industries, and one concerning those who operate as professionals, mostly in the area of services. It is well known that the fashion system includes two closely linked production activities, represented on the one hand by the textile and clothing industry, and on the other hand, by design, planning and communication activities, so-called “immaterial” production (Cietta, 2003, pp. 76–78; Rullani, 2004), which in most cases includes professionals or agency and service company staff.

In the following pages I will present some of the results of these two different inquiries and will try to show the differences in these two professional cultures, specifically in their typical practices, knowledge, and values, and the conflicts that develop between them. In addition, I will try to explain the reasons for the differences between employees working in companies as compared to professionals. While the former, aware of the constraints on their freedom of action in companies, were inclined to question their competence and skill through regular confrontations with their colleagues with whom they were collaborating in the development of a product, the latter seemed to be convinced of the uniqueness and the irreplaceable nature of their roles that were based more on their experience in the field than on standardized training.

If this difference can apparently be explained on the basis of the different organizational contexts in which these employees were located, research revealed other aspects that were related to the ambiguous role creativity plays in the world of fashion. While the employees in these companies did not consider themselves to be creative, but instead to be engaging in technical problem-solving, professionals on the contrary often described their jobs as highly creative.

The self-representations provided by our subjects seem to support the distinction, which are often confirmed by common sense and the mass media, but which is actually a stereotype, that companies engage in technical activities while professionals, working in the area of services, provide the creative elements of a product. On the basis of the surveys we carried out, this was definitely not the case because, as usual, when a situation is closely observed, it turns out to be much more complex than it seems. To explain the reasons of this conclusion, it is necessary to show how the different professionals we interviewed and observed at work performed their tasks.

As we have already emphasized, the goal in the fashion industry is to create and introduce new goods that meet consumers’ desire for change. We attempted to explain the criteria that different actors use to select creative inputs at various stages of the production system. It is particularly

important to understand how the “gatekeepers” operate since they are responsible for the transfer of information and material between different segments of the fashion system.

In general, the principal criterion is to keep a delicate balance between what is known and successful, since it is already appreciated by consumers and market, and what is new, provocative, never seen and therefore potentially innovative, but which does not guarantee greater success than products marketed in previous seasons.

According to the scheme outlined more than 30 years ago by Hirsch, some aspects of which are still useful from an analytical point of view, we conceptualize the cultural industry system as consisting of three independent sub-systems that Hirsch (1972, pp. 644–649) calls technical, managerial and institutional. These systems communicate through the activities of actors whose function is to control the flows of information and knowledge that pass from one system to another. Each sub-system works on the basis of particular rules, shared knowledge, consolidated routines, languages and jargon that Hirsch does not investigate thoroughly. The language and functionalist categories used by Hirsch in the 1970s obscure the role played by routines, stored knowledge, and unwritten rules, in other words, the culture of each sub-system, that guides the semi-finished product through the entire selection process that ends with the consumer. In the fashion industry, each sub-system (we might describe them as creative, productive, and communicative) functions separately. Paraphrasing Becker (1982), we could say that, around a fashion collection, gravitate different “networks of persons whose cooperative activity, organized on the basis of their common knowledge of the conventional ways to do things, produces the peculiar kind of works of art for which that world is known”. These networks, consisting of different groups of professionals who preside over different stages of the system, work in close contact with one another, and share the final goal, which is always that of being successful in the market. However, if for some of these groups success will be determined by sales volume, for others it will be based on critical appreciation from professionals in the field, or the attainment of high visibility through the media. Know-how, norms, and consolidated practices within each of these worlds may be quite different, as indicated by the interviewees. The persons who operate on the border line between one sub-system and another and who perform *gatekeeping* roles, are responsible for protecting the culture of each sub-system, but also and above all, for connecting worlds that otherwise would be unable to work together.

When a creative work requires activities performed by several persons, who use different procedures, competences, skills, and tasks based on the culture of their specific subsystem, the results are continuously questioned by those in other subsystems. The world formed by the cultural industry in the area of fashion involves not only complex organizations, such as companies, but also small agencies and independent professionals. Moreover, the relationship with the mass media is never as straightforward as the label (institutional sub-system) used by Hirsch suggests. Journalists’ interests often intersect with business interests, and neither fashion magazines nor the commentaries on fashion shows provide straightforward guidance to consumers. For these reasons, the production of innovation in fashion companies is the result of complex negotiations among employees and constant confrontation with material and economic constraints. This is particularly evident in Italy, where the cultural content of the most valuable fashion products is not only based on a particular style and embodied in a collection, but also derives from certain types of materials, manufacturing techniques, and the manufacturer’s geographical location and history.

Obviously, the general standard on the basis of which the balance between what is known and what is new is determined, is interpreted in different ways in different organizational contexts, and by professionals who have different responsibilities for the overall production process. We

Table 1
Companies examined in this study

| Company type | Case study |
|--|----------------------|
| Big industrial manufacturers. Integrated textile groups. Wide product range. High image brand. Strong presence on international markets | Marzotto |
| World-famous brands backed by manufacturing companies or manufacturing licenses. Wide product range (including also non-clothing products). Strong presence on international markets | Cerruti Trussardi |
| Medium-size industrial manufacturers. Limited product range in particular production segments. Company's own brands or licencees of other brands | Henriette Confezioni |
| Medium-small or small manufacturers. Special products or fashion accessories. Company's own brands or licencees of other brands. In-house production or through subcontractors. Mostly domestic market | JFK Maglificio Vema |
| Subcontractors of the previous companies. Variable size (from small workshops to medium-small and medium firms). In particular: standard subcontractors (providing finished clothing items and the majority of the required dressmaking) and subcontractors carrying out dressmaking and finishing operations on customers' semi-manufactured products | No case |

Source: Author's data processing based on an inquiry carried out by [Saviolo and Testa \(2002\)](#).

need therefore to examine in detail the activities in specific types of companies and in specific professional categories working inside and outside these organizations.

1.2. Description of sample

We studied six companies in the textile-clothing industry that were based in different regions of Northern Italy. Along with two firms based on internationally known brands and an industrial group quoted on the stock exchange, we also selected three small/medium firms operating on the domestic market or export-oriented. Because of the structure of the Italian textile-clothing industrial system, we attempted to obtain a wide range of situations.

These six case studies may be considered as examples of a typology classifying enterprises on the basis of their size and their production processes ([Saviolo and Testa, 2002](#), p. 52) (see [Table 1](#)).¹

Job identification inside the companies was carried out after having focused on the sample of companies to be studied and with the help of the person who, in each one of them, guided us during the whole case study. Regarding activities carried out by professionals and service providers, we proceeded in a different way, because at the beginning, the universe of professions and services in the world of communication seemed to us immense and bewildering. Therefore, we asked some expert informants to help us. With their assistance, we drew up lists of activities, and then went in search of studios, agencies, companies and individuals performing the most important tasks we wanted to analyze. The result was a sample of 28 professionals:

¹ For a brief description of these companies, see [Volonté \(2003\)](#), which also includes an analysis of the results of our study. In this article, the excerpts from the interviews with employees working in these companies will be quoted with the name of the company and the employee's professional role.

photographers, designers, trend researchers, journalists, fashion editors, public relation employees, buyers, casting editors, bookers, models, visual merchandisers, and set designers. In addition, three field studies were carried out during two fashion shows and an in-location photographic shooting.

2. Innovation control through negotiation of meaning

What criteria are used during the different stages of the system (production and communication) by employees of these firms to select the creative input that lead to product innovation?

As we previously mentioned, the basic criterion is that of keeping a delicate balance between what is known and what is new, a balance that can be maintained if the proposal for something new is presented in such a way that it does not radically question knowledge, routines and competences that are generally used for developing a new idea into a socially accepted and successful product (Peterson and Anand, 2004). Obviously, in a complex fashion system, not all employees have the same power to influence this precarious balance. People's behavior is based on different kinds of power, some of which have immediate economic value for the survival of a company, because they influence sales volumes and proceeds; other kinds of power (usually those held by skilled production workers) are sometimes undervalued, even though their role is very relevant from the point of view of the cultural changes that in the long run transform the life of organizations and quite frequently also their earning power.

The question of selecting the creative inputs that will turn out to be a success for a company emerges every time a new collection has to be planned. This happens at least three or four times a year. In a company producing clothing items, all activities are closely connected, from those that involve ideas and planning, to those that are more technical and executive (manual, iterative), as well as those linked to communication. These connections are evident from the fact that, unlike what usually happens in other manufacturing companies, here employees directly and reciprocally communicate even though they belong to quite different departments in the company and to different hierarchical levels. This process seems to be justified by the fact that the organization of work is focused on developing and preparing a collection in an extremely short time. A product may require the application of standardized procedures, but must have new, clearly identifiable and communicable characteristics in comparison with the product manufactured in the previous season.

To summarize, we have identified three kinds of influence (Mora, 2003b), which contribute to the success of a collection but which may also create cultural conflicts in the everyday life of a company, such as when, for example, it is necessary to train part of the staff in the use of new machines and to abandon obsolete technologies. Often enormous resistance is encountered, particularly among the older employees.²

(1) The first type of influence, and the one that is easiest to identify, is exerted by persons who hold managerial roles and have to deal with the three strategic areas of the system: style, product, and marketing (Section 2.1).

² The general manager of Lanificio Cerruti of Biella (a company belonging to the Cerruti Holding Group) made a similar comment. Some other interviewees also dealt with this theme concerning the use of new technologies, particularly in the model-making and cutting departments of the major companies.

- (2) The second, less visible, type of influence, perhaps because it is exerted through a greater number of negotiations, is expressed by the subjects who operate in specific technical areas in subordinate positions, but who possess several types of know-how that are decisive in developing a collection. This kind of influence is typically exerted by model-makers. However, as we will see later, in one of the companies in the sample, this role is also performed by the visual merchandiser (Section 2.2).
- (3) A third kind of influence is exerted by persons who are not responsible for a particular stage of the production process, but who instead follow the entire process from the design stage to the completion of the collection. Their capacity to influence innovation derives from their familiarity with the different languages and logics of all the stages of the fashion system. They connect people that otherwise would not be able to work in synergy toward a common goal. Certain roles, comparable to those of the product managers in these companies, correspond to this third type (Section 2.3).

2.1. Strategic influence

The power over the selection process that is exerted by management in the three strategic areas – style, product and marketing – is the decisive factor in the planning and realization of any new collection, although the motivation, background knowledge, and sometimes also the goals of the employees, who work in these different areas, often diverge significantly, as is suggested by the following quotation from an interview:

We have, on the one hand, in particular, the collections signed by Ferré, in which the designer is the one who expresses the highest level of creativity. So, we must interpret what he says, and transform his ideas and inputs into a collection. I think that the designer's contribution is to make sure that the clothes are beautiful. He does not have any economic problems; he only needs to be concerned with image. We have to be very serious; our most important goal is profit. So, we must develop collections that are respectful of the style that is decided and required by the designer, but at the same time, we must make collections that can be worn by a substantial number of women. I mean, if the collections for the fashion shows are made for 1.85 m high models, weighing 42 kg, and wearing size 42, the average woman is quite different (Personnel Manager/Marzotto).

The final product is the result of negotiation and demands a great deal of cooperation and willingness to question one's own and others' points of view and choices.

The creative work of the styling department in a company is often marked by an interesting tension. On the one hand, it usually involves an individual, particularly a person who has stylistic skills and who works alone, "outlining on paper" sketches, suggestions, ideas or actual dresses; on the other hand, this activity is always described as team work, a "very gradual" process, to which many different persons make a contribution:

The role of marketing is very important. Marketing acts as an intermediary between the sales and styling departments. It is the area assigned to say which were the best sellers of the past season, but also what are the market requirements, considering that in any case we operate in various markets, which have completely different characteristics. Therefore, the marketing office must prepare a briefing, which is submitted to the style department, and the style department, which must be absolutely free in terms of creativity, must take the input provided by marketing into consideration (Entrepreneur/Trussardi).

Although the six companies were classified differently in terms of the typology, all of them stressed the importance of confronting the requirements of the market through the data collected by the marketing office and through inquiries carried out by the company itself. One of the major subjects around which this confrontation takes place is the collection of the previous year, which represents an excellent test of what the public appreciated and might continue to choose. At Henriette, for example, the visual merchandiser is assigned to collect and report all information on the sales of the previous collections.

In a context in which fashion no longer evolves cyclically, but instead expresses specific identities associated with different styles, any new collection must retain characteristics related to the brand or company identity. Therefore, the creative process develops through an attempt to combine innovation and continuity, and the different employees involved in it negotiate the proportions of these two ingredients, taking marketing input into consideration.

In the planning stage of a collection, the balance among the different contributions, such as information or professional skill, is very delicate and depends also on the company's history and characteristics. Where an authoritative creative figure is present, whose role is perceived as central in the brand and product legitimization process, such as in the case of Cerruti, the creative stage, though being complex and managed by work teams, is mostly based on his inputs and coordination:

Style [. . .] is in practice the “imprinting” of our collections, [. . .], that is, a basic meaning that is obviously always given by Mr. Cerruti, and then the styling office is responsible for carrying out an inquiry about the “mood” of the fabrics for the new season, identifying the reference color range, and the macro-issues concerning our collections. We have the “word” of Mr. Cerruti. There are some basic guidelines that are provided by him, and only by him, (. . .) the fact, such as he likes to say, of going ahead and not going back in terms of style, image, contents (Product Division/Cerruti).

However, most companies work through a styling office that does not include designers artists (Crane, 2000, p. 151), or in any case outstanding personalities. Firms manufacturing high-quality or medium-high-quality products, such as Henriette and JFK, cannot stress trends too much, because they address a market that is not inclined toward seasonal clothing turnover and is more oriented to a classical-modern style. In this kind of company, great importance is given to what employees used to call “research”, which is carried out over a long period of time, attending exhibitions, travelling to trend-leading cities, and sometimes buying articles of clothing that are considered interesting, which are then disassembled in the factory in order to develop patterns based on them.

These various inputs must be worked out and transformed by the styling office. In this way, the image of a collection begins to take shape. In the final stage, when the research on fabrics is complete and the underlying concept of the collection concept has been outlined, it is necessary to draw together the various inputs and turn them into the final conception of the collection. At this stage, the person responsible for the styling office has the task of making a synthesis:

One of the problems of working for a company is that it does not allow you to concentrate, to gather things together, because every five minutes they look for you, the telephone rings. That's why I carry out the last stages of the collection whether at home or in the office on Saturday or Sunday morning. Then, the moment comes in which you have to gather all the different parts together, and you need silence and concentration (. . .). You find yourself

with a lot of models to make and you must choose those that, in your opinion, are the best. All these things require calm (Style Division Manager/JFK).

At this stage, the role of sales offices and product managers is not only aimed at providing information on the results of the previous collections, but also at establishing the cost limits so as to remain in a price range consistent with the company and brand identity. The designer has complete freedom only for a few particularly representative items, to be presented in the fashion shows, which however are not likely to reach the production stage. The materials in the final product (fabrics, technical accessories, such as shoulder pads, linings, hooks, etc.) contribute to the enhancement of its image and value, and therefore, in the case of companies belonging to the highest segments of the pyramid, these qualities become a determining part of its cultural content. In any case, price represents symbolically one of the major constraints creative people face. What are the elements that are considered in setting the price? Cerruti's product manager provides a useful description:

To determine a price. . . this is a million dollar question! Anyway, in my opinion, the correct way is starting, for any (product) type and market area, from what is the optimum sales price, and then going back, in order to obtain the starting cost of manufacturing it. Market inquiries on different kinds of positioning of products actually go like this: For example, concerning a suit by Cerruti in England, what is the 'focus' price, the one where we will make the largest amount of sales? The price range may go from x to y. We know what level of production costs we can accept, and, based on these data, we can define the right price. Therefore, Arianna [the person responsible for researching the fabrics] may also consider fabrics ranging from 50,000 to 60,000 Lire, but most of the research must consider fabrics ranging from 18,000 to 35,000 Lire, which represent our core business (Product Division Manager/Cerruti).

The decision about price is a stage that is also symbolically loaded with meaning, because in it the two aspects of industrially produced fashion confront one another—and sometimes clash, the free and creative soul, and the commercial one. What happens at Marzotto exemplifies this hidden conflict, considering that Marzotto industrializes elite stylistic content designed and planned in another company (Ferré):

Our task is to prepare prototypes, choose fabrics and raw materials, and this choice must be consistent from the point of view of quality, colors, and so on, but it must also be consistent with our price policy and with our market segment (Personnel Manager/Marzotto).

The great respect the creative professionals show for business constraints is particularly strong in the styling offices of these companies. As the designer responsible for JFK underlines, the consultants who cooperate in the development of a collection have very different types of responses:

I see the difference between those who work in the company and consultants. Those who work as consultants probably have very clear opinions on trends, fashion, but are rarely as sensitive to these sorts of changes as the people in sales and marketing [. . .]. It is true that the styling office is the creative area in which models are developed, but there is also a technical part that must be managed. When the dresses go into production, all the accessories have to be matched. We must match linings, buttons, we must manage fabrics, orders, there is a lot of work to do, mostly office work, and the consultant does not do it [. . .]. Since a consultant often works with several companies, she/he brings different types

of experience, gets in touch with different suppliers from ours, may often come from another region, and is therefore in the position to bring us quite a different approach to the product (Style Division Manager/JFK).

2.2. Technical influence

A second kind of influence in the process of innovation that leads to a new collection is exerted by certain types of technicians, who possess manual skills, experience, or know-how that introduce material innovations in planning the products and then in the final result. This process was described by one of the interviewees who was a model-maker:

First of all [I get in touch] with the designer. He stylist designs an idea, and then the product office tries to match the most appropriate fabric in order to make it, I would not say more marketable, but more feasible. And we make all the rest together, because obviously a sketch can be interpreted in ten different ways, and only if one has known the collection for many years, the type of product, the female consumer, is one able to finally get all these things right [. . .]. We know them [the styling office] and we consult the product manager, but it is the model maker, who decides what is the best solution, what cuts must be made in the fabric, how much space the dress will occupy, its volume, and it is also a question of experience, apart from the standard sizes we have, because we know that size 42 has these physical characteristics and that size 48 has different ones [. . .]. I make the first prototype, which is sewn in a small adjacent department, where we deal with all the problems that arise, which are numerous, especially regarding the first garment we make, and particularly if it is an unusual item. We give some indications, we make the pattern according to certain standards, obviously, following rules about seams, position [. . .]. Then, while we make [the prototype], the person who is sewing it tells us what in practice needs to be changed, or is not correct, and so, there is a very close cooperation with the person who is sewing it at that moment [. . .], because we need to understand how it can be produced in the best way [. . .]. After having sewn the prototype, we have a fitting with the designer and the product manager [. . .]. Sometimes there are only aesthetic changes and adjustments: we lengthen, shorten, move; sometimes it does not turn out well, perhaps because the fabric does not react as it should. Then we have the first fitting of all the dresses, once again with the designer and the product manager [. . .]. If you have a good relationship with production and styling, they actually leave you free to work as you want. So, when I go to a fitting, it is difficult when they tell me that it is not the same as the sketch. Because if your interpretation is correct, beautiful, and harmonious and follows the right style and standards of wearability, it doesn't matter if it's not like the sketch (Modeling Manager, Women's Clothing Division/Marzotto).

Obviously, the process this woman described refers to the manufacture of the “most unusual” models, those that, although based on standardized procedures deriving from past experiences, require several changes and innovations to be made by hand and by attempts to “drape the fabric on the dummy” in order to see how it falls, how it pleats, and to imagine which are the most appropriate forms and cuts to achieve the final aspect that is desired by the designer. In this type of work, the creative process involves a number of employees. The Marzotto model-maker indicated four of them: herself, the designer, the product manager and the sewers. None of these employees works alone; each one has a team of collaborators, who – perhaps through more

executive tasks – make a contribution. Does this mean that technological innovations, such as special software for planning, design and modelling, cannot be applied to the industrial production of collections with high stylistic content? This is not the case, even though this inquiry has detected some problems in the use of new technologies. For example, at Marzotto, the computer is used for developing some basic models, particularly the internal parts of clothes and the different sizes, as the menswear model-making manager told us.

However, at Marzotto, prototypes are still hand-made, due to the great variability in models. In other companies, such as JFK, the computer is used more, because it makes it possible to reuse the entire stock of models gathered from the previous collections.

In the Italian fashion system, new technologies play a different role in comparison with other cultural industries. While in the latter the use of new digital technologies makes it possible to introduce new reproduction and distribution strategies that extend the market (Peterson and Anand, 2004, pp. 314–315), in the fashion industry they make it possible to standardize some planning and design procedures, and therefore they are applied to production segments in which innovation results more from the industrialization process than from the designer's personal creativity.

A product may be made *materially* innovative not only with respect to its tailoring, but also regarding the way in which it is exhibited in the shop. One of the visual merchandisers we interviewed tried to enhance the image of a collection in the shops where the collection was sold. Her major aim was to give appropriate visibility to a product that, due to its intrinsic characteristics, is often destined to occupy a residual niche that tends to be ignored by both retailers and female consumers.

In this position, I am responsible for satisfying customers. The company has a certain number of customers that are important both in terms of sales and as showcases. I follow them personally, in the sense that I try to be present during purchases [. . .] in order to build actual packages of products (. . .). Within the spring-summer collection, there are spring clothes, sportswear, day wear, and formal dresses. So, I try to create packages with the retailer – logically, there are some rules we must follow – in order to allow the retailer to lay out our dresses in his/her shop in such a way as to give them an added value, so as to create in the prospective consumer who goes into that shop an emotional response [. . .] For example, to sell a product, on average you must see three or four similar products together. If you have some jackets, the same jacket with the same color, you place three of them on the stand, then you place three blouses. So, you have three beige jackets, followed by three white blouses, all of the same size and color, and when the customer comes. . . Today, you don't sell only a product (“I would like a pair of trousers”) and you give the customer a pair of trousers as though they were a can of tuna fish. (. . .) Perhaps, instead of selling only one pair of trousers you will succeed in selling three items (Visual Merchandiser/Henriette).

2.3. Procedural influence

The third kind of influence on the introduction of innovation is exerted by those who hold transversal roles in the fashion system. Companies do not always include such roles. Instead, this type of activity may be assimilated into the product manager's role. The product manager is the person who creates a link among designers, model-makers, marketing managers and all the employees who contribute to the realization of a collection (Hermes Lab, 2001, p. 39). This

position has considerably developed in the past two or three decades, based on the experiences of companies, as the peculiar nature of fashion industries began to emerge in comparison with other kinds of industrial organizations (Carr and Pomeroy, 1992, pp. 43–46). The profile of this position is now explicitly outlined:

“the product manager must be in a position to manage all aspects of a single project, including those concerning sales and overall profitability. It is a creative role, which must produce new projects based on input it obtains from the market, and which must supervise product definition, research and development, and technical tests, without neglecting the production process and quality”.³

This role might also be defined as a “process manager” role (Frings, 2002, p. 171), but it is actually a creative manager (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 53).

The product manager role differs in each company in relation to what a particular company defines as the so-called “strategic good”. If we imagine a basic reticular structure, whose centre is the product manager, we can identify the nodes with which he is potentially in contact, trying to connect one to another. These nodes are: the styling office, merchandising activities, marketing office activities, tailoring production activities (from the prototype to mass production), and brand and/or company institutional communication. The spontaneous statements of the interviewees show the various possible interpretations of the product manager’s role. In all the organizations we studied, this role was performed by connecting all the nodes of the net with one another, but these relationships do not always have the same importance. We noticed similar approaches, respectively, in the two companies whose identity (and hence, the strategic good) is connected to a famous brand with a high stylistic content (namely, Cerruti and Trussardi), and in the two companies which operate in the medium-high market segment with collections that do not have a strong brand identity and whose strategic good is the product itself (namely, Henriette and JFK). As a matter of fact, at JFK and at Vema, there is no specific person who performs the product manager role. The role overlaps with that of the entrepreneur. Marzotto, a company producing collections on licence, is still a different case.

In enterprises that represent a brand, such as Trussardi and Cerruti, the product manager’s major task is to guarantee consistency between the product image and the way it is communicated to the final consumer. In these two companies, these strategies diverge in ways that reveal different conceptions of the company’s relationship with the market (Mora, 2003a).

The production and organization manager of Trussardi emphasized the importance of maintaining a very close relationship with the market. In short, we can say that, in this case, the product manager role is mostly interpreted in terms of organizing and facilitating the different planning and production stages in view of the market goals set by the company. According to one interviewee:

A product manager must work according to timetables, goals, and costs. We must introduce the “time to market” concept in a very strong way (. . .) “time to market” should tell you how to schedule the things to do, which lines must never be overstepped, and it is very hard to introduce this mentality in product managers: they try to be either a little bit too much like designers, or a little bit too much like technicians [. . .]. Being a product manager

³ This description has been drawn from a profile developed by the personnel recruitment company Suitex International, quoted in *Hermes Lab* (2001, p. 41).

means mental organization, so they should be persons who coordinate, who take the designer's inputs, who must have a technical staff in the position to establish production times, and therefore, to estimate costs, and should always bear in mind the goal of the price for the end consumer in order to have the possibility to add finishing touches, on the one hand, and to improve fabrics, on the other hand, in order to achieve the highest possible quality which is always a compromise between image and cost [. . .] (Product Manager/Trussardi).

At Cerruti, too, the product area manager underlines the importance of a correct relationship with the market in order to consistently promote a coordinated image of product, brand and company. However, the strategic elements to be kept under control are the company's communication and presentation tools addressed to agents and retailers, who are in fact the company's customers. The project manager attempts to provide a univocal message about both product and brand. An interviewee described this process:

High product specialization is required. Currently we have to invest in the product, because the company is investing a lot in distribution and therefore the product must be of sufficient quality to justify this expense [. . .]. The most important thing, at this moment, is how collections are presented, the kind of message you immediately provide when somebody goes into a room and sees the collection hanging in a certain way [. . .]. This means arrangements for the different agents' showrooms, a certain quantity of digital photos of the collection and a few guidelines on visual merchandising [. . .]. Personally, I feel as if I guarantee that the contents are in line with what the Cerruti style is (Product Division Manager/Cerruti).

While Trussardi's strategy seems to privilege collecting information from the market, which the product manager will use in developing internal procedures to rationalize the organization's activities, Cerruti's priority is instead to send a clear message to the market. Nevertheless, in both cases, the goal consists in attempting to reduce the level of uncertainty that surrounds the new collection.

This comparative analysis of professions and occupations in a small sample of companies that are quite different from one another allows us to pinpoint the specific characteristics of fashion organizations in Italy. Although there exist (at least in the larger companies) formal positions, which correspond to codified and institutionalised roles, some strategic tasks for the competitive success of the company are performed by persons who do not hold a position that can be identified with a precise professional profile but who, nonetheless, exert a strong, personal influence. Personal influence (Zucker, 1991, p. 120) quite often coincides with the entrepreneurial charisma of the founder, as has traditionally happened in the Italian industrial system, but is also exerted by some individuals who have personal charisma. Their influence is legitimated by the success achieved in similar positions in other organizations. These persons perform managerial roles, even though they do not have explicit hierarchical pre-eminence over other managerial roles.

In the previous pages we have shown the ways in which, in the everyday life of an organization, the abstract imperative to select innovative input results in making a collection marketable. Through continuous interactive and communicative exchanges, each employee contributes to the definition of the characteristics of the new collection, using their consolidated stock of knowledge, experience, and skills to develop, carry out and improve the project on which they work together with many other persons. This continuous negotiation of meaning leads to what we have called a "diffuse creativity production process" (Volonté, 2003), because, contrary

to what people tend to believe, the innovation the market accepts is not only or predominantly the product of the styling office, but is the fruit of a project team's widespread ability to formulate questions and find new answers. This project team includes primary creative personnel, technical craft workers, creative managers, owners and executives (Ryan, 1992, pp. 124–134).

3. Uncertainty reduction through “signs of creativity”

Uncertainty of demand is clearly the basic problem in all fashion organizations, whether they are small or big. How does this issue affect the professionals who provide companies with their immaterial services of trend research, communication campaigns, and advertising?

On the one hand, indeterminateness and volatility are an intrinsic part of immaterial services, because their content is based on advice and suggestions about colors, the words of a slogan, and the images of a photo spread, for example. On the other hand, companies actually base a substantial part of their strategies on these types of advice and suggestions that are aimed at the reduction of uncertainty of demand; the goal is to find the appropriate message in order to convince consumers that a product can enrich their lives with novelty and value.

This ambivalence pervades the professional life of fashion journalists, editors, and trend researchers. Quite often, however, in magazine articles, in books, films and sometimes even in schools (for P.R. or graphic design employees, or in general for communication professionals), the attention of the public is drawn to the specifically creative content of these professions. So, “creativity” – whatever this term represents – is a principal factor in the cultural and social legitimization of an entire world of subjects.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, in their accounts, these professionals rely heavily on this category to describe and in some way to explain the content and the meaning of their jobs:

You must have some inborn qualities, such as taste, creativity. Obviously, it is a subjective thing, whether you have it or you don't have it, or you can have it in a certain way, and you can improve it . . . However [. . .], one cannot attend a school of taste, because, on the contrary, those who attend such a school make me laugh, because they are persons with even worse taste [. . .], because they are fake (Photographer).

I believe that first of all it is necessary to have great dedication, and this must be more or less an inborn quality. Some stylists are not real stylists, but only property men who don't have an opinion of their own. I am a person who, when I decide that a shoe must have a heel, it must be the right heel and the right tip. I am not one who goes out and finds 26 pairs of shoes and then it is you who must decide which shoe you prefer (Fashion editor).

As Ruggerone recently suggested,⁴ qualifying oneself as creative has become for these subjects a typical way to think about themselves, to find their own socially accepted position in a system, which traditionally did not provide all the services that have developed around the world of fashion. In a way that seems self-referential, they accept and partly contribute to the creation of the social discourse that justifies their existence.

A systematic resort to the term “creativity” and to an entire semantic area that implicitly refers to this term, turns into a cognitive strategy (Van Dijk, 1991) that is useful to legitimize the

⁴ In a report made at the meeting “Raccontare la moda, studiare la moda” (telling fashion, studying fashion) organized by Centro per lo studio della moda e della produzione culturale (Modacult), Milan, 9 May 2003.

status of one's job, in the absence of professional roles, standard training and professional profiles, and codified rules. This situation results from the nature of the activities that fill the everyday life of most of the professionals we interviewed. Rather than dwelling only upon the well-known role of the stylist, we will focus on other jobs that are considered central in the fashion system (for a description of these jobs, see [Table A1](#)).

In general, each profession described in [Table A1](#) includes a wide range of activities, some of which demand more or less sophisticated but specific technical skills, such as being able to use photographic equipment, or being able to write a press release, while others require a good cultural level and social skills. It is however difficult to determine which, among these competences and attitudes, are those that prove decisive for carrying out these jobs successfully, as any job is the product of an indefinable mix of all of them. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in most of these jobs, there are no codified training processes. Each one of the professionals we interviewed has built her professional profile in the field, through experience and continuous confrontation with market requirements ([de Benedittis, 2002](#)). It is particularly interesting to consider the stylist's role: from a profession completely carried out within the media system, it is quickly developing and gaining visibility and legitimization within the corporate world, to which it brings its overall aesthetic evaluation of the mood of an entire collection, thus acquiring the aura of creativity that usually surrounds this kind of profession.

Despite assignments and tasks that may often be very ordinary, a halo of creativity pervades the service professions in the world of fashion with unity and social respectability. Promising their customers to make the novelties of each collection publicly visible, these employees succeed in significantly reducing uncertainties, and their opinions enjoy the high esteem of stylists and marketing and product offices.

In what way do they actually contribute to reduce the endemic uncertainty that pervades all activities in the cultural industry of fashion?

Through their work, stylists, photographers, casting directors, trend researchers, and visual merchandisers help to increase the immaterial value of products, because they add semantic references that do not depend on their material characteristics or their practical functions. By doing so, they increase what we might call the performance potential of a product in this area, which is the most decisive aspect for its success, but also the most indefinite and unpredictable one prior to the public's response. From this point of view, it would seem that these professionals even encourage the uncertainty characterizing cultural products. On the other hand, since their creative aura gives them social recognition and prestige, at least among the public and among those who work in this sector, they also help to guarantee the creativity of the novelties included in fashion products.

By identifying colors, forms, and concepts to which the new collections inspire, by choosing meanings and images to which they call the attention of the public, and by preparing photographic shoots, these professionals build the semantic frame within which novel elements, combined with those that were successfully tested in previous seasons, can be read and recognized by consumers.

However, as we mentioned in the first part of this article, while those who operate inside companies experience every day the tensions and organizational constraints involved in balancing novelty and continuity, the employees of service and communication companies seem to develop routines and self-definitions in which individual roles prevail. As the styling office manager of JFK told us, they can focus on the most creative aspects and can almost completely forget the business ones. Their contribution to uncertainty reduction is mostly based on their consciousness of their typically advisory role, relieved of the need to pursue business goals. If

we consider that this self-consciousness is authorized by the acknowledgement of those who work in companies and by the rhetoric fed by media around creative roles, we can conclude that the leading role of immaterial professions in the fashion system is the product of a narrative construction strong enough to produce and make the whole system work (Czarniawska, 1997).

In the world of services, creativity takes the shape of a peculiar feature of individual personality (Bruner, 1962; Getzels and Jackson, 1962), which – if it does not express itself in ingeniousness of artistic excellence (Gardner, 1993), appears as an innate quality or a quality developed during early childhood experiences (Klein, 1948). This way of considering creativity increases the social prestige of those who are acknowledged to possess it and reduces the possibilities for developing it through training. In the world of clothing and fashion manufacturers, creativity is more rarely analyzed in an explicit manner, although, on the basis of studies made in the area of cognitive sciences, it is possible to acknowledge its role in a number of operational abilities that have been assessed as a special feature of the activities of several persons who were interviewed in the six companies at different hierarchical levels, such as the ability to analyze and synthesize information, flexibility, ability to relate available material and cognitive resources, and ability to formulate questions (Guilford, 1950). As Melucci (2000, p. 71) underlined, this kind of definition has contributed to the dissemination of this category in the everyday life of complex organizations, in which it has become a subject for research in view of greater problem solving abilities, production capacity, and personal professional satisfaction (Davis and Scase, 2000).

One of the most interesting results of our inquiry is that it appears that, in industrial organizations producing fashion, a space for the acknowledgement of the role played by forms of creativity that are different from designers' and communicators' creativity seems to be opening (Pedroni, 2005). In addition, this result seems consistent with a new trend that system analysts have begun to notice. This trend refers to the fact that the market is beginning to reward again the value of the product's material. "Made in Italy" is a guarantee of good fabrics, accurate tailoring, and personal delivery through boutiques and specialized shops. All these features are valuable means for providing satisfaction and identification, i.e. effective service to the customers.

In our opinion, this means that innovation developed within the organizational and productive constraints of a company and its environment is in a position to help Italian fashion products find a balance between the known and the new, which we deem the basic condition to overcome uncertainties about the success of new cultural products.

4. Conclusion

The case studies we carried out, which involved several types of professionals and six fashion companies that were quite different from one another in terms of size, turnover, organization, product types and reference markets, enable us to draw some unanticipated conclusions about the role of creativity in the fashion system.

In contrast to the persistent rhetoric about the individual creativity of designers and communicators, our research sheds light on some cognitive and cultural boundaries (Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990, pp. 15–17), to which all those who contribute to the material and immaterial production of fashion items are subject.

Cognitive embeddedness derives from the structured regularities of the mental processes through which all employees carry out their everyday routines. Cultural embeddedness derives

from shared collective understandings, both within a particular company and within the socio-cultural context in which it is included or aims at asserting itself. In a previous essay (Mora, 2003a, p.116) I pointed out the different strategic goals pursued by these six companies, which might be identified as immaterial products that exist alongside material products. Based on their own corporate culture, each company privileges a strategic good, which affects the company's positioning in the market: highlighting the brand (Trussardi), wearability and tailoring quality plus big sales volumes (Marzotto), total look (Cerruti), style, collection and communication (JFK), style, comfort and delivery (Henriette confezioni), and craftsmanship and after-sale service (Vema). In the pursuit of these strategic ends, the cultural embeddedness of each company is continuously negotiated, reproduced and updated, while the company's cultural capital is augmented and improved.

Cognitive and cultural boundaries, which might be considered as limitations to the exercise of creativity, become instead resources that allow the achievement of a delicate balance between innovation and what has succeeded in the past. Our inquiry shows that this is true on two conditions. First of all, on condition that the company structure, with all its more or less codified functional areas that depend on the company's size, must be able to guarantee an appropriate frame of order and rational control for any creative inspiration (Maramotti, 2000, p. 92). Secondly, the relationship between the different functional areas of the company and their various employees must be supported by everyday micro-communications (Ruggerone, 2002). On the one hand, these communications make it possible to improve either a single product or an entire collection. On the other hand, they also make it possible to control the input coming from each employee and from the socio-cultural context and to devise, develop and update a corporate strategic vision and a shared representation of the target market. As a designer of the creative team of an important Italian fashion company (Max Mara) says:

in a sea of shifting meanings, fashion is successfully launched when there is a consensus about the meaning of a garment that is shared by the designer, the customer and the various agencies that mediate between them (Griffiths, 2000, p. 89).

However, is the balance between innovation and what has succeeded in the past the outcome of joint negotiation among the different actors who participate, or is it instead a compromise (Craik, 1993, p. 60) between the idealized image of a consumer in a designer's mind and the consumption practices that already exist and that in fact grant the success of a fashion collection? The inquiry we carried out demonstrates that there is a tension between the representation of the consumer that drives the work of the company's employees and the one that drives the activities of service professionals, since the latter, as we have seen, work particularly in the area of the immaterial aspects of fashion production and associated services. These professionals contribute to reduce the uncertainty that always accompanies the launch of new products on the market, based on their ability to detect, create and inspire consumers' needs and desires. However, in doing so, they work with a conception of the consumer, as being much more amenable to manipulation than the actual contemporary consumer. Those who instead evaluate the success of their work on the basis of sales volumes and a continuous, constructive relationship with a complex distribution network, understand that "the majority of fashion consumers are extremely selective and reject fashions that are inappropriate to their lifestyles. . . . Everyday consumers constantly negotiate fashion fantasies with the conditions of everyday life" (Craik, 1993, p. 61).

However, on this particular subject, our inquiry has not produced any meaningful evidence, since it was not aimed at investigating fashion consumption practices. This is a field in which it

would be useful to propose new programs for research. In fact, if we assume that today's consumers are increasingly influencing the production of a company's culture (Crewe, 2006), it would be fruitful to try to understand in what ways the material culture produced by fashion industries becomes part of the collective cultural environment, instead of continuing to assume that companies, through their marketing strategies, simply satisfy consumers' more or less spontaneous desires.

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Appendix A

See Table A1.

Table A1
Creative service professionals in the fashion system

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Stylist/fashion editor | Organizes the photo shoots to be published by a magazine. Chooses subject, location, and items to be photographed and combined. Forms, in cooperation with the photographer, the team involved in the shoot (model/s, assistant photographer, make-up artist, hairdresser, person assigned to find accessories). Finally, writes the 'script' for the shoot, which consists of a number of pictures and short captions. This role has developed over the past 10 years. It often supports the designer in presentations of collections, and takes care of the image of the collections. In addition, this person is increasingly involved at the stage of the design of the collection, in order to give suggestions on the general "mood" |
| Fashion photographer | Participates in the photo shooting stage for fashion magazines and in the preparation of catalogues and models' photographic books. Works in close cooperation with the stylist, but is also responsible for ensuring the final aesthetic evaluation of the models' poses and expressions. In general, unlike the advertising photographer, the fashion photographer enjoys great independence in conceiving the shoot. Shooting preparation includes: work team selection, storyboard development (a fundamental stage in magazine shoots), set and light design, Polaroid test shootings. Only after having selected the best ones, can the final shoot be made, developed and edited for the printed page or broadcast |
| Model | Has the task of highlighting, through her carriage, expressions and gestures, the clothes and accessories of a collection in fashion shows and photo shoots for magazines and catalogues, advertising campaigns and showroom presentations. It is a particularly variable activity, which depends on the success achieved by the model. It begins with the creation of a book of photographs and a composite (a sort of visiting card with a front/back photograph, sizes and personal data), which are the major tools for a model's self-introduction to agencies and/or customers. Includes special characteristics (for example, a photogenic face for shoots, effective carriage in fashion shows) |
| Casting director | Plays the role of an intermediary between customer and model agency, procuring for customer fashion firm, stylists, photographers, and appropriate models (as to face and body). Receives from companies a general input (a Greta Garbo style, a look recalling the Sixties), and identifies a group of models among which the customer makes its choice. From the casting stage to the end of a fashion show or a photographic reportage, this person is responsible for anything concerning models |

Table A1 (Continued)

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Booker | Performs the booking role, that is, option and subsequent engagement of a model. Acts as the model's agent, working in an agency but with a role that goes beyond mere brokerage, since it follows day by day the development of a model's career, from the making of the first photographic book to the most prestigious fashion shows. When the model (either male or female) becomes successful, the booker manages his/her job engagements (appointments, casting, fitting, travels, photo shoots, etc.) |
| Public relations | The person responsible for public relations is a mediator who transmits the company's mission to the outside world. It has become increasingly difficult to identify entirely what this role actually comprises, because a company may entrust an agency with different tasks (from the organization of a fashion show event, to the communication campaign and its definition, etc.), and therefore the agency has to carry out several activities |
| Cool hunter | A person with a medium-high cultural background, assigned by styling offices, consulting companies, marketing departments of big companies, to continuously monitor custom and habit trends, non-conventional use of clothes and accessories, the success of particular objects or meeting places in the trendiest cities of the world (London, Milan, Paris, New York, Tokyo, etc.) |
| Visual merchandiser | An image consultant who transmits the basic concept of a collection, a brand, a product line, the arrangement of a shop window, the arrangement and furnishing of a shop or a department store corner |

Source: de Benedittis (2002).

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Emanuela Mora is Associate Professor of Cultural Sociology in the Faculty of Political Sciences at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan from which she received her doctorate. Her dissertation examined the connection between communication and reflexivity in the work of Simmel, Goffman, and Habermas. She has published numerous articles and monographs, as well as edited books, on urban forms of cultural production and on the Italian fashion system.