

Article

Coordinating transnational futurework in fashion design

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Abstract

Both quantitative and qualitative research has provided evidence of a fashion system with principled aesthetic transitions. Previous theories of coordination have been proposed at the level of collective behavior, but monopolistic competition at the industry level looms large. Designers and suppliers around the world have the difficult task of anticipating uncertain consumer demand. How are multiple layers of futurework coordinated through global value chains? Drawing on 11 months of ethnographic data from first-tier suppliers in India, I document the role of forecasting in buyer–supplier coordination. I describe the contents of forecasts and show how designers use organizational routines to balance competing requirements for conformity and differentiation. Most importantly, I argue that forecasting information is filtered through *calculative spaces* and the logic of *uncertainty absorption*. The consequences of transnational futurework resonate not only through finance and technological innovation, but through aesthetics and embodiment.

Key words: futurework, global value chains, outsourcing, uncertainty absorption, information sharing

JEL classification: L67 other consumer nondurables, M16 international business administration, Z11 cultural economics

If the design will not sell, then both material and workmanship are almost pure loss. The central function of the entrepreneur in a fashion industry is far less the efficient organization of the production of a given commodity and much more the shrewd anticipation of ... changing preferences.

—Robinson, 1961, p. 395

1. Introduction

Because the future is inherently uncertain, valuation and judgment are critically important in guiding action. All strategic decisions depend on intelligence communicated through models or prophecies. While German Idealism, neo-Kantian philosophy and pragmatism have long investigated agency and anticipation as part of the human condition (Mead, 1932; Emirbayer and Mishe, 1998; Tavorly and Eliasoph, 2013), organizational intelligence depends on more narrowly defined schemes of coordination (Knight, 1921/1964; Zucker, 1977). I define *futurework* as the occupational mandate of transforming an uncertain future into determinable information (Fine, 2007, pp. 99–134; Luhmann, 2018). Futurework is instrumental but can have realist ends, as in the case of weather forecasting (Daipha, 2015). It can also be reflexive. Consider economics or eschatology; through the construction of fictional expectations, models and forecasts can create self-fulfilling prophecies (Merton, 1948; Beckert, 2016). Futurework is not always accurate or successful, but it is a pervasive feature of work and social action.

Fashion provides an outstanding opportunity to study futurework in action. Trends are notorious for being difficult to predict. In fashion as in many other cultural fields, valuation rather than decision or contest is the principle method of reducing uncertainty (Aspers, 2018; Beckert, 2020). Promissory organizations and gatekeepers play crucial roles in defining future-oriented claims about trends as collective behaviors (Blumer, 1969; Khaire, 2014; Wohl, 2020). Although scholars have noted profusion and fragmentation (Davis, 1992; Crane, 2000), ‘nobody seems to seriously believe that the era of trends is over’ (Lantz, 2016, p. 68). Advanced quantitative research continues to provide evidence of a fashion system with principled aesthetic transitions (Cillo *et al.*, 2010; Godart, 2018; Cillo *et al.*, 2020). From qualitative research as well, we know that competing tastemakers regularly make objectively similar decisions even when they are subjectively independent (Blumer, 1969; Godart and Mears, 2009; Hoppe, 2019).

The challenge of predicting anticipatory dynamic conformity is amplified by the globalization of value chains (GVCs). Fashion capitals still play an outsized role in defining trends. Scholars have argued that forecasting and legitimate media based in Paris, New York, London and Milan define the general aesthetic situation (Crane, 1997; Godart, 2014; Lantz, 2016). Yet a stunning 97% of US apparel is imported from thousands of offshore suppliers (AAFA, 2016, p. 5).¹ Underneath the glamour of fashion capitals, there is a macro-economic shift toward modular governance and from trade in commodities toward trade in tasks and services (World Trade Organization & IDE-JETRO, 2011; Gereffi, 2014). The actual work of garment design, for example, is increasingly outsourced to first-tier suppliers in China, India and Turkey (Tokatli *et al.*, 2008; Hoppe, 2019). We are left not only with the problem of uncertain demand for cultural products, but a series of socioeconomic mediations that connect fashion capitals to distant suppliers. How, then, are multiple layers of futurework coordinated through organizations in GVCs? What can this tell us about how apparently individual decisions are influenced by social structure and legitimate social representations of the future?

The article begins by setting up the problem of transnational futurework in a status market with uncertain cultural demand. I then discuss the ethnographic data collection of

1 No single manufacturer holds more than 1% of total market share (Haider, 2016). Meanwhile, the top five retailers account for 8% of global market sales (Euromonitor International, 2017, p. 18).

organizational routines at first-tier Indian suppliers. The coordination argument proceeds by analyzing two mechanisms in detail: first, when interpreting forecasts, designers follow the organizational logic of *uncertainty absorption*, privileging inferences rather than evidence. Sequential decisions narrow the focus of attention and create determinable information about the future. Second, designers create and use ‘mood boards’ as *calculative spaces* of protension. They copy or tweak some elements of global forecasts while ignoring others, recreating the paradox of dynamic conformity that characterizes fashion as a broad social phenomenon. It is the forward-looking dialectic between promissory organizations and cultural workers in GVCs, which generates and diffuses design trends.

2. Entrepreneurs of taste

Fashion has long been studied as a social fact with broad relevance for status group consumption. Classic trickle-down theories and their rebuttals, however, are merely theories of diffusion in terms of consumer lifestyles (Veblen, 1899/2007; Simmel, 1904; Blumer, 1969). This is an important point. They do not contend, or even attempt to contend, with industry structure or the relational formation of markets between consumers and producers. Unlike ‘pure’ fashions in personal names (Lieberson, 2000), the apparel market has a central role in anticipating, interpreting, producing and promoting differentiated consumer goods. Unfortunately, there was almost no sociological study of fashion as an occupation or industry until the 1990s. While research on buyers has since shown us the importance of tacit knowledge and material devices (see below), we knew ‘next to nothing of the identities and work of fashion buyers whose choices directly shape our own by making particular styles available for purchase’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 2). Even Diana Crane, who led the charge of data collection for a generation, concluded that ‘it appears that research on fashion diffusion models as they apply to the fashion system is virtually nonexistent’ (Crane, 1993, 1997, 1999, 2000, p. 23; emphasis added).

Only in the past 10 years or so have scholars really begun to advance our structural and procedural understanding of industrial futurework. Building on the work of Harrison White, economic sociologists have conceptualized fashion as a status market organized around brands (Aspers, 2010a; Godart, 2012).² The market-based model of trend diffusion begins with high-end luxury runway shows in fashion capitals and quick imitations by fast fashion companies like Zara. Runway designs are later subject to the analysis of trend forecasting bureaus. Only then do trends filter through bridge segment or high street brands, later trickling down to the mass market—in some cases through supplier mediations (Crane, 1997; Lantz, 2016; Hoppe, 2019). Figure 1 presents the producer relationship in a diagram with trend forecasting service WGSN at the top, furthest from market impact. This relationship will be unfolded throughout the article. Fashion capitals and high-status brands lead governance relations without controlling the organizational routines of their suppliers. We will see how under diminishing time horizons, entrepreneurs of taste mediate layers of futurework that are distributed through GVCs.

2 Management and media scholars emphasize brand equity as a source of competitive advantage (Aaker, 1996; Arvidsson, 2005; Barney, 1991). Godart (2015) provides evidence that shared brand ownership affects collective selection. Bourdieusian scholars offer field-level analyses of status (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Mears, 2011).

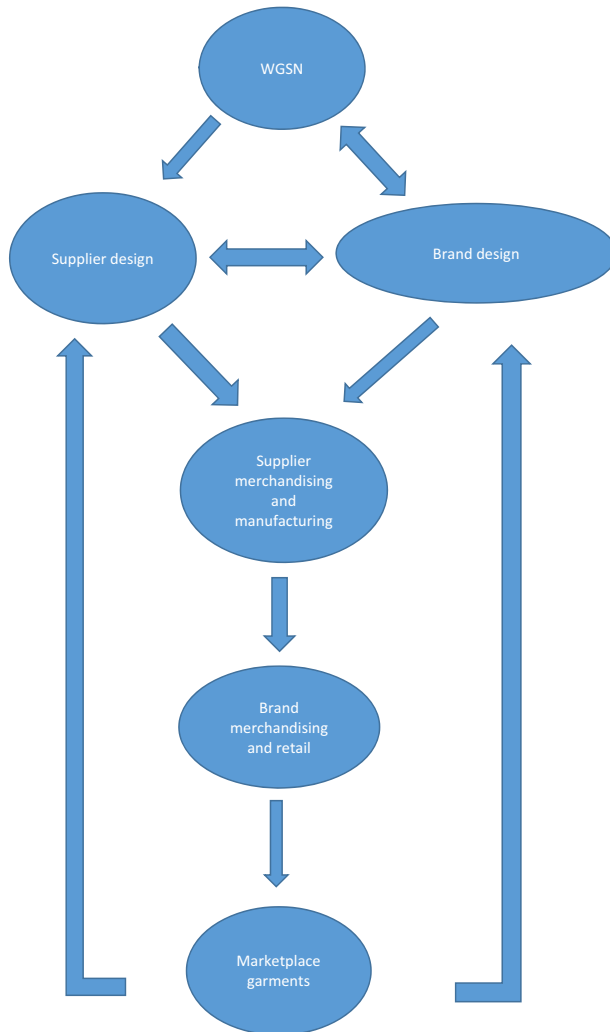


Figure 1. Flow of futurework in the apparel production market.

We are now in position to introduce forecasting as a textbook case of futurework. Forecasters, creative directors, designers and buyers serve as ‘entrepreneurs of taste’ (Robinson, 1961). It is their job to predict and perform what will be trendy—and thus what should sell. There are more than 20 separate forecasting firms or events, but Pantone (color), Première Vision (fabric) and WGSN (apparel) are the most widely referenced in industry and scholarship.³ Firms stake different claims about their power, responsibility and mission, but they are properly understood as promissory organizations, that is, intermediaries that

3 On trade shows, see Skov (2006). Competition among forecasters is an interesting complication addressed in the discussion section.

Table 1. Status segmentation in fashion retail (exemplars)

Segment	Brands and channels
Haute Couture (ultra-luxury)	Armani Privé, Schiaparelli, Ralph & Russo
High-end (true) luxury	Neimans, Saks, Gucci, Chanel, Giorgio Armani
Accessible (affordable) luxury	Nordstrom, Diesel, Emporio Armani, Coach, Ralph Lauren
Bridge (better, diffusion)	Macy's, DKNY, Banana Republic, Zara, A X, Lululemon
Mid-tier (specialty)	M&S, Gap, Levi's, Van Heusen, Uniqlo, Hollister, Nike, Victoria's Secret
Value (mass market)	Target, Kohls, J. C. Penney, Old Navy, H&M, Liz Claiborne
Discount (off-price)	Walmart, Ross, TJ Maxx, Burlington
Unorganized (independent, secondary, tertiary)	Formal or informal street markets

'routinely and prodigiously produce future-oriented knowledge claims' (Pollock and Williams, 2010, p. 532). Narrowing an infinite variety of choices, they anticipate high-level trends 18–24 months in advance. Substantive examples of trends are analyzed below, but they include both macro trends like 'sustainability' and micro trends like the current 'witchy' look. Quantitative data sources are mobilized by some firms and prophetically excised by others. Industry statistics are scarce, but forecasting has between 38,000 and 75,000 clients around the world; one estimate suggests it is a \$56 billion industry overall (Conroy-Randall, 2012; Sherman, 2014). WGSN, the largest firm, charges \$20–25k for digital subscription access for five terminals, so their reach easily extends to first-tier suppliers (Lantz, 2016, p. 15). The next section discusses the methods I used to identify and analyze transnational futurework.

3. Methods

Under the condition of brand confidentiality, I gained extensive ethnographic access to four export-oriented suppliers in India for 11 months. Two small factories were investigated in exploratory work, but I spent most of my time in one mid-size and one large firm.⁴ I call the small firms IFS and SFI, the mid-size firm ACE and the large firm MEI. All firm names and personal names are pseudonyms. An export orientation means that the suppliers produce orders for North American (56%), European (40%) and Asian (5%) brands.⁵ I gathered direct evidence from 129 unique brands in different phases of production. Ninety-two percent of the brands I observed are the accessible luxury, bridge/specialty or mid-tier segments (Table 1 and Figure 2). The average order size is around 20,000 pieces but ranges into the millions. In a general pattern of outsourcing, brands of all sizes and most marketing segments (except high-end luxury) outsource some design work to firms like ACE and MEI. These relationships are not without their cultural and strategic dilemmas (Tokati, 2007;

4 See Tewari (2008) for structural and historical context. Online Appendix A is a classification of factory size developed in consultation with factory owners and senior staff at the Apparel Export Promotion Council.

5 Percentages add to 101 because of rounding.

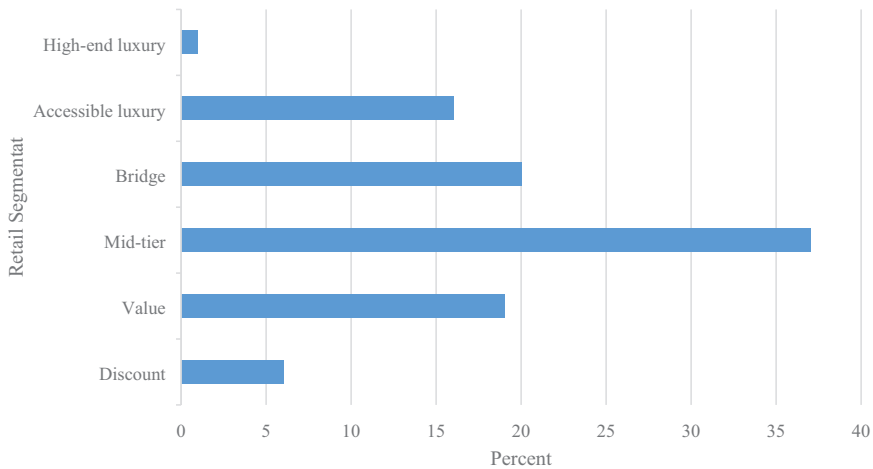


Figure 2. Retail brand segment sample distribution.

Table 2. Subsample of design-relevant participants

Department	<i>n</i>
Design	19
Sampling and quality control	8
Marketing	20
Fabric production	11
Foreign buying and sourcing	19
Top executives	15
Total	92

Aspers, 2010b; Hoppe, 2019), but I focus here on the general flow of tasks themselves, that is, organizational routines. Organizational routines are the micro-foundational programs not only of work, but arguably of culture and economy writ large (Biggart and Beamish, 2003; Pentland and Feldman, 2005).

The research design used departmental rotations through design, tailoring, industrial engineering, packing and so forth. My presence as a researcher and intern or management trainee (I wore a company lanyard) was usually introduced sequentially. A designer would introduce me to his assistant, for example, who after a few days would lead me to a master tailor. I spent the most time with department heads and middle managers, visiting four times a week for up to 3 months. For purposes of clarification and triangulation, I frequently conducted mini-revisits among firms, factories and departments (Marcus, 1995; Burawoy, 2003). In both India and the USA, I was able to access the WGSN forecasting archive through university and supplier subscriptions.

The data I collected are a mix of observation, ethnographic interviews, semi-structured audio-recorded interviews ($n = 31$) and digital archives. A subsample of design-relevant participants is listed in Table 2. Fourteen of nineteen designers are women; most are between

20 and 35 years old. Semi-structured interviews lasted around an hour and took place in managerial offices or showrooms. Ethnographic interviews, nicely aligned with organizational routines, yielded the most important data (Spradley, 1979/2016). I also collected data from go-alongs to textile mills, fabric retailers, buying agencies and similar locations (Kusenbach, 2003). In my office cubicle or a design showroom, I converted jottings to field-notes within a day or two.

Analyzing organizational routines in cultural fields is complicated by vocabularies of motive that endorse charismatic self-expression and reject bureaucratic organization. However, the dichotomy between charisma and routines ‘effectively conflates the *motivation* of creators—namely, seeking to “be creative”—with the actual *processes* of action’ (Leschziner, 2015, p. 114, emphasis added). Thus, while I asked industrial engineers about their standard operating procedures directly, I did not speak about ‘routines’ with designers because it violates their occupational principle of autonomy. Instead, I used the ethnographic strategy of playing (or being) the novice (Becker, 1998). The pretense of educating an untutored observer allowed designers to demonstrate ‘intuitive’ procedures of futurework in a step-by-step progression without compromising occupational honor.

4. Anticipating demand through uncertainty absorption

Pragmatist and symbolic interactionist theory has rightly drawn our attention to the temporal dimensions of agency, but to understand transnational futurework, we must show how cognition is embedded in larger structures of governance and organizational authority. Decisions across and within organizations sequentially change available intelligence and guide future action. In other words, the reception, manipulation and transfer of information through organizations generate determinable premises which progressively serve as points of departure for new decisions (Luhmann, 2018; Halliday *et al.*, 2010). This process is called *uncertainty absorption*, which ‘takes place when inferences are drawn from a body of evidence and the inferences, instead of the evidence itself, are then communicated’ (March and Simon, 1958, p. 165). Uncertainty absorption is fundamentally a method of valuation.

Uncertainty absorption is never more than a partial solution. It is conditioned on network and firm resources. It may systematically generate inertia and unintended consequences. Decision situations, for example, may promote a ‘garbage can’ of suboptimal choices (Cohen *et al.*, 1972; see also Feldman and March, 1981). Occupational truces of coordination, however, allow organizational routines to proceed and to produce results. Through information sharing and selective attention, seemingly intractable long-range problems can be procedurally translated into practical evaluations and eventually into products.

Predicting fashion demand is an exemplary problem for uncertainty absorption. Although some scholars have raised questions about cultural coordination in distant supplier markets (Aspers, 2010b), I argue that first-tier suppliers have extended their design capabilities by relying on the services of forecasting firms. As legitimate promissory organizations, forecasters create information channels which limit the attention space and provide the basis for (progressive) uncertainty absorption. (The same point can be made about relying on one organization rather than multiple organizations.) In the next section, I

describe actual features of WGSN—a firm that bills itself as ‘the world’s trend authority’—and how trend reports are filtered by designers.

4.1 Institutional endorsement

Used on a daily basis across the four suppliers I studied, WGSN is the most legitimate and widely used forecasting service in India and around the world. In India, there are three institutions which directly promote the service: first, as an assistant designer shares with me, when a value-segment brand does regional visits, they explicitly recommend beginning the design process with WGSN; supply-side designers should then ‘adapt [it] to [the brand’s] taste’. Supply-side marketing managers likewise flaunt their WGSN subscriptions to new potential clients as a signal of information competence (Feldman and March, 1981). Second, supplier industry groups in India (like the Apparel Export Promotion Council) sponsor twice-annual forecasting presentations led by WGSN in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru (Bangalore), and Ludhiana. Third, Indian design schools like the National Institute of Fashion Technology provide access and train their students in its features. These institutional endorsements improve the instrumental value and reinforce the legitimacy of WGSN.⁶

My export-oriented research largely supports Lantz’s interview-based claims (Lantz, 2016, pp. 163–166) about the rhetorical importance of WGSN in India, although studying organizational routines reveals additional variation. Assistant designers at the firms I studied treat the service dogmatically in ethnographic interviews. Even when I ask a senior designer at MEI if she could do her design work from anywhere in the world, she stops to think about it before laughing: ‘I would say no. I will definitely need WGSN!’ Another designer at IFS authoritatively states that ‘it’s worldwide. They use it in New York, they use it in Paris.’ When I tell Shreya (an assistant designer at SFI) that it seems like everyone uses WGSN, she laughs:

We all prefer WGSN . . . We get to know what will be the fashion that comes in [the next 2 years] . . . They do specialized forecast research. It is like a scientist. You can say that they will make the research and we will follow it.

I challenge her response to test for underlying assumptions: ‘But why follow it? What will happen if you don’t?’ She replies, ‘I can make it [differently], of course. But then I will disappoint the buyer, so we won’t have any orders.’ Shreya’s boss Niharika, the general manager of merchandising, agrees with Shreya’s limited operationalization: ‘The same way that Gap is the best for khakis, WGSN is the best for design.’ As mediators of style in functionally integrated GVCs, these designers believe that following WGSN forecasts is a market necessity. The fictional expectations of WGSN gain self-fulfilling efficacy when they are embraced in this way.

4.2 Uncertainty absorption as a form of valuation

My first WGSN ‘session’ is in the design office at MEI. Rahul, a senior designer, logs into the company account and sets me up in front of a Mac with a huge screen. The fashion portal is broken down into top-level categories of beauty, footwear and ‘complete look’, along with second-level categories, including retail, street style and specific products. Rahul says

6 Forecasting firms are highly secretive, so little is known about their own methods of search or presentation. The scholarly point of departure is Lantz (2016).

he usually begins with product categories or favorite designers. He navigates with me to Ghesquière's recent Louis Vuitton show from Paris Fashion Week Spring/Summer (S/S) 2017. This opens a gallery of high-resolution pictures of each complete look ($n = 45$). Entire collections and individual images are easily downloaded, cropped and modified.

Five principal areas within WGSN are of interest to the sociologist: (i) the service has a 'recommended for you' section based on behavioral data. An 'Earthed' theme shows up first, with a color palette of browns and greys and high-resolution photos of fabric textures. This is part of the central S/S 2017 trend report. (ii) There are 'most viewed' reports of all WGSN users. 'Earthed' is listed here as well, providing evidence that Rahul has been minimizing search costs and following a global current. (iii) There is a section based on highly accessible social science analytics and case studies. (iv) Other reports offer edited collections from social media, as well as information about micro-trends like 'normcore' (a term invented by the K-Hole forecasting group). (v) A final popular report of interest to the economic sociologist is 'Catwalk Analytics S/S 2017'. Each look is categorized according to specific design features. Trousers are up 14% from last year, for example, while skirts are down 7%. In the dress category, the 'cold shoulder' trend is up 64% and ruffles up 74%. While declining trends are typically ignored, as [Zerubavel \(2015\)](#) would expect, the biggest change is in gingham (7% of the overall shirt mix): gingham tops are up 786%. When I remark on this to an assistant designer, she is at first unconcerned because these are tops and she designs only bottoms. When I tell her that the trend applies to bottoms as well, however, she comes over and snaps a picture of gingham pants with her phone. Here gingham is a negative case of uncertainty absorption which results from the division of labor and attention. Forecasting reports are not fiat of dictatorship; specific information increases relevance. We must be aware, though, that statistics have far less relevance than emotional energy and legitimate memetic endorsements.

Over many months of discussions about trends, I never hear designers use statistics as a justification for action. This marks a contrast in the spectrum from realist to reflexive futurework. Buyers, on the one hand, need mathematical competence to make purchase orders and plan inventories. On the other hand, even where designers are commercially orientated, a mutual focus of attention and shared mood trumps consumer analytics (cf. [Collins, 2004](#); [Entwistle, 2006](#); [Pedroni and Volonté, 2014](#)). Analytics are further devalued because they provide intelligence from the past. Instead, designers tell me they must stay 'ahead of the curve' or 'one step ahead of the customer'. This 'collective groping for the proximate future' occurs even with retro fashions, provided that generational change has created sufficient distance between the past and present ([Blumer, 1969](#), p. 281; [Lieberson, 2000](#), p. 165). Indeed, the 1980s inspiration images (many printed from WGSN) line an entire wall in the MEI design office ([Figure 3](#)). With the understanding that consumer demand must be created or at least anticipated, endorsements by WGSN and by recent high-end luxury runway shows (see [Section 4.3](#)) are the *meaningful reasons* to pursue the new retro aesthetic.

While WGSN is the current leader in apparel forecasting, the process of uncertainty absorption occurs with other promissory organizations as well. Shreya references Pantone's color forecasts, for example, in relation to a mood board at her desk: 'Neon was popular in 2011-12', she explains, 'but now it's fading. Now it's more minimalist, we see more greys.' I immediately recall the trend of neon running shoes, especially from Nike (a public client of

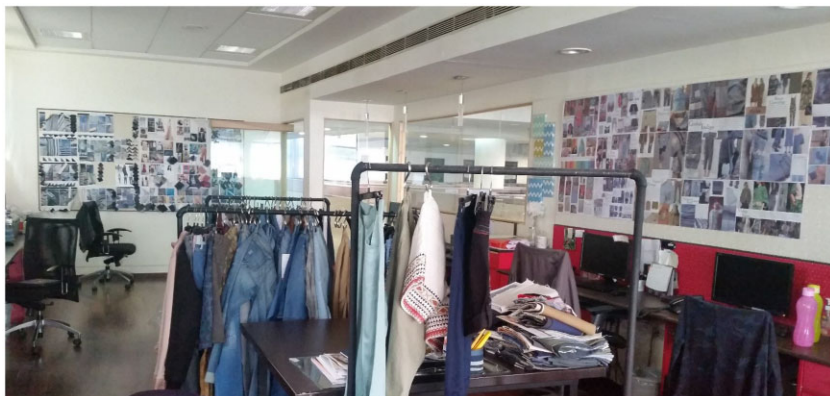


Figure 3. Inspiration images in the MEI design studio (photo by author).

WGSN). Looking back to the Pantone forecast for Fall 2012, one can pick out ‘bright charreuse’, supported by ‘ultramarine green’ and others. It indeed stands in contrast to Fall 2015, which embraces a more muted palette of ‘desert sage’, ‘marsala’ and a blue-grey ‘stormy weather’. The reasons Pantone gives for color changes are vague, self-referential and not mutually exclusive; at best they perhaps identify an increasing need for ‘comfort’. But because the evidentiary basis for selection is unimportant, designers often satisfice in their color choices. They use marsala fabrics *because the color has been selected by Pantone*, rather than relying on a hypothetical underlying claim that consumers will want their dresses to match their comforting glasses of red wine.

4.3 The devil wears WGSN⁷

Export-oriented designers operate within a global fashion system that favors representations of taste originating in fashion capitals. High-end luxury designers in these cities have leading roles in taste entrepreneurship because they possess uneven resources of heritage, financial capital and agglomeration. Their influence trickles down across the globe. Even in the biggest trend of the S/S 2017 season at WGSN—a 1980s retro aesthetic—Catwalk Analytics editors tip their hats to Balmain (c. F/W 2015). In my own introduction to WGSN with Rahul, at first I think that his point of departure with Louis Vuitton is simply intuitive (i.e. sensible but accidental). In fact, I later learn that according to Vogue Runway page views (Phelps, 2016), this was the ninth-most popular show of the season. (Balmain was #7.) Vogue and the *Business of Fashion* come out with similar analyses every year, and every year it is high-end luxury brands based in Paris, New York, London, or Milan that dominate the attention space.⁸ Superstar designers in fashion capitals remain influential for the entire fashion system even as mass-market design is outsourced.

7 This is, of course, a reference to the film version of *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006). The famous blue sweater scene explaining institutional diffusion does not appear in the book (Weisberger, 2003). The following section should be compatible with the framework laid out by Fligstein (Fligstein, 2001).

8 Superstar stratification is a regular feature of status markets (Bourdieu, 1993; Rosen, 1981), but the metaphor of attention space comes from administration and microsociology (Collins, 1998, pp. 80–135, 2004; Simon, 1997, pp. 92–139).

At the same time, the provenance of futurework is increasingly distributed through a series of taste entrepreneurs in GVCs. Designers use the services of promissory organizations, including brands, in concert with one another (White, 1981). Perception is both relational and anticipatory. Interpreting and tweaking trends from any source require agency from designers (Daipha, 2010; Hoppe, 2019). When I ask Rahul how he identifies trends, the first thing he mentions is ‘queries from buyers. If one brand asks for distressed [embellishment], and another asks for distressed, I will start to see something. I will talk to the other designers, and I will cross-check it with WGSN and store websites’. But because he believes that WGSN represents the future with ‘a move-on from existing production’, he pushes design requests from brands toward forecasts and signals from trend leaders like Louis Vuitton and Zara. According to Rahul, ‘Zara is one which makes the trend. What they have will be in the other stores next season. Other brands . . . they will check on what the other stores are doing, then they will follow.’ When lower-tier brands catch up with their requests to MEI—a seasonal phenomenon verified by both US and Indian participants in my study—Rahul will make the required tweaks from trendier brands and adjust downward for cost.

Designers of course add their own touches as well. As an assistant designer at IFS explains, ‘what we do is we create our own little version’ with components sampled from WGSN; ‘we don’t create something exactly as it is’. For other brands, designers can do without direct forecasts. With one value brand, Aparna just builds on her experience with their buyers: ‘we know what they like from their taste’. Other buyers ‘never use poly[ester] fabric, so we will never develop a sample in that material’. Her colleague adds that the same value brand ‘recently asked for a sleepwear collection with a new concept, so we design it in a very generalized way’. Trend forecasts and brands provide inspiration, but discerning, filtering and tweaking these trends are the bread-and-butter routines of export-oriented designers.

I assess strategic risks in the discussion section below, but uncertainty absorption throughout the fashion system has clear advantages for both buyers and suppliers. Both reduce their search costs and crucially improve assembly line planning when they subscribe to forecasting services. Brands (and their investors) gain assurances that their suppliers will endorse the fictional expectations of cultural consumption despite sweeping geographical distance. Designers, meanwhile, can derive their own representations of trends with points of departure from WGSN’s archives, multiple brand relationships and design school training (Simmel, 1908/2009). By relating to WGSN as ‘inspiration’, they maintain a sense of creative autonomy. The phenomenology of inspiration is likewise furthered by artistic devices called mood boards, to which we now turn. Although we have emphasized conformity so far, looking closely at mood boards helps us to appreciate the sources of differentiation promoted by modular or relational GVC governance.

5. Mood boards as calculative spaces

Mood boards, sometimes called style or storyboards, are collages of images with a color palette. Typically developed a few seasons ahead of market impact (3–12 months), they form the working basis for a sketch and design sample. The function of mood boards is to collate and clarify inspirational images. In theoretical terms, they objectivate a synoptic representation of the aesthetic future, collapsing trend trajectories into the phenomenological anticipation of protension (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013). Although mood boards are subjectively

expansive—designers understand them as devices that expand creative options—they can be sociologically understood as devices that channel inspiration. Just as spreadsheets or showrooms represent delimited, calculative spaces for decision-making (Simmel, 1994/1902; Callon and Muniesa, 2005; Entwistle, 2009), mood boards reduce uncertainty by condensing the content and time horizon of futurework. Meanwhile, individual variation in construction and reception remains, fulfilling the occupational mandate for differentiated conformity in fashion design. Both buyers and suppliers build mood boards. The craftsmanship varies, but the goal of transforming inspirational images into garment designs is the same. Brands seem to follow a similar process, albeit more personalized through an idealized customer image (Schulz, 2008). The following subsections cover construction and reception as organizational routines from the export perspective.

5.1 Mood board construction

To build a mood board, designers collect images from forecasting reports (especially WGSN), social media, reputable Western fashion magazines⁹ and retailers. Designers working at smaller factories arrange and print a series of color images on regular paper. Figures 4 and 5, for example, were developed by assistant designers at ACE and IFS. These ‘boards’ might be e-mailed to buyers or just posted in workspaces for personal reference. Designers at MEI use a thick plastic board and attach proposed fabric swatches and trims. They air-mail boards to buyers for approval, rejection or tweaking. Rahul usually sends the same board to a few different buyers if they are in similar brand segments. This increases the chance that at least one brand will accept his aesthetic direction. If two brands approve the same mood board, he offers tweaks to the brand which is less important (as determined by the supplier marketing team). As with garments, buyers typically accept substitutions.

Once again, principles of the component image selection process appear to align with the general expectations of interaction ritual chains (Collins, 2004). Designers foreground strong positive emotion and a small selection of legitimate external sources for inspiration when constructing mood boards. Pantone, for example, aptly notes that ‘orange can always be counted on to inject a bit of surprise’. Although ‘technical’ or production-oriented contributions are available (e.g. the work of textile designers), designers do not particularly value them. On the other hand, artistic and commercial input from forecasters and brands is respected and acknowledged (cf. Koppman, 2014; Pedroni and Volonté, 2014). Beyond simple sociometric distance (Entwistle, 2006, pp. 718–721; Schulz, 2008), forecasters and buyers occupy a greater share of the attention space than actual consumers because of the uncertainty absorption function that forecasting provides.

Mood boards gain value as calculative spaces because designers tacitly understand the principle of selective attention. While I observe Kairavi, for example, she uses two WGSN themes from the S/S 2017 trend report and titles the mood boards with the same theme names. This makes her contribution easy for buyers to recognize. For the more experienced Rahul, a mood board is less often about a single trend. One of his mood boards, intended for the design of sweatpants or joggers, combines a ‘destruction’ trend with an ‘open hem’ trend. Even the most conceptual boards, however, according to an assistant designer at ACE, are ‘very clear from a design perspective’. An assistant designer at SFI, for instance,

9 Partly because the consumer market is export-oriented, *Vogue India* is devalued. On the shifting conventions of Indian fashion media, see Khaire and Hall (2016).



Figure 4. Mood board developed by ACE (photo by author).

tells me she would ‘focus on the details’ within a mood board when she develops garment samples. Based on a board of sea-inspired themes, she might develop an image of a conch shell into ‘deep pockets’ or architectural geometry into cutwork (a lace technique). Such developments are strongly influenced by strategic capabilities at the factory and cluster level (see below).

No supplier I studied collects data on mood board approvals, rejections or tweaks. Indeed, while in the field I did not consider the relevance of ‘hit rates’ either at such an early stage in the design process. Mood board quality is thus an open question; interviews with Indian buying agents, quality controllers, and American buyers and designers suggest a



Figure 5. Mood board developed by IFS (photo by author).

complicated ambivalence. One consistent finding is that export-oriented mood boards largely respond to themes originating with forecasts and brands. The export-oriented goal is usually specific products, not collections. Still, such early involvement by suppliers shows the extent to which modular governance relations have developed. The next section investigates how suppliers respond to mood boards constructed by brands.

5.2 Mood board reception

When mood boards originate from brands, aesthetic definitions are never rejected outright. Instead, they are accepted or selectively embraced. The design director at ACE, Amrita, is clear that when a brand sends a mood board, ‘they already know what they want’. Boards are either sent by e-mail or airmail. In the latter case, brands often send glossy images ripped out from fashion magazines (‘tear sheets’). Brand mood boards (except those from fast

fashion brands; see below) generally contain more depth than supplier boards: there are more abstract references, higher-quality images and more complex collages. There are three related reasons for the difference. First, brands have sustained consumer relationships of brand equity. Even without investment in productive capabilities, they become known for an 'image' or mood. Second, brands may have superior design capabilities and feel the need to be especially instructive. Third, multiple buyers confirmed that they send some of the same mood boards to various factories in India and other emerging economies. Although some differentiation is expected through supplier competition, providing a single calculative space helps brands to maintain aesthetic boundaries.

Brands are more likely than suppliers to supplement images with written text. The mood board from one bridge-segment brand, for example, is organized at the top level according to four themes: 'Indigo Mood' for deep blues, 'Shine on You Crazy Diamond' for sequins and summery flashes of color, 'Texture-matic' and 'Put a Cherry on Top' for red tops.¹⁰ There are usually about 15 images per theme. Supplementary language also attempts to be evocative. One line says, 'follow the sun with a jet set getaway to Cannes'. Here Amrita repeatedly underlines 'sun' and tells me that words can sometimes be more powerful than images; she is now thinking of yellows and oranges. In a different case, Amrita relays her interpretation of a mood board to her assistant Vani, telling her to '*mix it*. [The brand designer] is saying mixed media. Add a panel, blocking, some black embroidery . . .'. Primed by art school education, designers interpret artistic intentions by identifying discrete aesthetic components.

Even within the calculative space of a mood board, designers respond with selective attention. At ACE, following Amrita's lead and the firm's core competence (Pralhad and Hamel, 1990; Khair, 2011), they gravitate toward conceptual and embellished pieces, constructing garment samples for approximately two out of every five available options. One of these they will attempt to nail 'bang on' and another 'close enough'. Designers ignore fabrics for which they do not have the expertise (e.g. denim) as well as low-value basics (e.g. plain t-shirts). In addition to circling a few complete looks, Amrita circles component features of others, like the geometric lace pattern on the bottom third of a skirt, to direct her assistants. The smaller factories I studied receive a smaller selection of mood boards but follow the same selective logic; assistant designers circle two out of six or eight images 'according to what our company does best'.

Mood boards from discounters and fast fashion companies do not contain references to ceramics, architecture or fine art. Perhaps the time horizon of trend forecasters is simply too distant for a fast fashion strategy. Instead, they contain either simple pictures of garments (occasionally trims) or models wearing garments, with three to six styles per page. Selections can be extensive, with one company sending a book of 197 images, but talking with buyers and merchandisers reveals that this quantity is based on the understanding that multiple suppliers will selectively develop samples. Though tweaks are standard industry practice, brand comparisons from my fieldwork suggest that fast fashion reputations for copying are well deserved. One book of inspiration images features a WGSN triptych, cropped images from a magazine editorial and branded designs from five different identifiable bridge

10 Theme names are altered for confidentiality, but word play is extremely common in trend forecasting and design.

segment brands. Sometimes brand designers insert handwritten notes for modifications, like a request to tweak the lace shorts of a competitor by using a thinner waistband.

Attention in the apparel GVC is hierarchical, but inspiration nevertheless ‘circulates’ through aesthetic circuits of commerce (see generally [Zelizer, 2004](#)). Designs originating from first-tier suppliers are part of a socioeconomic pattern in which brands observe other brands not only in the consumer market or through corporate strategy ([White, 1981](#); [Porter, 1985](#)), *but through a shared supplier market as well*. A bridge-segment mood board, for example, includes two accessible luxury garments first designed by Amrita and Vani. These exact same two images show up later in the mood board of a separate bridge-segment brand. I am deeply surprised by this, but Vani rolls her eyes and says that such an impact happens ‘regularly’. She tells me of another example from last season when Amrita developed a prototype that is now featured on the cover of an inspiration book for a large fast-fashion brand.

Mood boards channel forecast and brand images into a single calculative space. They are an individualized project constructed within the occupational jurisdiction of design, thereby devaluing technical input. Images and written texts are designed to arouse strong (albeit fleeting) positive emotion. Export-oriented designers satisfice in their image and color selections, aligning their subjective inspiration with the themes of trend forecasts and the core competencies of their factories. Even in the early and nebulous aesthetic territory of mood boards—before a garment sample is ever sketched or sewn—images generated and selected by forecasting services, brands and suppliers circulate through GVCs. Studying the backstage organizational routines of inspiration provides new insight for larger arguments about futurework, governance and cultural diffusion.

6. Discussion

Transnational futurework is becoming more common with macroeconomic shifts favoring modular and relational forms of governance. As responsibilities are increasingly distributed, microeconomic research will help us to understand the thickness of information sharing that is constitutive of advanced governance forms.

Transnational futurework and meaning-based markets are valuable extensions of pragmatism and German idealism. Three topics for further discussion include organizational routines and bureaucracy, an epistemological division between realist and reflexive futurework, and the question of unintended consequences.

First, if we conceptualize routines as the organizational dimension of habit—as I do—they are somewhat flexible programs of action subject to pragmatic changes in organizational learning (cf. [Dewey, 1922](#); [Camic, 1986](#); [Feldman and Pentland, 2003](#)). However, they can also be framed with a utilitarian emphasis, as economists and strategy researchers prefer when instrumentalizing routines as resources ([Barney, 1991](#); see also [Sako and Zylberberg, 2017](#); [Winter and Szulanski, 2001](#)). A middle ground in innovation and organizational design is available as well ([Cohen and Levinthal, 1990](#)). In any case, accurate transnational theories of work and occupations depend on knowledge of meso- and micro-practices. Forecasters and designers have powerful impacts on fashion because they are dependent on private bureaucracies, not in spite of them (cf. [Barley and Kunda, 2001](#); [Harrington and Seabrooke, 2020](#)). Further study of futurework will benefit from more precise mechanisms and smaller units of analysis.

Analyzing transnational futurework is a tricky mix of Weber and Simmel. We see some centralizing tendencies in aesthetics predicted by the Weberian production of culture approach, including a hierarchy of attention toward luxury brands and gravitation toward the central themes identified by WGSN. At the same time, adopting the Simmelian culture of production perspective (Fine, 1992)¹¹ makes clear that these large organizations amplify and distribute the ideas of tastemakers throughout the value chain (see also Collins, 1988, 1997). Focusing on routines and devices remains a valuable intermediate ground. Bloomberg terminals, for example, facilitate international micro-interactions and communities not entirely unlike the exchanges of mood boards (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, 2002). Credit rating agencies and the accounting framework of double-entry bookkeeping provide excellent examples of focused uncertainty absorption with world-historical consequences (Carruthers, 2010; Carruthers and Espeland, 1991). A mutual focus of attention on WGSN and the exchange of mood boards limits the attention space and facilitates thick information transfer.

Second, we might consider epistemology and ontology. Futurework is necessarily instrumental, meaning that its worth is determined by valuation and operational efficacy (Dewey, 1920; Beckert, 2020). Although futurework is an emerging concept, I have defined it as the occupational mandate of transforming an uncertain future into determinable information. This means that it is not a simple cognitive operation, but a moral division of labor that assigns functions to agents and institutions (Durkheim, 1958; Hughes, 1959). Specifically, I argue that it should be conceptualized on a pragmatic spectrum from reflexivity to realism. Realist futurework attempts to construct accurate models of reality without altering it. Methods can still be creative, as studies of weather forecasting have shown. When humans compete against computer simulations of the weather, they translate, ‘massage’ and sometimes override raw data (Fine, 2007, pp. 118–130). They walk outside weather stations to compare simulations against physical intuitions (Daipha, 2015). None of this, however, changes the weather. Reflexive futurework, meanwhile, manifests performative agency. Extreme cases are purely coherentist, like eschatology or astrology, but most social science is reflexive. Finance, economics and psychology are filled with fictional expectations and valuations which influence social action (Gergen, 1973; Zuckerman, 2012; Beckert, 2016). The instrumental character of both realist and reflexive models of futurework means that trials and errors are endemic. In any realm of product development, designs represent trials of futurework whose uncertainty is reduced by legitimate valuation.

Finally, we may consider the specter of unintended consequences for promissory organizations themselves. Forecasting services expanded rapidly with digitalization, partly to reduce uncertainty amidst a proliferation of styles and partly to signal legitimate search capabilities under financial surveillance (see generally Feldman and March, 1981; Pashigian, 1988; Carruthers, 2010). Consultants like WGSN are conventionally valuable because they reduce uncertainty with the resource of specialized knowledge (Knight, 1921/1964, pp. 245–263). In India, we may actually ask if the dependence on WGSN is creating a second-order level of uncertainty absorption for suppliers.¹² Given the mutual endorsement of

11 The oeuvre of Fine’s work, from kitchens to chess to weather forecasting, is closely aligned with theories of organizational routines (even if citations do not overlap). It just tends to highlight cultural dimensions before economic and administrative insights.

12 Thanks to a reviewer for this point.

WGSN by brands, educational institutions and industry associations, it is possible that reliance is crowding out competing forecasters, fashion magazines or other sources of information. In other work, I analyze how designers still rely on shopping, brand websites, previous sales and their own office environment for inspiration. Export-oriented suppliers believe they are dependent on WGSN, but they also gain deep knowledge from regular brand exchanges that imitate some of WGSN's features.

A related question concerns population ecology and firm strategy: once knowledge is extended to a wide subscriber base, a major firm like WGSN is likely to face threats from insurgent specialists (see generally Carroll, 1985; Porter, 1985; Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000). I am not aware of any empirical research on offensive competitive strategy from services like Stylus, Peclers, NellyRodi or Trend Union. However, it is clear that legitimation challenges could lead to substitution threats. The now distanced founder of WGSN, for example, has slammed the service as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' that has 'really removed the creative aspect' of design (cited in Lantz, 2016, p. 47). There are also anecdotal reports of brands that subscribe to WGSN to intentionally *avoid* the conformity embraced by other brands (Entwistle, 2009, p. 146; Lantz, 2016). These issues could be fruitful for future research. My only caution is to encourage continued awareness of the gaps between rhetoric, on the one hand, and organizational routines, on the other. My research, for example, specifically shows how trends are tweaked in different ways by brands and suppliers across layers of futurework in GVCs. By approaching global forecasts through mood boards and specific productive capabilities, suppliers can maintain stylistic affinities with larger seasonal trends while routinely creating product-level variety.

7. Conclusion

As promissory organizations, forecasting services represent the legitimate opinion and provide a basis for interpretation and inspiration. They remain based in fashion capitals like Paris and New York. They construct representations of taste which privilege design superstars at high-end luxury brands. Forecasts help to coordinate the problem of global futurework. They reduce both the risks of decentralizing production through supply chains and the uncertainties of aesthetic valuation itself. Export-oriented designers, meanwhile, derive inspiration from relatively standardized reports in a way that feels subjectively expansive. This generates product-level variety as part of full-package production within a modular governance structure. There are multiple layers of futurework in GVCs in which entrepreneurs of taste can make individual contributions.

Despite a hemisphere of distance, export-oriented designers collaborate in futurework before a sample garment is ever sketched or sewn. Identifying trends remains skilled work. The task of designers is more efficient when they exploit the uncertainty absorption of forecasts, but it is not a *fait accompli*. Design is not an occupational task 'full' of uncertainty—complete uncertainty means indecision and inaction. But designers have jobs to do. They turn to legitimate sources of inspiration in familiar formats with content that is regularly replenished. They establish relationships with brands, learning the brand aesthetic and contributing reflexively to it. Though it can be difficult to observe, creative decision-making has limits and principles. Inspiration is always filtered through bounded rationality and embedded within the larger relationships of industrial clusters, GVCs and a fashion system.

The organizational routines of forecasters and designers reproduce tensions in the progression and ossification of material culture.

Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *Socio-Economic Review* online.

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