Keeping Fashionable Company: ASOS and the Collective Logic of Online Spaces

To contribute to discussions of the collective enterprise of identity making, we turn to online retail spaces and to communicative practices articulated therein. We argue that identity does not emerge spontaneously from atomised market relations, but that collective spaces generate interaction which distributes relations of belonging intermediated by the virtual prism of digital sharing, in this case around the online fashion brand, ASOS.com. Simpson (2005) captures the logic of studying such online spaces as sites of collectivity, suggesting that the 'idea that one may construct an online identity that in turn shapes and forms one's 'real world' identity carries with it the potential to construct cyberspace as a new frontier in the mapping of identity'. The corollary of this logic is that identity is itself sustained by sources of social cohesion beyond immediate market relations. With its street credentials firmly expressed in an edgy brand ethos, we study the ASOS online community and how it cultivates particular forms of relational interplay that organize identity.

Online Interplaying

Turkle (1995) describes online 'identity play' as *serious play*, the dazzling breadth of connectivity available animating spaces where we re-imagine ourselves and our relationships with others. Central to her logic is the intermediated and immediate qualities of spaces of screened social relations. She argues that "we come to see ourselves differently when we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine." (1999: 643). Identity by this token fills the relational vacuum manufactured by the online staging of social distance. In an account that socialises the sphere of intimacy, Zizek (1997:139) writes that "the use of computers and virtual reality as a tool to rebuild community results in the building of a community inside the machine". In losing ourselves in virtual mediascapes, Turkle (2011) reports that "boundaries are eroded and views of the self become less unitary and more protean as people move in and out of their lives on the screen"(ibid, xi). We argue that interactive technologies assemble 'spheres of intimacy', not simply through the mobilisation of digitised narrative, but through participation in the creation and circulation of "high quality reproductions of lives and what is important to them" (Arthur, et al 2006:37).

Schroeder (2002) observes that visual culture excites consumption: "it informs, it shows, it communicates, it structures choice, it dazzles-and it offers a creative way of thinking about consumer experiences" (ibid: 65). Interactive visual technologies generate new ways of inserting brands into everyday practice through distributing forms of relational interplay which generate a currency of representation. The same might be said of the digitising screen which acts as a portal into worlds where social relations implode into symbolic exchanges of media surfaces (Baudrillard, 1983). Literature on photo-sharing suggests that digital cameras and mobile devices, especially smartphones, have given rise to a new kind of image language (Walker, 2005). Van House (2007) conducted a study of the image sharing website Flickr and found that photo bloggers tend to tell personal stories *with* digital images, rather than *about* image content. The study found that such images are strategically deployed as bloggers narrate lives through poaching visual and textual resources for authoring identities (Jenkins, 1992). It was found that users uploaded photos for a variety of reasons, including impression management and self-expression (ibid). Walker, likewise, suggests that such technology has given rise to the practice of people composing self-portraits and circulating them on the web. She uses the example of the mirror project, which is a shared collection of over 30K photographs that people have taken of themselves in the mirror. With traditional photography, she argues, people didn't tend to take self-photographs; but web-enabled mobile devices and sharing now encourage people to present a stylised version to accompany their online presence. Through an analysis of Flickr accounts she found that users often follow the conventions and styles of advertising, using Photoshop and other imaging devices to present an aestheticized version of themselves (Walker, 2005). Thus the presentation of the self within digital worlds finds participants deploying self-mages as visual constructs for the management of identity as photo-sharing enables the shaping and circulation of personalised narratives of ambition, aspiration and fantasy.

Fashion is widely understood as a visual language with its own distinctive grammar, syntax and vocabulary (Barthes, 1990). At the level of the high-street brand it informs cultural production through consumer agency which transmits symbolically, achieving social integration and differentiation through speaking of clothing 'families' (Davis, 1994) and subcultures (Hebdige, 1979). Through fashion and personal branding practices, consumers now have access to technologies for fashioning selves through bricolage, combining items and looks to improvise personal styles of adornment and presentation. Campbell asserts that fashion is one of the main areas where consumers craft themselves vectors of social space (Campbell, 2005). Such behaviour is fast moving online where style groupings are increasingly forming around self-fashioning, featuring digital sharing activity of clothes and outfits (e.g. www.fashionriot.com, http://lookville.com/).

Fashioning a Context

ASOS is the UK's number one pure play online fashion retailer. It was launched in 1999 as 'As Seen On Screen,' and targets customers in the fashion forward 16-34 segment. It offers both own brand, designer and high street labels and launches 1,400 new products each week. It offers male, female and children's clothing and accessories, as well as a range of beauty products. In 2009 ASOS launched its 'Life' section, an initiative which witnessed the company shifting towards the construction and management of an online community to market its offerings. ASOS sells both men and women's fashion, but the majority of online members of the community are women from the UK, but there are a scattering of members from the rest of the globe. With over 2million members in its community it is a vast and rich resource of 'self segmented' fashion-forward people.

The brand is present in the community via over 30 ASOS staff who interact with other members. One of the features of the site is that you can become 'friends' with people, the amount of friends that you have is on public display and this also shows who you are friends with. This 'friending' takes place both user to user and brand to user, many of the staff are online 'friends' with users, emphasising their interactive role. The website facilitates user generated blogs, forums and groups, which offer a plethora of consumer insights and creativity. ASOS has its own blog which is accessible through the 'Life' section of the website, but it also facilitates its users to create their own blogs. In these blogs users often post pictures of their outfits, write about their favourite brands and products and post pictures of items that they have bought or want to buy. The two topics which created the highest levels of consumer activity were 'what I wore today' and 'Saturday night style'. Blogs provided the richest source of photography and consumer creativity for this reason.

In addition, ASOS offers an online forum, our analysis of innovation largely focuses on this site, as it is largest and most active section. The forum is structured along the following sections: *Fashion Talk*- talk about fashion; *Star Style*- talk about celebrities' style; *Beauty*- talk about beauty products; *Introduce Yourself*- where users talk about themselves and read about other members; *General*- Here anything from tv shows to diets are talked about; and finally, *Help and Feedback*-where users seek help from admin staff about purchases. For the purposes of our we focussed on the 'fashion talk' category, as it was here that we witnessed the community of members socialising and community-forming around the totem of fashion. Findings are arranged into two key themes, these being: Fashion Talk and the ASOS Community where we explore forms of sharing and the camaraderie of 'fashionistas'; and secondly, self promotion and the desire to brand and image oneself through the techniques of attachment supplied by ASOS.

Family forms of 'Sharing'

"Fashion elevates even the unimportant individual by making them the representative of a totality, the embodiment of a joint spirit." (Simmel, 1997: 194)

The ASOS community is built on nurturing and distributing space for connective interplay; for participation in identity exchange and rituals of belonging. Acts of displaying and performing participation and belonging are constitutive of the community. This is sometimes achieved through making available for appropriation associations with celebrities and influential community members, but also through circulating social memes and other contemporaneous online resources.

The thread to make friends is the most active thread in the whole community, distributing among participants connective platforms. The popularity of this thread suggests that although fashion and style are important to this community, they merely act to service the social linking that drives the community. Belonging to the community and making connections is what is valued; "the link is more important than the thing" (Cova, 1997:307). Fashion and ASOS provide great 'linking value' for the community, but making connections to other *"like minded people" (DANIELLESDOTCOM, F, UK)* appears most important. Members strive to have as many friends in the community as possible, as it is viewed in the community negatively to have no friends or few friends*, "please, anyone, feel free to add me as a friend (I have zero having just joined!) :(<3"* (coutequecoute, F, SWEDEN).

The most active threads in fashion talk are exclusively about trends and styles. Affiliating yourself with a trend or style is an act of self-identification both within the community and in wider society. We have argued that clothing is a visual language, transmitting cultural meanings and aspects of personal identity claims to others. Affiliating with certain trends or consumption practices sends a powerful message to others in the community which can generate the pretext for connectivity within enacted spheres of intimacy. Members are keen to befriend other members who display similar tastes or consumption activities. In the following example a participant asked for advice on what dresses from the ASOS selection were the nicest: when another participant chooses the same dress that she favours, she reveals a great sense of affinity with the other person; *"OMG that's my fave dress out of them all! If I had to chose one that is!! We defo have similar tastes, infact I've just sent you a friend request lol ;)". (Retroqueen, F, UK)* Here, sense of style provided a link between members. Interplay frequently takes this as a point of departure.

Our analysis of the site reveals a strong camaraderie between participants, as demonstrated largely through the use of 'compliments'. Participants' compliments reveal what is collectively valued; and this practice drives relational patterns. In this example the participant's posts and photography are complimented: *"your posts are always so nicely done, and your photography is awesome:-)"(bellefantasie, F, UK)*.. Outfits are often complimented; *"omg u look aaamazing! that colour is fab and the back is gorge x" (lololoveday, F, UK)*, illustrating that 'good' taste and fashions sense are valued. Looks are also complimented; *"hey meant to say 2 u, has any1 evr told you, you r the spitin image of agnes deyn? so pretty :) xxx (DANIELLESDOTCOM, F, UK)*. All of these compliments show an overall appreciation for carrying style and looks. The camaraderie is extended to newcomers who often receive words of welcome after their initial postings. Here members fulfill the role of the 'greeter' to newcomers to the community. The community also displays a sense of collective identity or 'we-ness' (Bender, 1978); often members refer to themselves collectively as *"fashionistas", "stylistas"* or *"ASOS lifers"*. Many of the posts display collective opinions, outlining unfavourably how 'some girls' wear certain styles and collectively disapproving, branding 'them' *"try hards"* or *"stereotypes",* making group distinctions between 'us' and 'them', acting-out on screen rituals of belong and related regulatory social behaviours. The sense of 'we-ness' springs from a shared love of ASOS and fashion, but also shared aspirations. Many of the conversations reveal a group of young women who dream of being a part of the fashion industry: *"I work in a shop by day and want to be a fashion photographer"* (retroqueen, F, UK). The majority of regular posters on the site write about ambitions to become fashion models, make-up artists, photographers, writers, stylists and designers: *"My dream as always been to become a make-up artist (Maybe we'll end up working together one day, ellie! ;D"* (sufi, F, Denmark). Such ambitions for glamorous and successful lives are entangled with shared aspirations to own must-have luxury brands. They aspire to the fashion "good life" which is highly involved with material affluence and aesthetic beauty (Belk & Pollay, 1985).

Consumption Dreaming

We observe that advice seeking and provision between participants is a key form of social interaction and connection-making. Questions regarding what items of clothing go with other items are very common and often reflect the 'panic' that women can feel if they have to get dressed for a particular event (Woodward, 2007). In this example regina214 (F, UK) asks for advice on 'how to wear a floral bustier':*"Hey everyone, i've got a floral bustier top that i'm wanting to wear tonight. Trouble is, not sure*

what to team it with? Darker jeans were my first thought although not sure whether it goes. Other options i've got is black pencil skirt or pink tulip skirt. The top is black with red/pink floral design. Any ideas welcome!! X".

Questions like this illustrate how members sometimes position themselves in the role of 'learner' in the community, wanting to learn from others and self-improve. Such questions often spark a stream of responses where fashionistas enthusiastically share their own unique fashion formula for magic and success: *"I would wear it with the tulipd skirt, some super high heels and a statement necklace. Hope it looks lovely when you go out xx" (ilovelola15, F, Unknown)*

Some members go further offering members collages skilfully crafted from images taken from the ASOS website detailing possible outfit components: In instances such as these participants take on the role of 'fashion' mentor to the novice through the sharing of taste and expertise (Fournier & Lee, 2009). The learner's posts often detail personal reasons as to why they are asking style advice, which describe insecurities and personal life problems. In these cases members of the community offer style advice and moral support. In the 'Love this dress! Hate my arms! help!' thread members offer both style tips and words of reassurance to lolalou85 (F, Unkown).

Sharing' items virtually like this to solve fashion dilemmas is comparable to the practice of 'lending' which Woodward describes as females lending each other clothes, which serves to cement friendships. In the virtual world, members share a virtual item from 'ASOS: The World's Biggest Wardrobe', rather than their own, but it an exchange, which serves to reinforce the participative character of the community. Such an exchange is common practice and highlights the depth of feeling behind the posts and illustrates another role within the community, that of the 'partner'. The 'partner' is there to share tips and motivate other members, the 'partners' on ASOS have a great sense of camaraderie and willingness to help others. In this case the 'partner' is male, and it is evident that he has adopted the female language style that is required to connect with others in the community. Members also often post pictures of items from the website to ask the community whether or not they should make a particular purchase. The community helps members to make these purchase decisions by rationalising the purchase, offering 'fashionista' logic and reassuring person that item gets public approval. In one example 'retroqueen' shares a picture of some earrings. *"I've seen these vintage Givenchy earrings on asos, they're part of the Susan Caplan Vintage Collection. I really want them, but at £81 I want some opinions, please?*

In response, the community offers a plethora of reasons why the member should buy the earrings. They use their imaginations to describe how the items would make her feel; *"like a princess"* (ASOSchloe) and like a *"little girl"* (sufi, F, Denmark) are both mentioned, creating an air of romanticism and fantasy around the purchase. The community also rationalise spending the money on the earrings, stating that it is an *"investment buy"* (ASOSjennifer) (urban messin, M,UK).

After the purchase the community share what the 'remembered experience' which is reliving the shopping experience. In one thread Marlein asks *'What was your very first ASOS buy?"* (F, Netherlands). Through asking this question the member is also acting as the community 'historian' preserving and curating the community memory. The thread received 1656 views and 41 comments, each respondent eager to share and re-live their first ASOS experience.

Each item has a story to go with it, making each purchase much more than just about the item; "integral to a sense of who we are is a sense of our past. Possessions are a convenient means of storing the memories and feelings that attach our sense of past). Rather the member's sense of past is expressed through the telling of their story, in doing this they are also telling a part of ASOS story, playing the role of 'storyteller' for the community and emplacing the ASOS brand in the context of their lives, loves and emotions.

Discussion and Conclusions

"You are the company you keep. Your identity, your self, depends on the people and things that compose your associations" (Bateson 1982: 3).

Wernick (1991) argues that all manner of communication under the contemporary cultural condition of promotionalism have as their function "some kind of self-advantaging exchange" (ibid 181). Within this promotional culture Hearn argues that any meaningful distinction between notions of self and production and consumption has been blurred (Hearn, 2008). The consumer created images speak to the taste communities within ASOS and those that inspire most commentary tend to be those which articulate and practice a form of lifestyling.

Our analysis reveals that it is photographs such as these that are most popular with the community as resources of identity work - that is to inspire comments and participation. Schroeder asserts that to talk about an image is to attempt to relate to it (2002); it appears that the images depicting 'everyday' scenes are easier to relate to and so spark more interest given their familiarity. In response to such invitations, members will ask, 'where did you get that?' Or 'where did you go?' Members thus tend to be interested in the story behind the images and feel that they could recreate the 'look' themselves, so ask questions about it. This preference for 'real' images with an aura of authenticity and 'everydayness' in fashion was commented on by Tungate (2008), who asserted that the public relate more to the perceived "realness" of actresses more than "the unattainable beauty of models" (Tungate, 2008: 124). The popularity of the everyday images, which include items from cheap high street shops appear to be popular because the look rather than be fantasy-driven appear attainable.

In such worlds identity is alienable; it is an unfinished and readily available work in progress that summons relational interplay in the form of interpretive practice. Digitally shared identities speak of the inclinations and feelings of the persons to whom they attach. In this view an identity is not a determined constituent feature of the self, but an unstable text for assembling selves and releasing them into circulating currents of affect: for as Bauman observed, "if the modern 'problem of identity was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep options open." (1996: 18). *Keeping one's options open* is then a useful way to define a screened sensibility, a logic wherein *fluid identity is* essential to the strategic work of identity practice. Fashioning online identities thus appears saturated with a collective logic of relational interplay. Brands must participate in the collectivity through circulating and sustaining on-line spaces for identity interplay (Phan & Heine, 2012).

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