

The Death Of Trends: Part I
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Back in February 1988, Vogue's "Point of View" column constantly alluded to the "right" style. Pants in this category were "narrow over the hip, softer and wider through the leg," while jackets were "longer, sharply tailored...often graphic in its design," hemlines were short, the proper color was green and the best accessory a scarf.

Twenty years on and the diktats of cool have become much less defined. Elle's March 2008 issue advises readers to stock up on cargo pants, mannish trousers, skinny jeans, denim cutoffs and flares, to pair with floral blouses, white tees, pajama tops or gypsy-inspired camisoles. And, while the apparel list seems rather extensive, every proper fashionista's list of must-have shoes also includes sculptural heels, wedges, gladiator sandals, ballet flats, open-toed booties and moccasins.

When it comes to fashion in 2008 the only prevailing trend is that there are no prevailing trends. From excess to minimalism, free-spirited ingénue to tailored sophisticate—and everything in between—designers are mining just about every culture, decade and mood to create a distinctly "anything-goes" aesthetic.

"It's always been difficult to define an era's trends without generalizing, but nowadays, it's difficult to even define what a trend is," says Ben Whyman, writer and lecturer at London College of Fashion and arts editor of Issue One magazine. "It's safe to say the '80s were the age of the Yuppie and the New Romantic, while the '90s were about grunge on the streets and minimalism on the catwalks. But in these tight economic times, designers and shops are desperate for customers, so they're offering up lots of mini-trends within trends to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. It's hard to pin a season down to a single idea anymore," he adds.

In this absence of a clear-cut sartorial zeitgeist, "Designers are focusing more on their own brand identities, despite what everyone else is doing," explains Stephanie Meyerson, Director of Youth Culture at trend resource agency Stylesight. "Balenciaga, Marc Jacobs, Gucci, Prada—all have an unwavering sense of brand vision and creativity, regardless of fleeting trends." It's an evolution that, though great for creativity, has made the editor's job of pinpointing "the new black" much more difficult.

It's not just designers who are contributing to the end of boldface trends, however. Armed with broadband and blogrolls, consumers, too, are rejecting the commandments of the editorial elite, taking inspiration from peers around the world to craft their own personal interpretations of style. Rather than buy into one trend from head-to-toe, like the "preppy" or "punk" movements of decades past, consumers are appropriating eclectic influences and remixing them like a DJ does with music. It's now common to see stylistic mash-ups, like a demure Stella McCartney floral-print blouse coupled with Alexander Wang's grimy cutoffs and finished off with a pair of Balenciaga's erotically charged knee-high gladiator sandals.

Sure, mixing different influences isn't particularly groundbreaking, but the current difference is the result of access. The boldness of the aforementioned outfit, for example, is no longer unique to the creative enclaves of London, New York and Paris. We're now seeing this kind of independent dressing everywhere from a flea market in Perth to a gig in St. Louis or a lounge in Prague.

"With the rise of 'fast-fashion' retailers, consumers have an overload of trends to choose from," explains Meyerson. "They ingest so much information from magazines, internet and TV that they're able to quickly digest the trends, buy what they want and style things in a unique, smart way. Not to mention the economy is making us think twice about each purchase, which brings a natural creative consciousness back to fashion." Adds Whyman: "The consumer is now so savvy that they choose only what's right for them and their lifestyle. I think this is the fundamental difference from 10 or 20 years ago, when people were more likely to loyally buy into one designer's ethos."

In the run-up to the spring/summer '09 collections, we'll be taking a closer look at how the trend is being re-defined, from the role of retailers in its shortening life cycle to the influence of alternative media in its proliferation. We may be just as baffled once show season rolls around, but hopefully there will be a little more context to the chaos.

This is the first in a three part series. The subsequent articles will appear on the next two Mondays, August 11 and August 18.

—Erin Magner

The Death of Trends: Part II
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Last week, we introduced the first in a series of articles about the changing face of fashion trends. Rather than having the clear focus and boldface movements we used to see on the runways, the past few seasons have given us a deluge of eclectic "micro-trends"—from floral prints to ethnic detailing, from architectural tailoring to body-conscious silhouettes. We argue that instead of buying into a signature look or designer ethos, the consumer is now focused on mixing and interpreting these divergent elements in their own, highly personal ways. This week we explore one of the driving forces behind this transformation: new media.

The fashion industry has always been driven by experimentation and creativity. Until recently, however, everyone who lived outside the major style hubs never saw it—their only exposure to fashion came from shopping malls and the pages of Glamour. "The whole point of magazine editorial is to present a cohesive vision," explains Julie Fredrickson, founder of fashion blogging community Coutorture. "That's why traditional media is conducive to fashion that is very distinct and holistic. New media is now providing a more effective venue for niches, subgroups and outliers in fashion to promote their vision."

Fashion big shots and rising stars alike are now accessible to the masses in a way they never have been before. Thanks to sites like The Cobra Snake and fashionista.com, even those who aren't part of the industry know who Jessica Stam is and what she wore to the Beatrice Inn last night. Browsers can learn about emerging designers on Project Runway and www.style.com—designers who are filled with cutting-edge concepts and new ideas, but who may be several seasons away from a mention in the mainstream glossies. As a result, designers and consumers are both drawing from different influences, rejecting the head-to-toe "looks" presented by advertiser-driven print publications. It's no surprise, then, that this widespread exposure has led to a barrage of micro-trends.

Another major cause for this mainstream fascination with fashion is the fact that consumers see it come to life on real people, rather than through the intimidating, unattainable magazine ideal. "When you see people on street style sites, you may actually

have a lot of what they're wearing in your closet—or at least enough so you can go out and buy a top or bag to get the look, with your own personal twist," explains Chris Kensler, editorial director of social networking site www.stylehive.com. "With glossies, it's all about brand new things that cost a lot of money, styled by a professional, on a six-foot-tall 17-year-old—a vision that's out of reach for most women. It's still nice as a fantasy, but it's getting marginalized into a niche in the marketplace."

A third factor behind the unrelenting trend torrent is the sheer number of new media outlets fighting for recognition. In the daily quest for original content, bloggers and pundits pinpoint and discuss emerging trends much more rapidly than ever before. "The very nature of blogging means that nearly any topic, from shiny leggings to fall florals, will be picked up. Bloggers are constantly searching for original content in an increasingly crowded space," explains Fredrickson. Just look at the blogosphere tizzy heralding the rise of the purple moccasin after Sartorialist Scott Schuman posted four street snaps illustrating the trend in question—nevermind that few of us have seen anyone sporting them in daily life.

Some may argue that, in this word-of-mouth climate, the fashion editor's role is obsolete. And yet many new media professionals disagree, arguing that consumers seek guidance and advice in such a noisy marketplace. Even social networking sites like Stylehive are under some degree of editorial control, but, according to Kensler, they simply act as funnels for what are ultimately user-defined trends: "Our editors analyze and identify trends from what our users are actually wearing. But while fashion magazines are closing their issues three months ahead of time and are ultimately guessing at trends, we show you who's wearing them right now."

Of course, the effects of new media can't be discussed without also mentioning the effects of the new retail model. Retailers and designers now have to churn out more material than ever in order to satisfy a press that's hungry for headlines and a public with an insatiable appetite to buy. It's hard to pinpoint exactly which came first—the idea of "fast-fashion" or the rise of the 24-hour fashion news cycle. But, rest assured, we'll explore the sartorial chicken-egg dilemma in this series' final installment next week.

—Erin Magner

For the past two weeks, we have analyzed the shift from overarching seasonal trends to a constantly evolving blend of eclectic micro-trends. We argued that instead of buying into a signature look or designer ethos, the consumer now focuses on mixing and interpreting these diverse elements in their own, highly personal ways. We also noted that one of the main catalysts behind this no-trend trend is the rise of new media, which allows micro-trends to enter the mainstream and evolve into new trends much more rapidly than the traditional print model allows. The impact of and on retail is the last piece in our sociological puzzle. This week, we examine the ways consumers now buy (and don't buy) fashion products.

Over the past few years the fashion world's two-season model has been cranked up to lightning speed. Designers now churn out up to five collections a year: pre-fall, winter, holiday, resort and summer, all of which are immediately imitated by fast fashion retailers such as Topshop, H&M, Zara and Forever 21. With these rapid-fire factors at play, it's no wonder that the boldface seasonal trend has become a relic of the past.

Eveline Morel, owner of EM & Co. boutique in Los Angeles, has noticed the shift firsthand. Of the phenomenon, she explains: "There's a pressure among retailers to constantly give

consumers something new. [Consumers are now] very sophisticated and trend-aware, especially because H&M and Forever 21 have made trend surfing accessible to everyone. Fast fashion brands are able to pinpoint up-and-coming trends and react very quickly to them. There's a higher expectation for small retailers to keep up with all the options."

According to Morel, this need to keep up with micro-trends has forced boutiques to buy less—and less often. She continues: "Although most major labels and European brands still stick to a twice-yearly schedule, many emerging designers—especially in the US—are now sending deliveries every few months. A lot of buyers are starting to move toward a one to three month schedule, and are buying less since it's hard to commit to large orders when you don't know where the season is going to take you."

Julie Fredrickson, founder of fashion blogging community Coutorture, echoes this point: "The triumph of micro-trends over all-encompassing seasonal trends has more to do with delivery schedules than anything else. The two-season system is essentially defunct as designers are pressed to keep consumers stimulated with new goods. In that sense, there isn't room for an overarching vision because the schedule has accelerated so dramatically."

While independent retailers are still deciphering the ever-changing nature of micro-trends, online boutiques are inherently better equipped for the challenge. "Online retail allows for a quick turnaround and access to collections as they arrive," notes Sarah Curran, founder and CEO of my-wardrobe.com. "Customers who don't live near a major city can still have access to the season's must-have pieces and most desirable brands—many [customers] even 'cyber-stalk' their favorite online stores to be the first to buy the week's newest pieces."

Just like the fast-fashion retailers and their trendspotting teams, online retailers are able to react almost instantly to the next micro-trend bubbling under the surface. Curran observes: "The front page of the site and our e-mail campaigns allow us to present themes and trends on a regular basis—and we're able to quickly evaluate and change them depending on what our customers respond to the most." In a sense, online retailers have become new media outlets themselves, broadcasting the newest shade of black faster than a traditional retailer can say "Who Wore it Better?"

Despite the rise of micro-trends and their impact on the rest of the industry, the current economic slowdown may prove fast fashion isn't as invincible as it seems. According to a recent report by JP Morgan, non-food retailers are being faced with the biggest inflationary costs in a decade, which may lead to higher prices for the consumer. If the day comes when that tribal-printed maxidress can no longer be purchased for less than a margarita, shoppers may become more discerning about which trends they buy into. And, by virtue of natural selection, this could ultimately lead us back into the headline trends of yesteryear. Until then, consumers will continue to be spoiled with choices—and we'll do our best to keep up.

—Erin Magner