How Do Cultural Producers Make Creative Decisions?
Lessons from the Catwalk

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Faced with high uncertainty, how do producers in the cultural economy make creative decisions? We present a case study of the fashion modeling industry. Using participant observation, interviews and network analysis of the Spring/Summer 2007 Fashion Week collections, we explain how producers select models for fashion shows. While fashion producers conceive of their selection of models as a matter of “taste,” or personal preference, we find that their decisions are shaped by information sharing mechanisms in social networks, principally through a mechanism known as “optioning,” which enables producers to know each others’ preferences and to align themselves with similar status actors. For cultural producers, choices are a matter of strategic status considerations, even as they are expressed as a matter of personal taste.

Introduction

With the rise of an economy centered on symbols, aesthetics and creativity, the exchange of cultural products on markets is now prominent (Zukin 1995). While sociologists have noted the prevalence of this “aesthetic” (Aspers 2001; Entwistle 2002), “creative” (Currid 2007) or “cultural” (Scott 2000) economy, they have yet to understand the minute social processes involved in the making of creative decisions which market actors face daily. If aesthetics and creativity drive urban and global economies, how do market producers navigate the uncertainty inherent in creative choice?

The fashion modeling industry is a prototypical case of the creative economy and its markets for symbolic goods. Fashion models play a crucial symbolic role in the definition of fashion producers’ identities in the marketplace. Fashion producers (i.e., fashion houses) communicate symbolic meanings and styles through advertising, and quite visibly on the catwalk (Crane 2000; Davis 1992). During the bi-annual Fashion Week catwalk shows, fashion houses display their collections to an exclusive audience of editors, buyers, critics and celebrities from which the lay public is notably absent. For the roughly 20 minutes of a catwalk show, producers broadcast their sartorial style, status position and market identity. A successful show can help them secure a better position in the highly competitive fashion market (Kawamura 2005). Producers are literally putting their best faces forward with the use of fashion models.

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However, producers face broad choice among thousands of qualified candidates prescreened by modeling agencies. Given the abundant and selective international labor pool of fashion models from which to choose, how do producers select a mere handful of fashion models to send down their runways? How do these tastemakers navigate the uncertainty of choosing the “right” models? Sociologists have long theorized the collective and communal nature of taste decisions (e.g., Blumer 1969; Bourdieu 1984; Gans 1974; Willis 1981). More recently, scholars have theorized tastes as rooted in social influence effects (e.g., Salganik et al. 2006) and producers’ tastes in particular have been shown to be sensitive to status positioning in networks of competitors (Podolny 1993, 2005; White 2002). Yet it remains unclear how social actors orient toward each other as they make aesthetic deliberations. Through what mechanisms are social influence and status transmitted in the fashion industry? How do social networks and status positions shape aesthetic judgments in uncertain contexts? We investigate these processes through ethnographic research and network analysis of the catwalk.

Uncertainty and Creativity in Cultural Markets

The rising importance of creativity in the economy presents sociologists with several puzzles around the issues of coordination and production. Much work on creative industries concludes that among cultural producers, “nobody knows” (Caves 2000) what will be a success, “all hits are flukes” (Bielby and Bielby 1994), and that even successful producers view their market chances as a “crap game.”(Denisoff 1975:93)

The fashion industry in general presents an illustrative case of the creative economy because the goods produced in fashion are principally about meaning over functionality (Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975). In fashion, producers face extreme uncertainty because their designs can be easily copied, consumer demand is fundamentally unknown, and being in favor with gatekeepers is never guaranteed (Crane 2000; Hirsch 1972). Furthermore, each step of the production process involves an aesthetic, and hence subjective, choice.

This is especially the case when designers select fashion models to display their clothes during the Fashion Week show season, a month-long international showcase of collections, twice a year, that begins in New York and moves on to London, then Milan and terminates in Paris. The Fashion Week shows are rarely profitable endeavors for a fashion house, but they are an important branding practice. Shows stand to gain (or lose) the attention of international editorial presses, thereby generating sales down the line for the brand’s diffusion products such as perfume and prêt-à-porter labels (Moore 2000).

To these ends, fashion producers select a handful of fashion models to send down their catwalks to show their latest designs. They choose models from an oversupplied pool of pre-selected candidates. There are more than 80 key modeling agencies in London, Milan, New York and Paris, and each of them represents hundreds of models (Callender 2005). Well in advance of the shows, modeling
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agents, the gatekeepers in the field (Hirsch 1972), carefully preen and prune their candidate pool—only those models in perfect physical shape who are personable at castings and confident on the catwalk are entered for consideration. During a show season, producers estimate that anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 models will vie for the opportunity to attend castings and shows in New York, and even more in Europe where visa restrictions are more relaxed than in the United States (Dodes 2007). Compared to style considerations such as the choice of fabric textures and colors, the selection of models is not coordinated by organizational filters; there are no organized fairs or trend forecasting firms in the modeling industry as there are in the design field (see Rinallo and Golffetto 2006). Faced with overabundant selections and relative freedom of choice, how do fashion producers select models for the catwalk?

A commonly held explanation assumes that personal taste drives creativity and aesthetic preferences (Horyn 2008). People often think they are exercising individual choice, when in fact their choices are socially responsive and bound up, even subtly, with other people's decisions (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Lieberson 2000). For example, Lieberson (2000) has shown how social influences guide personal decisions even in the absence of any organizational or commercial influence, as in parents' choice to name a newborn. In the sociological perspective, the communal nature of taste stems from socialization processes in a stratified social space (Bourdieu 1984; Gans 1974; Van Eijck 2001; Willis 1981). In Bourdieu's account, taste is a set of dispositions that acts as a means of distinction, thereby reproducing domination (1984). Other sociologists conceive of taste as a choice influenced by surrounding individuals (Salganik et al. 2006). Previous studies of cultural markets suggest that creative producers work and interact with like-minded people; their immersion in social networks and locally-specific conventions shapes taste and is integral to cultural production (Currid 2007).

Through their social networks, producers access network-specific meanings that shape their taste (Corona and Godart 2009; White 2008; White et al. 2007). For example, in his study of fashion buyers, Blumer (1969) found remarkable convergence of preferences for new fashions, when on the surface buyers just liked garments they found personally “stunning.” Blumer theorized that the industry was driven by “collective taste,” as a result of shared cultural and social space among buyers.

In the creative economy, market constraints likely shape the formation of collective taste. As White has noted, uncertainty characterizes all production markets (White and Godart 2007), and producers cope by looking at each other, thereby defining their market positioning based on observed signals from one another. For example, while producers of Broadway musicals (Uzzi and Spiro 2005) and Hollywood movies (Faulkner and Anderson 1987) recognize their work as a “crap game,” they navigate market volatility by relying on social ties and connections to spread and receive ideas, a mechanism also found in academia where collaboration networks drive “disciplinary cohesion.” (Moody 2004) However,
producers do not just orient to one another in any random way; they follow social patterns. Producers’ social status matter, Podolny argues (1993, 2005), by signaling underlying product qualities.

While sociologists have theorized at length the social nature of markets and decision-making under uncertainty, we know relatively little about the mechanisms through which social influence shapes such decisions. Social ties surely matter in the dissemination of creative ideas, but how exactly do social relations and status orderings steer collective taste? In the market for fashion models, producers’ tastes are not organizationally mitigated; producers choose models with the same degrees of freedom that parents exercise in naming their newborns (Lieberson 2000). Furthermore, because the pool of models has been pre-selected by gatekeepers, producers must discern among minimal “quality” differences. Modeling is an exaggerated case of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty in the creative industries. Thus, a study of the catwalk can be generalized to other creative industries where people work with high uncertainty and base their decisions on taste. With the goal of understanding how creative decisions happen under the pressures of market uncertainty, we turn to our case study of the catwalk.

Mixing Methods: Ethnography and Network Analysis of the Catwalk

To investigate how producers make their selection of catwalk models, we conducted 30 interviews with fashion designers, stylists and casting directors in New York, London and Paris with a snowball sampling technique. Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, and ranged in length from 40 minutes to 1½ hours, allowing respondents to discuss their strategies in producing fashion shows. We also conducted a network analysis of the Spring/Summer 2007 fashion weeks of the four main fashion capitals – New York, London, Milan and Paris.

The network analysis is based on fashion show reports delivered on Vogue magazine’s website extension, Style.com, launched in 2000 by Condé Nast Publications. Vogue is the most authoritative press in the fashion industry; 28 respondents named an edition of Vogue as among the top three magazines they routinely consult for industry trends, or they mentioned Anna Wintour, editor of Vogue, as one of the most influential tastemakers in the industry. Style.com is a public catalogue of designer collections sent down the runway in every major show. Importantly, the photographed designs are accompanied with the name of the models wearing them. We study only women’s ready-to-wear fashion because it is the dominant sector of the fashion industry, and women models receive the bulk of attention in the fashion press; Style.com reports collections from 172 designers for women’s apparel, but just 63 designers for men’s lines. We built a database cataloguing each model’s appearance in every show for the Spring/Summer 2007 collections. This resulted in the catwalk records of 172 fashion houses and 677 models. Descriptive statistics for the number of models per fashion show and of fashion shows per model are shown in Table 1 and distribution frequencies are represented in figures 1 and 2.
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Number of Models per Show and Shows per Fashion Model During the Spring/Summer 2007 Fashion Season

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<th>Number of Fashion Models per Fashion Show</th>
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Each fashion house showcases its collection in one—and only one—show per season. A typical show lasts 10 to 20 minutes with approximately three hours of preparation time for hair and make-up and dress rehearsals. Fashion groups such as Armani can display different collections in different cities, but each collection, or each show, is dedicated to a different sub-brand—Emporio Armani in London and Giorgio Armani in Milan. These sub-brands are considered in this article as different fashion houses.

The Fashion Week calendar is organized in a way that avoids overlaps and facilitates travel for journalists, buyers, designers and models. For the Spring/Summer 2007 collections, the show calendar was as follows: New York: 8-15 September 2006; London 17-22 September 2006; Milan 23-30 September 2006; and Paris 1-8 October 2006. Travel across the fashion circuit for shows is a common experience for models who, given their short careers and the few opportunities to walk down the runway in major fashion shows, are very mobile and likely have agencies in several major fashion markets. A model’s agency will front the cost of travel throughout her career, which she pays back from her future earnings. Therefore, fashion houses’ choices of models and models’ decisions to work for them are not limited by distance or travel costs. Fashion producers have, in theory, equal access to all models, irrelevant of the show’s location in the global fashion circuit. Moreover, while some state governments have made calls to ban excessively thin models in the interests of public health, strict regulation of models by body weight has yet to affect producers’ selection process.

Despite the relatively unfettered access to thousands of models, we find that designers chose a total of just 677 models to include in their fashion shows. Seventy-five percent of the models were employed in fewer than five shows, while just 60 models (9%) were chosen for more than 20 shows in each city. The three most popular models were extremely busy during Fashion Week. Behati Prinsloo walked in 64 shows; Iekeliene Stange and Irina Lazareanu appeared in 59 shows each. Thus, we see considerable convergence of producers’ taste in models resulting in a “winner-take-all” (Frank and Cook 1995) or “superstar” market structure (Rosen 1981). We therefore have evidence of the convergence of “collective taste,” following the theoretical forecasts of Blumer (1969) and White (2002), but we now ask, how do producers align in the market to converge on collective taste?
Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of the Number of Fashion Models per Fashion Show During the Spring/Summer 2007 Fashion Season

Figure 2. Frequency Distribution of the Number of Fashion Shows per Fashion Model During the Spring/Summer 2007 Fashion Season
The Look: How Fashion Producers Talk about Their Creative Decisions

In order to understand how producers select models, we observed and interviewed fashion producers as they worked. We asked them about the casting process, how they "size up" models, and how they determine whether or not a model is right for their catwalk. Given the ambiguity involved in such a subjective task, we were surprised to hear the confidence with which many producers profess to do this. When asked how long it takes to decide on a model in a casting, one major stylist in London summed it up: "An instant! You know, you know, you know."

Models sell their "look" on the market to fashion producers, and their agents broker the trade. Beyond general height and body requirements (typically at least 5'9" with measurements close to 34" bust, 24" waist, 34" hips), a model’s look is a matter of idiosyncratic tastes and personal evaluations of her physical beauty. A look can be summed up as the "small and subtle differences in models’ physical appearance that lead to their being preferred by one client but not another." (Mears and Finlay 2005:321) To see if they have the right look or not, models are subject to a systematic and rigorous process of selection, or "filtering out" (Hirsch 1972), in which their agents arrange casting auditions to meet prospective employers.

The term “look” comes up often when producers discuss models and they claim to prefer the look of one over another. But when asked to define the term, producers often grapple for the right words. Most explained in rather vague terms that a look is more than the sum of a model’s physical attributes; it is the whole package of her personality, reputation, catwalk and appearance. Models are thus the quintessential new “aesthetic laborers” whose bodies and personalities are commodified as “goods” for market exchange (see Entwistle and Wissinger 2006; Witz et al. 2003). The importance of sizing up personality demands face-to-face auditions, an integral part of the selection process:

“Shes got a look. She’s got something that makes her—that she’s kinda working with. Like yesterday I saw three girls that all have very short hair, and two of them I was like ‘uh, whatever.’ And then one of them came in, and she immediately had something. So she looked almost identical to the other two, but there was just something about her that made her better than anybody else.”

– Casting Director, London, 5 years

Producers define a look as a set of references and associations, as the indefinable, as something “unique” or “individual,” a “feeling,” a “theme,” even an “essence.” It takes considerable cultural knowledge to interpret a model’s look; finding the right look for the catwalk is a daunting task rife with uncertainty. Designers may sort through the candidates themselves, while larger fashion houses tend to outsource
this task to specialists like professional casting directors and stylists on a contractual basis. Some casting directors work on exclusive contracts, like one renowned London-based director who reportedly sifts through 100 images of models per day. He described his job to us:

“My main role is to service designers to provide them with a suitable kind of look of girl that’s appropriate for their ethos and their world, basically.”

– Casting Director, London, 20 years

Producers must be able to swiftly identify the “right” look of model for their catwalk. They refer to this skill as a having an “eye” or a “vision.” They recognize this ability in one another, and aspire to it themselves:

“I think, just people have it… Everybody develops it in their own way… I mean in this industry, it’s being good at what you’re doing, having a strong vision.”

– Casting Director, NYC, 10 years

Having a “strong vision,” often means taking chances on an innovative—or to use a term that came up often during interviews—an “edgy” look. When pressed to explain their selection decisions, producers could not say what makes one model a better pick than another. Instead, producers spoke to us in terms of their personal feelings and physical reactions. They may not consciously know why one model’s look is right, but they certainly are able to feel that it is:

“You see so many girls. It’s very exciting when somebody walks in the door and you—and this is because I love my job—you get, you know, your tummy goes. You’re a bit like, ‘Yes!’ It’s amazing, and you get very excited.”

– Casting Director, London, 15 years

Considering this producer’s reaction, it may appear that some models have superior physical traits that perhaps are unobservable to the sociologist but recognizable to the practitioner. However, we rule out most unobserved heterogeneity among models for three reasons. First, the agents, as gatekeepers, restrict access to castings to a select few thousand candidates. Second, these Fashion Week candidates constitute an extraordinarily elite pool of models, considering the hundreds of thousands of young women around the world who aspire to be models because of the glamour associated with the job in popular media accounts (Massoni 2004). Third, agents groom and socialize models to meet the physical and personality criteria before Fashion Week. This flattens the quality differ-
In the absence of solid criteria for what makes a good selection, producers rely on what they perceive as their “gut instinct,” feelings and personal taste. They feel compelled to have an account of the ineffable, similar to the ways product designers studied by Molotch (2003) described the quality of “cool.” Because they work in fashion, an industry premised on creative genius, producers explain their work with the “rhetoric” (Bearman 1993) of taste, understood as the enactment of their personal and emotive reactions to beauty. Based on “vision,” they are able to identify and pick models with the right kind of “edginess” for the catwalk, and these models are, in their words, “really good.” Producers believe in this “vision,” because, as pointed out by Bourdieu (1996), they must believe in the rules of the game, the illusio, in order to play at all. To work as fashion producers, they must believe in the autonomy of what they are doing, even as social conditions influence their actions and choices in profound ways.

Information Sharing and Social Networks

What makes a model a “really good” model, considering that all of the candidates have met stringent qualifications to attend castings in the first place? The answer has less to do with the actual models than with the social organization of fashion producers. Skills such as a “good eye” or a “strong vision” are intimately tied to producers’ networks and mitigated through information sharing. Producers value passing tips to other producers in their social networks, thereby easing an uncertain decision-making process.

Throughout the interviews, clients explained the myriad ways in which their “strong vision” was fundamentally a social one. They shared stories of their long socialization histories in the industry, and many have held a series of different jobs in the business. One of our respondents, for example, began her career in London as a model, then became a stylist’s assistant, then a model agent, and finally today, she is a casting director with considerable sway:

“I have a good relationship with my clients, and I’ve had the same clients since I started. So if I say she’s great, they’re gonna believe me.”

– Casting Director, NYC, 17 years

When making decisions, fashion producers are also informed by shared sources of inspiration. They are avid magazine readers and spend countless hours browsing periodical racks in book stores. Furthermore, two-thirds of our sample (20) had at
some point attended art or fashion design school in a major metropolitan area, most commonly London’s Central Saint Martin’s or New York’s Parsons School of Design.

In addition to being outwardly connected to the fashion world, producers actively network within it. They “hang out” with one another and engage regularly in face-to-face communication, notably during social events organized in specific urban settings, a hallmark of creative industries (Currid 2007). Crucially, producers value information sharing:

“Throughout the season we speak almost on a daily basis also with other casting directors. They are friends, they are competition, they are colleagues, but mostly they are also friends. So there is really a buzz that during the off season you will start to hear about, oh this girl did this, this, this, and this.”
– NYC, Casting Director, 23 years

Passing tips among producers also helps to explain the extreme inequality of popularity among models. Producers frequently explained their reliance on social networks and shared information by a need to identify and keep up with the “hot” models, defined as those who are in high demand by prestigious magazines, campaigns, famous photographers and those that walk in high-prestige shows. A model deemed to be “hot” will become hot by virtue of her greater demand.

Thus modeling is similar to other “winner-take-all” markets defined by a cumulative advantage effect, in which successful goods accrue more success, exacerbating small perceived differences in quality into large differences in popularity (Frank and Cook 1995). In modeling, the winner’s success, however short lived, survives the course of at least one season, such that even the model who walks in the most shows will not have exhausted her popularity by the time the show circuit finishes in Paris:

“I think the fashion industry is built on followers. So if a girl gets the right show in New York, and by the time she gets to London everyone knows her and so she’s going to do the best shows in London too. And then by the time she gets to Milan, they’re going to decide if she is going to make it or break it.”
– London, Casting Director, 10 years

The “really good” and “hot” models are conceptually the same. They appeal to producers’ socially embedded “vision” to recognize appropriately “edgy” looks, made possible by information sharing and social ties among producers. A “hot” model is therefore defined by appearing in the “right” shows. In other words, a model’s desirability is connected to the social status of her clients.
Information sharing goes a long way in explaining how social influence flows through networks of fashion producers, enabling them to tune into one another and converge on similar choices. However, during as harried a time as Fashion Week, even the most socially cued-in producers are apt to overlook whatever “hot” new talent is lined up on their competitors’ catwalks. To navigate the uncertain environment of Fashion Week, the fashion industry utilizes a mechanism known as “optioning” or the “option mechanism.”

While a show audition may take just a few minutes, the actual casting process begins more than a month before Fashion Week starts in New York. First, modeling agents put together a “show package,” akin to a press kit, announcing every model they are promoting for the shows. Next, producers sort through the show packages to narrow down to a manageable number of models they wish to meet at the casting. Finally, producers negotiate with the agents over which models they want to place on hold, or option, for the show, in ranking order from first (strong) to third (weak) options.

An option is an agreement between client and agent that enables the client to place a hold on the model’s future availability. Similar to options trading in finance markets, the option gives the buyer the right, but not the obligation, to make a purchase (e.g., Hull 2008). In the modeling field, it enables clients to place a hold on the model’s time, and may be cancelled up to 24-48 hours before the job is scheduled. According to senior producers we interviewed, options developed in the 1960s as the modeling industry expanded to meet the needs of the growing advertising industry. The first options were used to manage the busy schedules of early supermodels such as Lauren Hutton. Unlike finance options trading, model options come free of cost; they are a professional courtesy to clients, and also a way for agents to manage models’ hectic schedules. Options may be confirmed as bookings or cancelled for no particular reason, and oftentimes last-minute, sometimes even the day before the show. Producers begin optioning models up to a full month before they are ready to meet the models for castings, and there is no limit to how many models a client may option for a given show.

In addition to their coordination function, options serve the symbolic purpose of “signaling” (Spence 1974) the model’s status to clients. During castings, clients are likely to ask models which other shows they have done or are optioned for that season. A model with several show options is deemed to be in high demand, or “hot,” compared to the model with no options. Likewise, a model with several options for high-profile shows will be in higher demand than a model with several options in the smaller, poorly-attended shows of unknown designers. The opposite is also true. For the unpopular model who finds limited success at the start of New York’s Fashion Week, it is unlikely that her agency will front the costs of auditions for shows in the other three fashion markets, and so she will remain unpopular.
Modeling agencies exploit the option mechanism to their advantage. Agents use future options as selling points when pitching models to clients. Agents also use their knowledge of “hot” models to gauge whether or not a fashion house is of enough importance to use their models. This means that, while producers can select among a large pool of models free of location constraints, not all producers have equal chances in bidding for the high-demand models. Models at the top of the hierarchy will only work for top rewards, either in the form of symbolic capital for a prestigious house, or in the form of high fees for a less prestigious house. Lower-status fashion producers are unlikely to have either the prestige or the finances to hire a “hot” model. They will, however, have their pick among the other competing models who are in a similar position of being new, unknown or similarly disadvantaged.

Newcomer producers placed less emphasis on seeking out the popular fashion models. For example, we interviewed one New York designer with a start-up fashion label of two years. She had just held the casting for her catwalk show, auditioning 100 models but choosing just six of them. She explained that she could not book any of the top models for her show, because they have “insane day rates.” She could, however, choose from a wide variety of newcomer fashion models, which she called “fresh faces,” because she could afford to pay them in “trade,” which are gifts of clothing:

“I just get fresh faces from the big agencies… because they see you as being in the same position as the fresh faces, like you’re going places so you can use their girls…. If one of the models later on gets big, it’s really only good for me if she’s connected to the brand.”

– Designer, NYC, 2 years

Therefore, producers’ choices of models are constrained by their own status and the status of the models they wish to hire:

“I can’t just book any girl I want. After I see all the girls, you know, I call the agents up and I say these are the girls that I would like for this show. And they don’t normally give me girls right away. The first thing they ask you is, “Well who else is in the show?”… They want to know who else you’ve got. So I always have to get that one girl. If I can get, I guess this season it was Coco Rocha. You know as soon as I got Coco in the show, it was like, OK now I’ll book whoever I want!”

– Casting Director, NYC, 14 years
Options allow producers to know their fellow producers’ tastes. The option mechanism generates a feedback loop of status signaling. “Hot” models with many options for upcoming shows in Milan and Paris are likely to secure enviable shows in New York; meanwhile a successful model in New York is likely to garner more success along the fashion circuit, securing the most prestigious shows in Milan and Paris.

Therefore, producers’ personal tastes are entangled with status considerations. Producers recognize that they are influenced by collective taste in general and powerful high-status producers in particular:

“A lot of people jump on the bandwagon. But I think that, you know, I think for you to be a creative person, there has to be a bit of infusion going on within you, as well. You can’t just be saying how amazing this girl is just because Tom, Dick and Harry said that she was, you know? You’ve got to apply a certain amount of your own, I don’t know, your own taste, in a way.”

– London, Stylist, 10 years

Under the guidance of the options mechanism, fashion producers can amend and bend their tastes in order to hire the “hot” model because big fashion houses do so. A fashion model becomes a marker of status, transporting the high status of one fashion house to another, thus making her into a useful asset when selected strategically.

How Status Structures the Catwalk

Based on our ethnographic findings, we have a set of theoretical claims about how producers make aesthetic decisions under market uncertainty. First, despite their narratives about individual taste, we find that producers’ choices are embedded in social networks via information sharing. Second, producers orient to one another based on status considerations and they do so through the option mechanism. Thus, while there is plenty of room for variation of models on the catwalk— theoretically each designer could cast a unique set of models for his or her show—we find the convergence of collective taste around a handful of socially defined “hot” models.

To test these claims, we used the Style.com database to construct a “network of taste” in which fashion houses—the nodes of the network— are connected through similarities of choices of fashion models. First, we collected all connections between fashion houses and models as reported by Style.com for Spring/Summer 2007 collections, simply removing “doubles”—i.e., if a model wears two different outfits for the same fashion house—and harmonizing the spelling of the models’ names if necessary. After this first step, we found 4,216 connections between models and fashion houses. The second step was to remove “missing data” (i.e., when the name of the model was not reported or the model not recognizable).
After removing missing data (less than 5%), 4,031 connections were recorded. An affiliation network was then constructed in which only fashion houses were included. One of the 172 fashion houses was removed from the dataset because it had no recognizable models. The result is a 171x171 matrix in which each cell $c_{ij}$ represents the number of models shared by fashion houses $i$ and $j$, and the diagonal of the matrix represents the number of models hired by each fashion house. This matrix, representing the sharing of models by fashion houses, is the dependent variable that needs to be explained.1

In order to test our hypotheses that information sharing and status structure catwalk model selections, we defined several measures. First, we measured a fashion house’s status by the number of articles mentioning it at least once in *Vogue* magazine during the four months preceding the Spring/Summer 2007 fashion shows. The measure of status adopted here is not flawless because it represents *Vogue*’s specific view on fashion, but it is robust. First, the status rankings reflect historically important names in fashion: Chanel (with 42 articles), Marc Jacobs, Balenciaga and Christian Dior (28 articles each). Second, *Vogue* is authoritative in the fashion industry. Third, unlike fields such as academia or sports, there is no official or semi-official prestige ranking of fashion producers, and a proxy is necessary. Therefore, our measure seems reasonable.

Using the suggested measure of status, we define three status groups of fashion houses, low (no article, the lowest quartile), medium (up to five articles), and high (five articles and above, the highest quartile). Five categorical independent variables were constructed to determine the impact of status on the similarity in the choice of models by fashion houses, all of which are 171x171 matrices. In the first two—“High/high” and “Low/low”—a “1” indicates belonging to a same status group (high or low status, respectively) and a “0” indicates belonging to a different status group. In the other three—“High/medium,” “High/low,” “Medium/low”—a “1” indicates belonging to specific different status groups (respectively, high and medium, high and low, and medium and low) and “0” otherwise. Thus, the reference group consists of Medium/medium links.

Next, we operationalized information sharing in social networks through two categorical independent variables—“shared city location” and “organizational link”—represented by two 171x171 matrices. Because social networks in creative industries emerge and evolve in specific urban settings (Currid 2007; Rantisi 2002), a “shared city location” variable was created, with a “1” indicating that two fashion houses presented their collection in the same city and a “0” indicating that two fashion houses presented in two different cities. Similarly, the independent variable “organizational link” was included to take into account the affiliation of fashion houses to the same international corporation or “fashion empire”—e.g., PPR and LVMH (Hass 2007)—or the affiliation of sub-brands to the same brand (e.g., Marc Jacobs and Marc by Marc Jacobs are affiliated). Fashion houses belonging to the same “fashion empire” and affiliated sub-brands often share resources.
and information. Some houses share casting directors, but we lack systematic data to investigate the effects of shared third-party firms, and can only aggregate these effects as organizational links.

Finally, we defined a variable that measures to what extent fashion houses share a similar profile in terms of resources and organizational knowledge available to them, called “resources similarity.” This variable is a 171x171 matrix in which each cell $c_{ij}$ represents the age of fashion house $i$ multiplied by the age of fashion house $j$. The age of each fashion house is the number of years of activity since the house was founded, until 2007. Founding years were researched on corporate websites.

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients of the variables defined above.

In order to understand the impact of the status and network variables, a multiple regression Quadratic Assignment Procedures was used. QAP regressions are used when Ordinary Least Squares approaches cannot handle inherent interdependent and autocorrelation features, such as in the case of the relational data used in this article (Krackhardt 1988). QAP tests can be handled and interpreted like OLS tests (Tsai 2002). The double semi-partialling approach (with t-statistic option) of the software UCInet (Borgatti et al. 2002) was used to run the QAP regressions because it presents the most reliable procedure under a number of multicollinearity and autocorrelation conditions (Dekker et al. 2007). Table 3 shows three different statistical models using this approach.

The QAP test confirms our hypotheses, with an interesting twist. Status, resources and social networks significantly influence the similarity in the choice of models, with status variables explaining the bulk of the $R^2$. It seems that the “homophily” of model selections exclusively characterizes high-status fashion houses. Homophily theories generally posit that “birds of a feather flock together” (McPherson et al. 2001), suggesting that low-status fashion houses should also share fashion models. However, we find that while high-status fashion houses share a group of popular fashion models (the High/high variable is significant and its coefficient is positive), lower-status houses hire a wider variety of less popular models (the Low/low variable is significant and its coefficient is positive).
Medium/high and Medium/low variables are also significant and display coefficients—positive and negative respectively—that are expected given the coefficients of the High/high and Low/low variables. However, the coefficients are not as strong as the High/high and Low/low variables. High/low does not yield any meaningful result. Also, fashion houses that have similarly high resources and organizational knowledge tend to hire similar fashion models, as suggested by our hypothesis that some houses use their market clout to hire models.
Discussion: A Matter of Taste and Status

When it comes to choosing models for the catwalk, producers face time constraints, ambiguous selection criteria and intense competitive pressure. As models are carefully pre-selected by agents, producers cannot tell a “hot” model from an average one with just their own eyes. They need an overall vision of the field before choosing models. Our qualitative data suggests two mechanisms of information sharing that enable producers to do this. First, producers share tips through their social networks to determine the “hot” models, defined by their social desirability, namely desirability by prestigious clients. Second, the option mechanism enables producers to picture the field of fashion competitors, allowing them to enact aesthetic tastes according to status considerations. These mechanisms are built into the market to enable producers’ decisions to converge on the “collective taste” for a core group of fashion models.

Our network analysis has confirmed these findings, but with a surprising discovery. Only high-status fashion houses share fashion models. High-status houses cluster around the choice of the “hot” (i.e., most popular) models, while lower-status fashion houses do not share models; they choose from a larger pool of models. This is because high-fashion houses have specific resources that lower-status houses lack, such as access to networks and high regard from modeling agents.

Therefore, collective taste seems not to be so “collective” after all, but rather exclusionary in nature as fashion houses wield market clout to secure those models that signify distinction from lower-status houses. Fashion houses may agree on who the “hot” fashion models are, but they do not share equal opportunity to hire them. When producers cast models, they are drawing distinctions between themselves and their competitors according to status and reputation. To use Bourdieu’s terms, they differentiate according to their taste (their dispositions, habitus) as a means of distinction, to set themselves apart from lower status producers and to align themselves with those in whom they may see themselves (Bourdieu 1984). Habit is also a basis for agency and strategy. Our analysis of catwalk model selections suggests that tastes are simultaneously an emergent effect of a social structure and the enactment of a strategy, to take Gould’s distinction (2002). Empirical observations of other creative markets, such as film (Faulkner and Anderson 1987), fit with our theoretical frame that matters of taste are matters of relational orientations and strategy within an uncertain field of possibilities.

There are three main limitations to our research.

First, we do not measure the heterogeneity of fashion models' “quality” (skills). We believe the pre-selection by agents creates a relatively homogeneous pool of models. The existence and extent of quality differences should be confirmed and measured in future research, for example through an experiment à la Salganik et al. (2006) that would implement a methodology to define quality differences in modeling.
Second, no external status indicator for fashion models was included in this research. Like fashion houses, fashion models do not have an “official” or widely accepted ranking. Moreover, no proxy seemed satisfactory. For example, in 2006 and 2007, there is not a single *Vogue* article in the database Factiva mentioning two of the three models with the highest number of shows in our sample. This type of press coverage did not allow the creation of a proxy of the status of models using the measure used for fashion houses. Other potential proxies of status—such as salary for example—are not publicly available.

Third, we do not examine the strategic work of fashion models, such as influencing their agents and engaging clients at castings (Mears 2008). Models attain status via institutional location and may try to work for what they perceive to be the “right” fashion houses. Therefore, the choice of fashion models by the fashion houses is to some extent a reciprocal choice. Understanding the strategies deployed by models would be a significant additional research project, but the objective of the present article is to understand the decisions made by creative producers. Models are not creative producers, and they are largely treated as goods for exchange by fashion houses and modeling agencies.

**Conclusion: Implications for Cultural Production**

Behind every winner in a winner-take-all market like fashion modeling, there is a complex and organized production process. Fashion producers wield a specific, however intangible, set of skills when selecting models’ looks for the catwalk. Such skills, in the form of a “good eye” or a “strong vision,” reflect socialization into networks, status orderings, and strategic choices within the fashion world.

We conclude with four implications for theory on the intersections of creativity and commerce.

First, this research illustrates the concept of taste as a fine-grained skill that creative producers use as a strategic asset to create and assess cultural goods. Taste drives a constantly changing structure of outcomes: each producer makes a choice that is affected by the decisions of others, who are influenced in the same manner.

Second, fashion producers express with utter certitude judgments which are inherently uncertain. Producers are quick and decisive about very vague taste qualifications, when academics, for example, labor slowly to spell out their exact points. The cultural producer must make definitive judgments, feigning indifference to fears of market failure. To indulge doubt is to question the very nature of the undertaking, and to jeopardize its accomplishment. In Bourdieu’s language (1996), they believe in the rules of the game, the *illusio*, as this is the only way to get the job done. We do not think that producers are being disingenuous when they claim to be motivated by their personal taste and “gut feelings.” Rather, taste is the only rhetoric available for creative producers to explain what we have found to be status considerations. In an industry that prides itself on daring creativity, producers’ professional identities hinge on protecting the ineffability of their skills,
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consciously or not, as Bourdieu and his colleagues have found (Bourdieu 1984, 1996; Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975). Thus the producer’s taste for any cultural product is embedded in the social process of production.

Our third implication is that such processes are mitigated through specific social mechanisms which enable producers to tune into each others’ actions before taking actions that will position them in the market (see Accominotti 2008; White 2002). It is surprising that fashion houses share information at all, rather than conceal it from their competitors, but they must do so in order to navigate their uncertain environment. Passing tips and placing “options” are two means by which fashion houses orient towards their competitors when selecting models. Blumer (1969) noted the phenomenon of taste convergence in fashion markets. We find that this convergence happens in the market through the deployment of specific social mechanisms structured around producers’ status positions. The choice of models, expressed as a matter of personal taste by producers, is a matter of strategy (i.e., of positioning) in a market.

Fourth, this “collective taste” does not emerge through an egalitarian process, but through the mobilization of specific resources. High-status producers enjoy access to high-status models with whom to broadcast their market identity, while producers with fewer resources and lower status are effectively excluded from collective taste. Given our findings of the uneven homophily from the QAP analysis, we suggest that lower- and medium-status fashion houses may in fact have a taste that is less strategic, driven more by idiosyncratic aesthetic preferences, than high-status fashion houses because lower-status houses choose more freely among a greater share of models.

This claim is contingent on our assertion that unobserved quality differences among models do not drive high-status fashion houses’ selections. Based on agents’ gatekeeping work to limit heterogeneity among Fashion Week candidates, fashion modeling is an exaggerated case of the creative industry’s more general predicament of elusive quality differences. Unlike traditional manufacture of goods with objective use-values and measurable quality differences, producers in the creative industries face high uncertainty about product quality. Indeed social consensus about the merits of a model’s look, a musician’s sound, or a piece of art or film is consequential in the absence of standardized quality measures. Such consensus, we find, is produced through information sharing mechanisms linked to external factors like status, social networks, and resources.

Our approach locates market-specific mechanisms to resources among cultural producers, and yields a generalizable approach to taste in other fields of cultural production in which uncertainty is high and product differences are elusive. In the absence of organizationally enforced coordination procedures, and in the presence of high risk of failure, the option mechanism for fashion models can be thought of as a formalized version of track records, reputation and buzz among producers in such industries as film, publishing and music. As aesthetic considerations
move from the margins to the center of production in the cultural economy, we expect that such mechanisms—and their underlying structures of status and resources—will figure prominently in shaping aesthetic decisions.

Note

1. The alternative is to run the analyses based on proportion of possible overlaps between houses, which controls for size of fashion shows. Substantively, as expected, the results (available upon request) are the same as the ones reported in this article.

References


