Creative Concepts Have Networks, Too

By Charles Galunic , INSEAD Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Data from 12 years of high-end fashion reveal clues about the building blocks of successful styles.

Artists manqués are often consoled (and console themselves) with the idea that their work will be “rediscovered” by future audiences. Posterity is proffered as a kind of compensation for a lack of popularity in the here and now.

And in a larger sense, we tend to think of cultural popularity as ahistorical, the product of either the mastery of a *sui generis* creator or a fortuitous connection with bigger themes the artist had no role in impacting. According to this view, popularity and prosperity are basically synonymous. Human tastes and emotions are thought to be reasonably well reflected in the mysterious mechanisms of the marketplace that anoint certain artworks as “hits” and classify others as “flops”.

Taking a longer view, however, enables us to see a different side of popularity. Beyond isolated trend cycles, every artistic medium features familiar elements – names, colours, styles, etc. – that recur again and again.

The romantic comedy, for example, is a movie genre whose fortunes have waxed and waned in Hollywood, but the fact that it keeps getting resurrected is proof of its perennial popularity. If we consider popularity as largely determined by the chords that certain combinations of cultural elements strike in us, rather than solely by aesthetic or marketing genius, we may begin to make more systematic sense of it. We may even be able to start cracking its codes, a challenge that has long preoccupied artists and creative-industry executives.

The fashion industry: An elemental perspective

For a recent article in ***Organization Science***, **Frédéric Godart** (HEC Paris) and I analysed global high-end fashion trends over 25 seasons spanning the years 1998-2010. We used the Worth Global Style Network (WGSN) trend forecasting database, which provides comprehensive lists of what's hot and not across more than 80 houses each season. WGSN recognises four categories of elements that, in various combinations, can compose a fashion trend: look, colour, fabric and pattern.

We took a very unusual approach, looking at each of our seasonal snapshots of the fashion industry as a network or ecosystem of cultural elements "competing" for inclusion in collections. In other words, we adapted social network theory and methods in charting the relative popularity of the elements. We were chiefly interested in the idea of "centrality", which states that individuals can gain advantage within networks by forging novel connections between groups. The analogue to centrality within the cultural sphere would be what the research literature terms *structural embeddedness*, or the extent of ties between one element and all the others.

Our results confirmed our hunch, that cultural elements with a higher level of connectivity and resonance were also the most popular. Like people who are natural connectors across a range of individual types, cultural elements have "survival" advantage when they are structurally embedded.

The "floral" look is an example of a highly embedded element. Designers keep returning to it because it serves as a natural bridge between other elements that are not usually seen together, such as the rarely paired colours green and blue. Conversely, the "military" look is more aesthetically rigid and limited in the unlikely associations it can form between elements. Of the four WGSN categories, "look" was the least popular on the whole, presumably because its relative complexity (compared to the other three)

reduces its ability to form links with other types of elements.

Also, elements that can make a fetching ensemble out of what would otherwise be a hideous combination carry a great deal of legitimacy. To designers and fashionistas, these elements are like dinner companions who can mix in virtually any company. They are a fairly safe choice for all occasions, posing little risk of embarrassment and nicely balancing out more outré choices. Our results, however, show that something can be “too safe” and so avoided: the more a fashion house is visible in the media, the more subsequent designs actually avoid its featured elements. That is, designers seem to be looking for designs that will stand out from what is popular.

Implications for creative fields

For creatives and executives chasing career success, our findings offer no magic formula. However, our **recent essay for *Aeon*** sifts this research for fresh insights on artistic innovation. Because embeddedness works both by forming novel connections and by affirming legitimacy, it gives us a conceptual lens to examine how unorthodox, dissonant expressions get absorbed into the “safe” society of accepted cultural elements (e.g. the musical modernism of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* – originally a *scandale*, now an orchestral mainstay). Deeply embedded elements may function much like a bassline often does in music, laying down a solid and steady rhythmic grounding that keeps the culture moving forward. Another analogy is to think about some of these elements as “platform” strategies, developing and using foundational elements that will become platforms for other creations.

The approach in our study could also help put a finer point on how celebrated creators developed the distinctive aesthetic identities that brought them fame. Rather than ascribing their success to indefinable artistic genius, we can analyse how they selected and arranged cultural elements into harmonious yet surprising combinations.

Further, we believe our method could especially apply to contemporary ideology and political culture. Here, the relevant cultural elements would be ideas, proposals and policies, instead of patterns and colours. The art world’s relentless, ingenious recycling may be the most fitting model for a political landscape where some old ideas may be regaining popularity to a surprising – and alarming – degree.

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