

## **Fashion Trends: Must we follow them?**

*Seasonal change cues fashion media editors to present the public with “must-have” and “no-no” listings*

**Sept. 1, 2008** - [PRLog](#) -- Fitting in – slavish, sensible or sensational?

Seasonal change cues fashion media editors to present the public with “must-have” and “no-no” listings, which, no matter how individualistic or judicious we might think we are, subtly compel us to reconsider the stock in our private wardrobes.

In these times of economic strain and budget adjustments, does “fitting in” with rapidly changing fashion cycles not pose challenges to designers and consumers alike? Are we prisoners of fashion dictates, or could we consider co-creating new looks with minimal expense? How can local fashion designers sustain themselves by working around and within global and local market forces?

Through aggressive marketing, our individual identity can become effaced by homogenised clothing, a veneer that suggests we are part of a recognisable whole. Trend forecasters, retailers and brand conglomerates launching new styles, fabrics, cuts and colours stoke the coals of peer pressure that conditions us to be seen in the latest ranges. As social beings, we are construed as a collective commodity travelling in a continuum of design renovation that is dictated by a few but embraced by the masses, often with little thought to suitability or personal imagination.

Being seen in the right brand wearing the “in” label of a particular designer neutralises our individuality and leads to a contradiction of the purpose of fashion: individual style portraying human uniqueness; instead, we become fashion clones.

By conforming to seasonal trends, are we not impeding the innovation and growth of young fashion designers emerging in the market? There are a few designers who have created distinctive aesthetics and have steadily built a brand following. These looks are not confined to the examples seen on catwalks at Fashion Weeks events; idiosyncratic, semi-mass-produced, wearable garments are also available.

The old saying, “catch them when they are young” can be applied to fashion education. For example, when experts visit fashion colleges and advise students on the latest European trends - as if these are the unassailably essential forms of good design and as such, critical to design success - are we not diluting their imaginative resources?

Both student and established designers are required to be in touch with global fashion directions, but is it a prerequisite to emulate these trends without any re-interpretation? The colours for 2009 are, according to the style forecasters, moving away from metallic finishes to a more earthy, subdued colour palette; ripped denim might resurge, and for younger women, appropriation of men's jeans (known as “The Boyfriend Jeans”) will be in vogue and Deep-V-T-shirts and jerseys could be the 2009 new style for men.

We need to respect the genius of our learner designers, and support them in steering away from reliance on European trends. This information is available for reference, so rather than delivering lectures on trend templates, their curricula should cover instruction in sourcing, assimilating, and interpreting the data, with a view to redefining trends in the local context and according to their own design sensibilities.

Upcoming generations of South African designers can consult a wealth of historical fashion approaches to inspire new nuances for their ranges, not only through their designs but by the way they market and retail

their creations. It is my sense that the edicts filtering down to young designers and into the consumer psyche of what can or cannot be worn should be challenged. It is time for fashion revolution and evolution.

The late 1950s and early 60s are a good example of this: young, energetic, visionary designers kicked against prevailing market prescriptions, sweeping aside hidebound retailing and manufacturing methods. Interestingly, even though the establishment was outraged at the audacity of these young artists, the two systems found equilibrium and co-operated in the realisation that the market was big enough to accommodate the diversity.

This period saw the rebirth of the boutique as a way of retailing fast, limited-edition, highly individualistic fashion. Led by Mary Quant, this fashion revolution saw new designers enter and disappear from the fashion scene as rapidly as new styles appeared in the boutiques. The survivors were those who developed solid business strategies and used experts to market their labels and outlets. Quant saw that the only way to thrive and move up the fashion value-chain was to develop a system of manufacturing that could produce limited ranges of quality garments in a timely and cost-efficient manner, and in so doing, she established business partnerships with CMTs and textile manufacturers who were willing and able to meet her needs.

In 1971, it was estimated that in the United Kingdom alone, there were 15 000 boutiques doing an annual business remit of £300-million. There was fierce competition between the boutiques, but this fostered an ethos of mutual respect and operational etiquette flourished in this sector. Each boutique offered a retail outlet for designers, and these outlets evolved into distinguished, quaint retail oases, establishing a reputation for a particular fashion flavour for a discerning market segment.

The boutiques offered an ideal opportunity for the supplier designers to interact with customers, get critical feedback and rapidly adapt, innovate and supply updated designs. They did not wait for received wisdom from textile manufacturers or trend forecasters. Instead, they created their own trends, and styles, allowing both young and old the space to explore and mix a variety of affordable, high-quality styled clothing to create their own personal fashion statements.

The key to fashion revolution is the alignment between CMTs, textile suppliers, independent designers and the financial sector supporting boutiques that present viable business plans.

South Africa's fashion sector should spearhead this alignment process, by understanding global trends - much as a musician masters fundamental techniques and genres - and then improvising on these to recalibrate the degree and trajectory of fashion development along new lines of excellence.

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