

# Fashion spheres – from a systemic to a sphereological perspective of fashion

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore how the fragmentation of the fashion system can be conceptually explained by drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's theory of spheres.

**Design/methodology/approach** – By conceptually discussing the changing nature of the fashion system and the institutional pressures exerted on fashion systems as a result of digital technology, the fundamental conceptual underpinnings of the theory of spheres are applied to these developments in order to explain the character of the contemporary organization of fashion.

**Findings** – Based on the conceptual analysis, this paper illustrates how a sphereological perspective to fashion provides a conceptual approach to explain the transformation and fragmentation of fashion systems.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes to the field of fashion marketing and management by demonstrating how the concept of fashion spheres can explain social arrangements going beyond the boundaries of fashion systems and the associated implications that this brings to bear on the role of fashion.

**Keywords** Digitization, Fashion, Fashion spheres, Fashion systems, Sphereology

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

In recent years, a vast interest has emerged in fashion studies in regard to how digitization is changing the character of fashion and its associated system. Digital technologies have been argued to increasingly contribute to the fragmentation of fashion (Crane, 2000) as novel sources for fashion advice and communication emerge (Kawamura, 2005) and become institutionalized (Pihl, 2011, 2013a). This development has not only created institutional pressures within the fashion industry, but challenge the traditional systemic perspective (e.g. Barthes, 1983; Entwistle, 2000; Leopold, 1992) often applied to fashion in the fashion studies literature.

Increasingly, the fashion system has in its conceptual development become able to incorporate several systems. Consumer groups in terms of youth culture have been shown to create fashion systems of their own (Kawamura, 2005). Even though extant literature suggests that fashion systems can differ at the macro-level (Roach *et al.*, 1980), the plethora of micro-expressions of potential fashion systems found in social media as a result of digitization (cf. Roach *et al.*, 1980; Laurell, 2014) calls for further investigation in terms of their potential implications for the macro-level fashion systems in which they could potentially be embedded. This is particularly the case



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because micro-fashion systems in a sense represent a paradoxical notion from a conceptual point of view as the notion of system in a broader cross-disciplinary context tends to draw attention to not only components and relationships between components, but also borders that distinguish the system at hand (e.g. Bertalanffy, 1950, 1968).

With this discussion in mind, this paper aims to explore how the fragmentation of fashion systems can be conceptually explained by drawing from the theory of spheres (Sloterdijk, 1998, 1999, 2004). By drawing on this approach, this paper will illustrate how the notion of fashion spheres that emerge and are embedded in digital information and communication technologies (ICTs), and most notably social media, can conceptually explain the social interplay taking place in the digital spatial settings of which fashion is created, reproduced, and diffused.

This paper is structured as follows. First, a conceptual discussion of the changing nature of the fashion system is provided, focusing particular attention on the issue of borders as well as the multitude of systems embedded in the system. This is followed by a review of the institutional pressures exerted on fashion systems as a result of digital technology. After these developments have been discussed, what follows is a presentation of the fundamental conceptual underpinnings of the theory of spheres and how these can be drawn from in order to explain the character of fashion spheres. At the end of this paper, the conclusions, as well as proposed directions for future research, are presented.

### **Fashion system(s)**

In the conceptual debate within the field of fashion studies, one of the key issues is to point out how the character and nature of fashion and its associated industry should be conceptually explained. A wide plethora of contributions have been offered to explain this issue, from which the dominating perspective has embraced the notion of the fashion system (e.g. Barthes, 1983; Entwistle 2000; Leopold, 1992). The notion of the fashion system often occupies a central point of departure in the contemporary conceptual discussion from which the fashion sector, as well as emerging phenomena within its boundaries, are understood and consequently studied. This is because a consensus can be found among a number of fashion theorists in terms of advocating a systemic approach toward fashion (cf. Entwistle, 2000; Gradén and Petersson McIntyre, 2009).

From the systemic perspective, fashion is treated “[...] as a system of institutions, that produces the concept as well as the phenomenon/practice of fashion” (Kawamura, 2005, p. 1). As such, fashion should be viewed as a result of ideas in our consciousnesses that are created through a number of institutions that are expressed and articulated in terms of cloths (Gradén and Petersson McIntyre, 2009).

The notion of the fashion system has a relatively long history within fashion studies and has come to be conceptually developed over the decades (cf. Barthes, 1983; Blumer, 1969; Craik, 1994; Entwistle, 2000; Kawamura, 2005; Leopold, 1992; Roach *et al.*, 1980). An overarching development in regards to this concept is that it has been forced to deal with increased complexity in light of the evolution that the fashion system has undergone. One of the discussions that have occupied the field relates to the reach of the fashion system. More specifically, this is an issue of whether the fashion system should be argued to represent one system with a global reach or whether a multitude of fashion systems co-exist and to some extent are integrated with each other. While Kawamura (2005) argues that fashion represents a system of institutions, Roach *et al.* (1980) have suggested the distinction between simple fashion systems and complex fashion systems. While simple fashion systems tend to be small-scale and emerge in

pre-modern societies, complex fashion systems emerge in modern societies where a multitude of professional actors collectively operate within its boundaries. In a similar manner, Craik (1994) suggests that western elite designers should be argued to represent one system, but that this system should not be understood to be exclusive nor to be determinative of other fashion systems. Instead, fashion systems have the ability to become recast in an array of fashion systems that are competing as well as cutting across western and non-western cultures. While these perspectives aim to explain how fashion systems can be explained on a macro-level, Kawamura (2005) offers an explanation for how micro-level fashion systems also can emerge. It is suggested this phenomenon is related to youth cultures that create their own styles with their own definitions of what constitutes fashion.

Parallel to the question of whether fashion systems should be conceptually understood as embedded in each other, and how novel fashion systems emerge as a result of youth cultures, the issue of diffusion also becomes a central component. Put differently, the changing nature of the fashion system due to digital technology may have implications not only for how systems are organized, but also for how fashion spreads within these systems. In this context, Crane (2000) argues that the previous orientation around social class and its impact on how fashion manifests itself has shifted increasingly toward consumer fashion. Fashion designers during the nineteenth and early twentieth century produced clothing styles that were aimed at expressing the social position of the wearer, similar to how the seminal contributions of Veblen (1899/1970) and Simmel (1904/1957) describe the role of fashion in relation to class. Class fashion, however, needed a centralized system of creation and production where a high level of consensus between designers existed. As Crane (2000) shows, fashion no longer originated exclusively from fashion world capitals such as Paris or London or even from the fashion industry in the late twentieth century. As thousands of organizations around the world produced a great variety of choices, aided by the emergence of electronic media with enormous audience penetration and postmodern imagery, these developments together represented important factors affecting diffusion. Crane (2000) therefore argues that, in contrast to class fashion, fashion should be understood to fragment from one genre in terms of haute couture to three major categories of styles that each incorporates its own genres: luxury fashion design, industrial fashion, and street styles. The system becomes fragmented not only as a result of these transformations but also due to the diffusion of what the systems produce – namely, fashion. When taken together, this illustrates the fragmentation of the fashion system(s) as well as the increased dynamic it entails.

### **Digitized fashion system(s)**

In the literature that concerns systemic perspectives on fashion, several contributions have pointed out the importance of technology in order to explain the high rate at which fashion information is spread from various sources throughout multiple media (cf. Crane, 1999; Kawamura, 2005). With respect to the discussed notion of consumer fashion, Crane (1999) argues that the introduction of novel technology in combination with the more general development of fragmenting fashion systems had strong effects on how the diffusion of fashion should be understood. More specifically, both the traditional trickle-down and the bottom-up models of fashion diffusion are argued to become increasingly challenging based on four main arguments (cf. Crane, 1999; Pihl, 2011). First, the process of diffusion seems to increasingly consist of many relatively short trajectories, whereby certain styles diffuse up or down in particular segments.

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Second, the status of the fashion adopter has been revised based on the fact that consumers have become less likely to imitate and instead select styles based on their perceptions of their own identities and lifestyles (cf. Giddens, 1991). Third, the process of diffusion became less an interpersonal process, and instead large corporations that operate in global markets play a key role in that their goals and strategies affect the nature of fashion innovation and the process of diffusion. Fourth, the impact of the media and popular culture is seen in the content of fashion innovation and diffusion, where opinion leaders function almost entirely in those contexts.

In response to the arguments set forth by Crane (1999), Kawamura (2005) emphasizes the importance of technology in order to understand the high rate at which fashion information is spread from various sources through multiple media outlets. Building upon the discussion of the general structural changes in western societies and the decentralization of the fashion system, Kawamura (2005) argues that “(i)nstead of looking for fashionable items of the season in Paris, consumers look elsewhere” (p. 100).

As these contributions illustrate, the developments that fashion systems have undergone due to novel digital technologies relate both to the professionalized institutions integrated within the fashion system and to the role played by the fashion consumers. When fashion is seen as a system (e.g. Entwistle, 2000; Kawamura, 2005; Gradén and Petersson McIntyre, 2009), professional actors such as designers and fashion journalists have traditionally been argued to maintain central positions because they control access to distribution channels within the system and thereby have the potential to become particularly influential. In the context of such a conceptualization, the role of consumers has been integrated by arguing that fashion is a socially constructed process through which the value of fashion arises as a consensus among actors (Kawamura, 2005).

Contemporary works have argued that the rise of postmodern culture has had a significant impact on the role of fashion, and also the role of consumers as the importance of one’s self-image and identity has become one of the central aspects in the conceptualizing of fashion (cf. Chittenden, 2010; Pihl, 2013b). More specifically, fashion consumption is increasingly regarded as a form of role-play through which consumers seek to project conceptions of their identity – a process that is constantly evolving (Kawamura, 2005; cf. Turkle, 1997).

In relation to the rise of ICTs and later of social media, these digital spaces have proved to offer good opportunities for consumers to take part in these kinds of processes related to self-image and identity (cf. Kawamura, 2005; cf. Turkle, 1997; Pihl, 2013b). More specifically, fashion has become one of the dominating sectors in the general setting of the social media landscape particularly in regard to fashion blogs and the fashion blogosphere (Pihl, 2011). Fashion blogs, like blogs in general, often contain thoughts, opinions, and experiences that are expressed by combining texts and images (Rickman and Cosenza, 2007). Fashion blogs have, however, also proven to be settings in which consumers are associating and combining fashion brands (Pihl, 2014); as a result, entries not only tend to discuss events taking place in bloggers’ everyday lives, but also chosen outfits and fashion items drawn from both online and offline settings. Meanwhile, blog posts often embed other related features such as personal fashion photographs, professional photographs from fashion shows, fashion magazine photos, and images of products (Chittenden, 2010).

Increasingly, influential fashion bloggers become opinion leaders who use social media as spaces where self-stories concerning fashion consumption unfold. In these settings, branded storytelling has been shown to materialize through various social

practices related to fashion blogging (Pihl, 2013b). Kretz and de Valck (2010) have illustrated that these practices encompass both implicit and explicit self-brand associations, present fashion brands as objects of desire, and use brands as identity-construction partners. Taken together, these expressions represent “reversed brand communication” (Kretz and de Valck, 2010, p. 313) as branded storytelling in the setting of fashion blogs strives to appeal to both consumers and brands.

In contrast to being characterized by personal expressions and associated with a high degree of personal creativity in their production (Gunter, 2009), social media outlets have later been shown to materialize both as places where consumers and commercial objects interact (Muñiz and Schau, 2007) and as places where consumers, commercial objects, and commercial actors interact (Kim and Jin, 2006; Thomas *et al.*, 2007; see also McCormick and Livett, 2012). In view of this development, an evolution can be discerned.

Initially, social media have been dominated by non-commercial and amateur expressions of consumers. For example, blogging practices have been explained as being closely related to the personal and intimate practice of writing diaries (Keren, 2006). As social media over time have become highly interconnected, collective settings of, for example, blogospheres have been suggested to represent a “densely interconnected conversation” that emanates from these personal characteristics (Herring *et al.*, 2004, p. 1). As this development has taken place, social media have also given rise to digital communities where linking value has been created based on branded goods or services and through collective practices integrating commercial objects (Schau *et al.*, 2009). Because of these evolutions, commercial actors over time came to approach social media by creating places of their own with the aim of managing and controlling the creation of meanings concerning commercial objects through practices fostered in these places (e.g. Kim and Jin, 2006). Taken together, the landscape of social media has, in the process of becoming populated, given rise to places where different user groups dominate the development of social meanings and practices.

When taken together, one of the central questions is how the consequences of these emerging but heavily populated digital places should be explained. From a systemic perspective, the emergent landscape of digital places found in social media could be argued to represent a plethora of micro-fashion systems (cf. Roach *et al.*, 1980; Laurell, 2014). This social media landscape, and particularly popular places such as fashion blogs, seems to be driven by youth culture expressions that have been suggested to be able to create fashion systems of their own (cf. Kawamura, 2005). This plethora, even though it has been shown to draw highly from established fashion brands (Pihl, 2014), also incorporates novel fashion expressions of bloggers’ own creation (Pihl, 2013a). This could suggest that the borders between novel digitized fashion systems in social media is a matter of fluid boundaries as well as a highly integrated closeness between different cultural expressions found in these spatial settings (cf. Pihl, 2013a, 2014).

One of the ways in which these environments have been conceptualized, and where consumers particularly have come to dominate, is to be found in the notion of the fashion blogosphere (cf. Pihl, 2011, 2013a). Even though this concept has been suggested to capture the spatial settings occupied by this particular expression of social media applications, namely blogs, it has over time evolved to incorporate other social media applications such as micro-blogs, video services, and social networking sites, to mention three examples. This questions the notion of fashion blogosphere, but simultaneously raises the question of how digital fashion spheres can be understood in relation to the notion of wider fashion systems.

In view of this discussion, spheres emerging as a result of digital communication technologies can be argued to have become a matter of co-existence between users in an increasingly crowded social media landscape in which fashion has been shown to play a major role. As such, there is a need for a theoretical approach that allows for the analysis of these transformations. Previously, both Leopold (1992) and later Entwistle (2000), based on Ash and Wright (1988) and Willis and Midgley (1973), have emphasized that an approach that combines technology, social contexts, communities, and individuals is yet to emerge in the literature in order to conceptually explain the increasing complexity at play. With the discussed transformations brought by digitization in mind, this adds to the relevance of exploring how alternative conceptual frameworks which allow for dynamic interplays can be applied in order to capture the blurring of borders in digital settings from which novel fashion expressions seem to increasingly stem. One theoretical framework that offers the ability to conceptually approach and explore these issues is Sloterdijk's (1998, 1999, 2004) theory of spheres. In the following section, the theory of spheres is therefore discussed in further detail.

### Sphereology

One of the leading contemporary German philosophers, Peter Sloterdijk (1998, 1999, 2004), has in his trilogy on spheres created a novel vocabulary of human co-existence by integrating the spatial embeddedness of the social (Borch, 2010; see also Elden, 2012). The theory of spheres and its associated concepts provide a theoretical approach with which to analyse diverse sets of activities and relations that together form collective meaning and action, even though the intention of Sloterdijk is not to create a systemic philosophy (Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2011).

In the Sphären-trilogy (Sloterdijk, 1998, 1999, 2004), the theory of spheres is elaborated. The fundamental question addressed is "where is man?" (Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2011, p. 11). In regards to the key concept of the sphere, this has been explained to manifest:

[t]he interior, disclosed, shared realm, inhabited by humans – in so far as they succeed in becoming human. Because living always means building spheres, both on a small and large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 28).

Based on this definition, Sloterdijk throughout the trilogy develops three interrelated concepts of spheres: bubbles, globes, and foam. The first volume (Sloterdijk, 1998) focus attention on the notion of bubbles, which represent micro-spheres that emerge among intimate relations. In contrast, the second volume is devoted to depicting globes that are manifestations of macro-spheres (cf. Borch, 2010; Sloterdijk, 1999) that in a sense represent the boundaries of humanity's perceived co-existence.

In the third and final volume, the concept of foam is presented that represents the plethora of closely interlinked bubbles or micro-spheres that are characterizing the contemporary time (Sloterdijk, 2004). Micro-spheres emerge in several forms between humans with strong relationships to one another, but, when aggregated, these materialise as a foam or as the "agglomerates of bubbles" (Sloterdijk cited in Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2011, p. 15). Put differently, the notion of foam is not a question of a "mono-spherical container" (Sloterdijk cited in Borch, 2010, p. 226) but instead a question of:

[m]icro-spheres (couples, households, companies, associations) of different formats that are adjacent to one another like individual bubbles in a mound of foam and are structured one layer over/under the other, without really being accessible to or separable from one another (Sloterdijk cited in Borch, 2011, p. 31).

Because foam as agglomerates of bubbles encompass diverse activities, relations, and interactions, these together give rise to atmospheres of spheres. Put differently, Sloterdijk (2011) suggests that spheres as the result of human co-existence are also atmospheric-symbolic in their character. More precisely, the relation between the spheres and their atmosphere has been explained as follows:

Spheres are air conditioning systems in whose construction and calibration, for those living in real coexistence, it is out of the question not to participate. The symbolic air conditioning of the shared space is the primal production of every society (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 46).

When taken together, these concepts and particularly foam as micro-spheres with close connections to each other allows for the analysis of the dynamic nature of symbolic meanings materializing as atmospheres across different socially embedded spatial contexts. With regard to these, the following section will continue by discussing how a sphereological approach can be applied to the notion of fashion in light of its fragmentation.

### **Fashion spheres**

In view of how the concept of fashion is explained under the systemic approach (Kawamura, 2005), the discussed conceptualizations underpinning the theory of spheres (Sloterdijk, 1998, 1999, 2004) allow for a novel perspective in regard to how fragmented fashion systems can be explained. More specifically, the institutions that have been argued to together manifest a system under the systemic approach have been defined as the “social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and have a major significance in the social structure” (Kawamura, 2005, p. 107). Based on a sphereological approach, however, these social practices essentially become a matter of co-existence (cf. Kawamura, 2005; Sloterdijk, 1998, 1999, 2004). Put differently, it is not necessarily institutionalized social practices of established systems through which the phenomenon of fashion transforms. Instead, novel opportunities for digital co-existence from a sphereological point of view explain why fashion emerges within the socially embedded spatial setting of digital media, and, as a consequence, transforms fashion by widening the territory from where fashion is created, reproduced, and diffused.

Following Sloterdijk (2011), this parallel expression *vis-à-vis* established fashion systems can be explained as representing a foam of fashion spheres emerging across the digital media landscape. Fashion spheres emerge as users take part of activities and over time develop relationships as a result of these interactions, which together give rise to collective meaning and action within these spatial and inherently social settings (cf. Pihl, 2011, 2014).

In regard to one of the earliest digital expressions where fashion came to play a major role (cf. Chittenden, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), blogospheres, as the aggregation of blogs (Keren, 2006), have been suggested to represent the created and occupied space in the digital media landscape (Baoill, 2004). When approaching these social contexts as foam of fashion spheres, this provides explanations to the social interplay to be found within and between the plethora of micro-(blog) spheres that emerge in several forms among users who come to share relationships that, when taken together, manifest closely interlinked agglomerates of bubbles (Sloterdijk, 2004).

Fashion spheres encompass networks of relations being formed and negotiated which provide spheres with a strong social base. Fashion spheres exhibit traits traditionally ascribed to communities (Pihl, 2014), but the borders of these spheres are blurry.

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This blurriness occurs because of the low entry barriers to these settings (Pihl and Sandström, 2013) as they include and allow potential members to freely take part in them and negotiate such aspects as rituals, traditions, and conventions of the spheres (Pihl, 2014). For this reason, individual fashion spheres are to be understood as characterized by their own unique collective traits.

Drawing on previous literature on the emergence of digital and social technology that has come to be centered on fashion (Pihl, 2011, 2013a), emerging fashion spheres can be argued to initially have been characterized by individuals who ventured out into an uninhabited space to explore the uses and meanings of new technological expressions. Later, the spheres centered on fashion would become particularly inhabited places in the digitally spatial settings. As the popularity and population of these spheres increased, and because the collective interests centered on fashion and how expressions of style became articulated with the help of consumption objects such as fashion products and fashion brands, fashion spheres, on their own initiative, created atmospheres that included commercial elements. As atmospheres characterized by commercial elements emerged, this eventually sparked the attention of commercial actors. As commercial actors started to approach the emergent fashion spheres, these have become increasingly commercial in their character.

As such, interactions in fashion spheres occur between varied sets of actors. These interactions give rise to relations to form, but also encompass the integration of consumption objects. From this perspective, fashion spheres and their associated borders comprise a conjunction of the dichotomy of fashion consumer and fashion producer. This is because the balance between the creation and appropriation of value relating to fashion (Pihl and Sandström, 2013) and the intermix of personal- and commercial-oriented contents (cf. Pihl, 2011, 2013a, b) seem to be the result of the actors and consumption objects that take part in these spheres. When actors and consumption objects interact within these spheres, this process gives rise to linking value (Cova, 1997) which is closely related to making sense of meanings of both non-commercial and commercial character (Pihl, 2014). As such, this challenges the separation of fashion consumer and fashion producer domains from each other in these particular settings, because fashion spheres represent a metamorphosis of the two.

In view of this metamorphosis, the formation of relations through interactions between actors and consumption objects and the resulting relations also give rise to atmospheres of fashion spheres. As actors and consumption objects co-exist in fashion spheres and take part in the construction and renewal of these spheres, this results in negotiations of the atmospheres which are highly related to symbolic meaning creation (Sloterdijk, 2011). As in the case of how spheres materialize, atmospheres are thus dependent on the actors and consumption objects that take part in these spatial settings. Put differently, atmospheres emerge as a result of, and are maintained by, the intrinsic interests of actors and the different symbolic meanings carried by consumption objects that become integrated in spheres.

When taken together, a sphereological perspective to fashion thereby provides a conceptual approach to the transformation and fragmentation of fashion systems. More specifically, the notion of a fashion system corresponds well to the concept of globes, i.e. to macro-spheres (cf. Borch, 2010; Sloterdijk, 1999), which, in a sense encompass a “mono-spherical container” (Sloterdijk cited in Borch, 2010, p. 226). As the fashion system has come to fragment because of the rise of digital communication technologies, however, the emergence of fashion spheres has come to allow for the expansion of the territory of fashion by allowing previous outsiders of



fashion systems within the socially embedded settings of digital spatiality to take part in fashion creation. In light of the increased interest among fashion system members to approach the emerging foam of fashion spheres, a sphereological perspective also illustrates how the boundaries of fashion systems fade and redistribute agency in relation to fashion phenomena.

## 528 **Concluding remarks, managerial implications, and recommendations for future research**

This paper has aimed to explore how the fragmentation of fashion systems can be conceptually explained by drawing from the theory of spheres. In view of the discussed character of fashion spheres, a sphereological perspective reveals the social interplay taking place in the spatial settings of digital spaces. As such, this paper has contributed to the field of fashion studies by providing an alternative approach to fashion that goes beyond the borders of the commonly applied systemic approach.

In regard to fashion marketing and management, the role from a sphereological perspective becomes that of affecting, negotiating and redefining atmospheres of spheres. As argued previously, however, the negotiation of atmospheres does not encompass individual action but, instead, collective action of the inhabitants of spheres. This widens the role of professional fashion organizations, as it requires participation in spheres, and wider sets of information streaming from personal, private, and commercial interests that fill spheres with meaning need to be taken into consideration. In order to become a part of these spheres, the meaning of commercial objects needs to correspond to the interests therein. The role of marketing from this perspective thereby becomes that of creating consumption objects that can be integrated by being aligned with the different interests of spheres. This in turn suggests recurrent and dynamic shifts of influence taking place over meanings of fashion, which is expected to become a characterizing feature of fashion.

Based on the presented contributions of this paper, two main directions for future research are relevant. The first direction concerns the potential consequences of spheres that emerge and develop in digital spatiality in regard to physical expressions of the fashion sector. Studying this interplay would expand the field's knowledge base in regard to what consequences digitization brings not only for novel digital expression but also for established practices within the fashion industry. The second direction regards the potential size and range of fashion spheres. More specifically, future investigations of the distribution of fashion spheres in relation to these variables would bring clarity to the issue of whether the aggregated variation of fashion expressions continues to increase or if digital interconnectedness potentially reduces the speed of this development.

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