

Changes in style and Changes in fashion

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Abstract

Any musical community or other style-driven society should have a theory of how styles emerge, evolve and disappear. The model proposed in this paper differentiates between changes in fashion and changes in style. The former are driven by insiders in order to prevent imposers mimicking the insider's style. The latter are created by outsiders trying to create alternative styles to the mainstream. This model advocates that new styles, in order to succeed, need to reject one of the main values of the mainstream style that it is trying to differentiate from. This rejection impede that the mainstream could adapt the emerging style.

Introduction

We first focus on the development of styles. Specifically, we are interested in identifying the main factors that shape a particular style.

We understand style as one of the main components of group identity. A style is the external manifestation of certain underlying values and attitudes. People decide to follow certain style because they agree with the values and attitudes it expresses.

Style is not just musical taste, ways of dress or speech. It should be seen as a combination of all this elements, where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. In other words, style cannot be easily imitated by an outsider. An imposer could imitate one part of the style but he will be easily identified by the insiders. This holistic view of the style imposes special costs to the newbie who want to assimilate the style. He should spend considerable amount of time and expose himself to possible retaliation while he tries to understand the style not as a simple overlapping collection of external attitudes. Sometimes the style-insiders make some variations to their code. They do this because they want to force people to spend time in order to "stay in the loop." This assures loyalty from insiders; someone cannot disappear from the scene for a couple of years and then come back expecting to still be an insider – he is a newbie.

These changes, fashion changes, do not imply style changes. The signals change but the underlying values of the style do not. The followers of the style can follow the fashion without jeopardizing his group identity.

Fashion changes do not explain why a completely new style emerges and why some people decide to follow it. We borrow ideas from Kuhn's paradigm shift to explain this

phenomenon. We argue that there are people who propose alternative styles; they wish to differentiate themselves from the mainstream style. The alternative followers will choose a set of underlying values that are incompatible in some sense with the mainstream culture. This will assure that the mainstreamers do not follow them.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we explain the fashion changes from the point of view of signalling theory. Second, we use this theory to explain the differences between changes in fashion and changes in style. Third, we make an analogy of this idea and the paradigm shift theory. Then we explain the cycle of alternative styles becoming mainstream. Finally we provide some discussion and conclusions.

Signalling theory, an explanation to fashion

Signalling theory has been used to explain the meaning of signals in nature. The main point of the theory is that to keep a signal honest it is necessary to impose a cost on the sender (Bergstrom 2002). This cost assures that more capable senders will pay a lower cost to emit a signal than less capable ones. For example, female peacocks prefer males with long and bright tails. On the other hand, males have to spend much energy to keep their tail big and shiny, so stronger males can create and maintain these tails more easily than the weak ones. This will make the male's tail a reliable signal of his strength and health that the female bird can use to choose her mate. This is known as the handicap principle. This kind of signal is called *assessment signals* (Bergstrom 2002).

Sometimes it is impossible to keep the signal costly enough to assure its honesty (Dawkins 1991). If the society lowers the cost of the signals to facilitate communication, it is open to deception. The meaning of this signal depends on social conventions, so they are called *conventional signals*. This kind of signal is still meaningful because the members of the community have some memory of the past performance of the others inhabitants of the environment (Dawkins 1991). One typical example of this is the reputation of a physician. A regular person cannot evaluate the quality of a medical doctor. He should rely on the experience and recommendation of other people to decide the doctor he wants to visit. This means that the physician must maintain good quality of service of her patients to have a good reputation and keep having patients.

Another way to keep the conventional signal meaningful is by changing the signal over time. This kind of signal is called *fashion signals* (Pesendorfer 1995). The dynamics behind them is that the cost of emitting these signals decreases over time, so high quality individuals should keep changing their signals in order to signal their quality (Pesendorfer 1995).

Fashion signals are not static signals. These signals convey their meaning over time. This means that a single snapshot of a signal is not enough to convey the underlying qualities of the sender. We need to have access to a set of signals that he displays over time to know his real qualities. The only way to prove the underlying quality is by displaying the right signal in the right time. The speed in the change of the signal depends on how easy it is for outsiders to fake. When the outsiders are able to counterfeit the signal, it does not serve as group identity signal, then the insiders find a new signal to express their identity.

For example, the changes in the dress code of particular styles are fashion signals. The insiders keep changing their wardrobe to distinguish themselves from the outsiders. Fashion signals are about having access to information. The easier it is to access the information, the faster this signals change. In the Internet era, where you can find information about anything from the screen of a computer, style signals change faster.

One force that drives changes in fashion is countersignaling (Feltovich 2001). Suppose that we can stratify society into three classes: high, middle, and low. It is difficult to differentiate among them using only *assessment signals*. This means that the middle group can easily imitate the high group signals, so the middle group can be confused with the high group, to the detriment of the high group. Countersignaling occurs when the high quality group starts to imitate the attitudes of the low group. This behavior helps to distinguish the high group from the middle group. If the middle group imitates the low group, they are not confused with the high group and take the risk of being confused with lower one (Feltovich 2001). The typical example of countersignaling is the use of slang. High quality individuals may imitate the speech of the lower classes. However, if the middle group imitates the speech of the high group, they will start to sound like the low group. Eventually the use of the slang will become more popular and the middle group can start using it without being confused with the lower group. At this point, the high group should find other ways to distinguish themselves from the middle group. This phenomenon helps to explain why fashion behaves in cycles (See Feltovich 2001 for an explanation).

Recent sociological studies have used signalling theory to explain many aspects of human interaction, from mating (Gangestad, 2000) and aesthetic taste (Miller, 2001) in the offline world to Usenet forums (Donath 1998), and eBay (Kollock, 1999; Resnick, 2001) in the online world.

Evolutions of new styles

New generations want to differentiate themselves from old ones. They try to find their own group identity that give them cohesion as a generation and distinguish them from the mainstream. This change is not only in music style but also in ways of dress and speech. To assure that new style becomes a real signal of identity, young people should create a set of rules that are incompatible with the values of the style they are rejecting. This causes the style they want to differentiate from to play an essential role in the shape of the new style.

Music has an important role in the development of this new style; it serves to create and express social cohesion (Noah 1998, Hagen 2002). It brings people together by signaling a group identity and promoting social interaction. During these music gatherings, people see how others dress and speak. In other words, music provides the place where people can be influenced by others. We do not argue that music leads the development of new styles. On the contrary, music, dress and speech should be seen as a single unit, but it is the music that disseminates the new style as a whole.

To shape a successful new style, the new generation should find one or more important characteristics of the mainstream style and signal something that is incompatible with these values. This assures that mainstreamers find new styles unacceptable and incomprehensible. For this reason all the new styles born as a reaction of the old styles.

As one example, the punk movement was born as a reaction against the rigidity of British society. Punks reject the social formalism as a whole, reject the social structures and become anarchistic, reject the musical virtuosity of progressive rock and instead play music that is as dirty and unacademic as possible. Punks find that their attitudes will not be understood and followed by the mainstream, and thus they adapt them as elements of their own identity.

Similarly, electronic music was born as an antithesis of the traditional rock band. They reject having four people playing on the stage, and each of them playing a rigid set of instruments. Electronic music advocates claim the beginning of a technology-driven era where even traditional musical instruments are unnecessary. This causes the rejection of rock stars and their fans.

One proof of mainstream's disapproval of new styles is "moral panic." This kind of reaction shows that the set of values and attitudes of the alternative style is incompatible with some those of the mainstream. This will reaffirm the alternative group's identity in opposition to the mainstream identity.

Gaining this rejection of mainstream culture helps the new style to attract young people who are looking for a group with whom to identify. The rejection assures that their values are not going to be assimilated by the main style, making the alternative style a safe paradigm to find their group's identity.

This process is different from countersignaling. When a new style is born, a new set of signals is created that differentiates itself from the mainstream culture. This signal is essentially inaccessible to the mainstream culture, which makes it meaningful as a separation signal. This includes imitating attitudes of a lower social group, generating a music style, or approach partying. While punks act or actually become homeless they do so to "find their own place to breath" not to differentiate themselves from the middle class. Similarly electronics music followers create their own music rather than mimicking the lower class. On the other hand, countersignaling does not look to create new attitudes; it is about the higher classes differentiating from the middle classes by imitating the lower class. Countersignaling does not create new signals.

New styles and paradigm shift

Kuhn's paradigm shift theory

Kuhn divides the evolution of science into two stages, normal and extraordinary science. Normal science is the stage in which no new radical concepts are introduced; scientists try to expand the understanding of the world within a paradigm. Eventually they find contradictory evidence in this paradigm and the paradigm enters a crisis stage.

Sometimes to solve this crisis, some concepts of the current paradigm have to change. This is called extraordinary science or paradigm shift (Perez 1999).

In Perez's words, the main characteristic of an extraordinary stage of science is the incommensurability, the inability to find an algorithmic point-to-point translation between both paradigms. For example, the concept of time is different in Newton's paradigm than in Einstein's paradigm, and thus a question like "How long does this object take to move from A to B?" cannot be translated.

Perez argues that this impossibility of complete translation assures that some people do not believe that the new paradigm provides valid explanations. These scientists are not wrong or being irrationals; they just cannot find an evident reason to validate the truth of the new paradigm. Indeed, sometimes the skeptics are right and the crisis is solved within the old paradigm, thus no extraordinary stage occurs. This makes science a subjective task but does not imply that is irrational.

Kuhn's theory says that during extraordinary stages, each scientist explores a path that she considers more plausible to solve the current crises, without any external or oversight structure to control the process. Since any scientist can find an irrefutable proof that his path is correct, or prove that the others are wrong. This search process helps to explore all the plausible solutions. One outcome of these searches is that sometimes two groups of scientists cannot reach an agreement of the right path to follow. When this happens, the field of study divides and new fields of study emerge.

As scientific evolution can be divided into normal and extraordinary science, so fashion and style changes should be seen as separate phenomena.

Thus, fashion changes are analogous to normal science; there is no depth change in the style. The change of the signal comes from insiders as distinguish from newcomers or impostors.

New styles are like extraordinary science periods where the whole meaning of being 'in' or 'out' changes in such a way that the mainstream could not follow the new style without abandoning some important part of its old style. These changes come from outsiders who are not willing to belong to the mainstream. This forces the alternative style to reject an important characteristic of the mainstream, which they cannot follow.

The main similarity between changes in style and changes in science is the concept of incommensurability. Just as it is impossible to make science applying two paradigms at the same time, so it is impossible to be part of two styles at the same time. Style incommensurability assures that the mainstream cannot assimilate a new style, and thus the new style is a reliable signal of non-mainstream identity.

As in science, the emergence of new styles are not decided by a select group, which plans what the next style is going to be. In a given time, there are multiple people proposing new styles, and most of them never get enough people to become noticed by others. Thus, these are failed styles that never get popularized. Because there are multiple styles trying

to emerge and there is not a central command that dictates which style should be adapted, it is possible that in a given time, two alternative styles may emerge. This phenomenon is true in current days where we are seeing multitude alternative styles popping up from multiple sources and with different stylistic proposals.

One difference between these two phenomena is who drives the revolution. The scientific changes are started by the community looking for better explanations, it is made by insiders. The style changes are driven by outsiders.

The cycle of becoming mainstream

If a new style reflects the concern and interests of a new generation, more and more members of the society will adapt it. When the adapters of the style reach some critical point, the style is brought to the attention of the general public. In this way, the style is not an alternative signal anymore; now is part of the mainstream culture.

Becoming a mainstream style creates an identity problem for the pioneers of the style. At the beginning, the non-mainstreamers create a new style as a reaction to the mainstream, and proudly see their style evolve and become more rich and complex. The new style is very effective in communicating a new set of values against the mainstream. This gets the attention of many early adapters who understand the values and the attitudes of the new style. The early adapters learn the secret code that allows them to understand and follow the fashion changes proposed by the pioneers. As time passes, more and more people adapt the new style, but unfortunately not all of them fully understand its underlying principles but nevertheless follow the external changes in the fashion. Thus, the new style has become mainstreamed. The pioneers get frustrated because their style does not serve as a differentiation signal anymore.

At this point new pioneers start trying to create new styles to differentiate from the current mainstream culture. The old pioneer's values are now a target of critics. Eventually a new style will start to gain momentum and the cycle will repeat again.

Since there are multiple alternative styles emerging all the time, this process is inevitable. Eventually some new style will emerge with an attitude and values that identifies many people. This style will get the critical mass necessary to become mainstreamed – sometimes to the detriment of the early style followers.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are some questions that still need to be answered. What are the forces that make people reject traditional style and start looking for alternative forms of expression? It is true that once a particular style is adapted and becomes part of the mainstream does not serve as a signal for alternative identity, but this does not imply that it is time to start looking for new forms of expression. The Baroque period got established in the century XVI and ended in the XVIII – with 200 year as a mainstream style. In the dawn of the 21st century, this attitude still applies to for some styles and not to others. Country music

emerged in the 1930's and has been mainstreamed since then; in the rock-electronic scene, new styles emerge every day.

In this paper, we propose that changes in fashion and changes in style are different phenomenon. They are similar to the normal science and extraordinary science stages proposed by Kuhn. While changes in fashion differentiate outsiders from insiders, changes in style are driven by outsiders who refuse to be integrated into the mainstream culture. Changes in style are incommensurable in the sense that new styles self-select a different sets of values that are unacceptable to the mainstream style.

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