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Commercialisation and the authenticity of vintage fashion

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### **Introduction**

Vintage fashion retailing has been typified by its evolution from second-hand shops to independent small-scale businesses and its position outside the mainstream designer and fast fashion system, reflected in their collections of vintage clothing focused on specific pieces and looks (McColl, 2005; Mhano and Niehm, 2005). Its antecedents can be found in 1960s youth culture and its engagement with unusual clothes sold through emporia and boutiques that satisfied consumer needs for an alternative style. They provided an opportunity for customers to find unique and chic products not usually available through traditional shopping channels and by the possibility of finding many brands gathered into a single location. Secondary sites and locations near second-hand markets provided distinctive, but also low-cost stores for these and subsequent vintage clothing retailers. Their point of difference was often communicated through the owner's expertise in sourcing merchandise, the personality and "quirkiness" of the store interior and word of mouth communication (McColl, Canning, McBride, Nobbs & Shearer, 2013).

As vintage gained acceptance, vintage boutique chains emerged with stores across the larger cities in the UK (McColl et al. 2013; Ferrier, 2016). Moreover, multiple fashion retailers such as Topshop and Urban Outfitters introduced their own vintage ranges. This marked a further change in the market towards the commercialisation of vintage fashion and new competition to earlier forms of vintage retailing and the authenticity of vintage. Paradoxically, the very rejection of mass market retail by consumers may have contributed to this process. In these circumstances, characterised by an independent fashion and retailing tradition, the discussion of vintage using conventional, economic marketing theory may not be particularly helpful. It may be more appropriate to recognise that marketing constitutes a range of organizational functions and activities (Duguid, 2005 and Warde, 2005) and that the marketing process entails 'linked and implicit ways of understanding,

saying and doing things...that include practical activities, performances and representations or talk' (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009: 31). Resonating with this view, some scholars have indicated the need for a stronger focus on marketing as practice (Skalen & Hackley, 2011).

From a market and marketing perspective, vintage clothing and accessories do not conform to the conventions of the fashion industry, which emphasises 'new' looks, styles and products, delivered through a fast fashion system. Instead it is characterised as an emergent, unformalised market that depends on the negotiation of vintage clothing by retailers through networks of suppliers, informed too by consumers and the media. In this context, economic definitions of markets and marketing may not fully account for the creation and maintenance of the vintage market. It shares attributes of markets that are not universal, self-contained entities, but instead have distinct discursive forms and material practices in different social contexts and over time (Venkatash & Peñaloza, 2006).

A constructivist view of markets focuses on how markets emerge and organise, through the unceasing configuration and reconfiguration taking place through different marketing practices and expertise (Araujo & Kjellberg, 2010). They are considered as bundles of practices in which material objects can have a significant influence on how the market actors act in market spaces (Araujo, Finch & Kjellberg, 2010: 8). A practice based approach directs attention to the concrete interactions between entities as part of an event or situation. It does not search for enduring causes of action but how individual practices interlink to form temporally emergent entities such as buyers, sellers, goods and markets (Araujo & Kjellberg, 2010). The approach recognises a diversity of buyer-seller interactions in market exchanges. Especially interesting in this account are the contexts and differences between buyers and sellers in their respective sense-making and negotiation of the meanings of exchange. The account relies on interplay between human and non-human elements in the actor world, in which cultural and interpretative dimensions can form the basis of misunderstandings, disputes and incommensurabilities. These are argued to be important characteristics of actors' encounters in markets with the potential of stimulating actors' imagination and creativity (Finch and Geiger, 2010). If vintage is regarded as a distinctive, but changeable approach to the use of previously used fashion products, it deserves closer examination of the changing practices and relations.

As vintage retailing has expanded from small, independent owned and managed stores, to larger and more complex businesses so it has come under pressure to take on more commercial,

competitive practices. But these have to be balanced with its distinctive appeal based on unique, merchandise that is historically and materially authentic. To achieve these objectives, a marketing positioning model for vintage fashion retailing can be developed through its merchandising strategy, customer service, communications, and trading format (McColl et al. 2013). Given the relatively unformed nature of the vintage retail market, this chapter draws on McColl et al.'s (2013) model combined with a focus on its marketing practices. Given the importance of the merchandise and its provenance in vintage fashion, the aim is to provide new insights into merchandising strategy through the less well explored practices of product sourcing and merchandising. By drawing on research with three different categories of retailer, independent, boutique chain and multiple branded retailer, it contributes to explaining how vintage fashion retail is changing through more commercial practices and the implications for sourcing authentic vintage fashion.

### **The concept of Vintage**

A significant challenge with vintage fashion is its very definition. It has clear associations with the past and its historical, temporal dimension. But while some products are precisely valued by their date of production, for example vintage wine (Cervellon, Carey & Harms 2012), vintage clothes are not. This dimension is particularly unstable, as vintage tends to be defined by sellers and buyers in the course of trading. Vintage certainly implies something old, distinguishing products by a particular age, provenance and scarceness. The retailers in our study, themselves acknowledge that by the early 2000s what was classified as vintage clothing may have been completely different to that of ten years later. The declining availability of older merchandise combined with rapidly changing fashions, has led to a more flexible understanding of what can be sold as 'vintage'. Not all merchandise is more than twenty years old; fashions from fifteen years, or more recent 2000s fashion from five to ten years ago, are also sellable as vintage.

Vintage is not only old but must be fashionable; it has to be in demand and sellable, and so customer usage and their fashion attitude should also define vintage fashion retailers (McColl et al. 2013). From the early 1980s, an understanding about buying an authentic period look emerged among consumers. 1950s Americana was popular at this time and people bought into a James Dean or other classic movie stars look. In this way vintage clothing made it possible for certain images from the past to 'live on' in a different form (Silverman, 1994). As fashion and fashion designers have consistently drawn on earlier eras and looks for inspiration, the sense of the past in the present tends to blur the boundaries of new and old. This is evident in the explicit referencing of the past in

designs and collections accounted for by descriptions that include retro as well as vintage. In these circumstances, the authenticity of a look becomes more problematic. In vintage, the focus on eras, for a certain look from a certain time enables the consumer to buy a classic, timeless piece that can be kept and then passed on to the next generation, as a form of personal heritage. But, in practice it's very difficult to establish whether a particular product is from an era; branded merchandise has to be checked to make sure it is real and as authentic as possible. For retailers it has become more of a struggle to find the same stock, harder to acquire the classic item, such as the old Levi's denim jacket or black 501 jeans. Moreover some vintage retailers rework lower grade merchandise to upcycle them into more sellable garments. These are 'genuinely made in store' but the reworking further differentiates the authenticity of vintage by its look, from the garment itself in its integral, physical form.

Previous ownership creates a blurred and unstable relationship with second-hand trading.

'Second-hand' categorizes any piece of clothing which has been used before, notwithstanding the age of the clothes (Cervellon, Carey and Harms 2012) and vintage is used to sell second-hand merchandise to a more discerning and valuable market; its more prestigious meaning distances it from second-hand in a different way, from its old and musty connotations. Moreover the labelling and display of vintage merchandise can hide previous ownership from customers; they simply may not be aware that a fashion item is not new.

More generally, visual merchandising, the organisation and location of the retailer, contribute to its market position between branded retailers and charity shops. In this way, vintage retailers distinguish themselves from the formal and typically branded mainstream retailers and at the other extreme, less focused, lower cost charity shops. It also enables them to compete with the full margin brands on price, and 'the whole point of shopping vintage' may be to buy the look more cheaply and with second hand shops, on fashion, store design and layout. Above all, the interpretative possibilities of vintage clothing enable the consumer to actively create a distinctive individual look; personalisation and the uniqueness of an item are an essential part of vintage consumption. For younger customers, its appeal draws on the individualistic culture of streetwear, and vintage's tradition of alternative looks as an escape from the homogeneity of mainstream fashion.

In the development of both second-hand and vintage fashion retailing and its consumption, authenticity and nostalgia are held to make important contributions. They can serve as 'authentic' representations of another time or place (Palmer & Clark, 2005) and vintage can define consumers

as being true to their existential being, their authenticity as personalities (Palmer 2005). A nostalgic longing for an actual past or a re-appropriation and re-invention of a past through consumer goods may inform the quest for authenticity (Gregson, Brooks & Crewe, 2001). A seemingly less commercialised past therefore offers many greater opportunities for the presentation of an authentic self. A more nuanced approach is found in Steiner's (1994) studies of the art market and the 'paradox of authenticity' as traders offers markers of authenticity, while on the other hand their role as middlemen and economic intermediaries denies consumers direct access to the 'genuine' article, When something is marked as authentic it is mediated, and hence not authentic in terms of unspoilt.

From a brand perspective authenticity can be interpreted as an interaction between objective factors, subjective constructs and existentialist motivations (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Authenticity can be contextual, and Bertoli et al. (2016) observe that consumers seek different forms of authenticity based on their own personal objectives, and in some situations, attributes leading to subjective and self-expressive attributes count more than objective authenticity attributes. Consumers can also be define an authentic product as the opposite to a commercial one due to its real, genuine, true and non-commercially intended attributes (Beverland & Farelly 2010).

High end vintage stores often authenticate their merchandise as rare and present them ensemble to the consumer which sanitises the experience: designer wear for the elite removes the negative connotations of used clothing. New vintage boutiques reinforce their authenticity by locating near traditional second -hand markets, for example Portobello Road in London. Upscale market settings are created for those who don't have the time to seek out other authentic sites (Palmer and Clark 2005). Although as Steiner (1995) observes, 'the manipulation of context through the calculated emplacement of objects, is a widespread practice among art dealers around the world, ... part of the collectors quest is to discover what has previously gone unremarked' (p.154).

Based on three case studies, some generic characteristics can be identified among the retailers to encourage a sense of the treasure hunt as random conditions authenticate the experience and heighten the sense of achievement. For some it is the process of sifting through, hunting around and ultimately trying to locate something that stands out, but is genuine and good quality. This discovery impetus is further heightened as second hand shopping is an unreliable and unpredictable activity with no guarantee of success. Our research suggests that vintage shops offer elements of surprise and fascination. One of the most captivating features about vintage shop is its ability to

satisfy customers' curiosity and desire for novelty, platforms to discover unique pieces and to reinterpret past trends and styles in a contemporary way. What vintage fashion retailing demonstrates are sophisticated consumption practices enabled by the wealth of consumption choices and practices (Veentsra & Kuipers, 2013).

### **Vintage fashion sourcing and supply**

The quest for authentic fashion requires an unusual level of expert knowledge by vintage retailers as it does not follow the fashion industry's ordering and supply conventions. Fashion retailers are usually concerned with new products, range planning, demand forecasting and specifications. Instead, as one retailer explained, at one time if it was up to him and if it were at all possible he would only sell the things that he likes. But commercial demands require him to make money and the only way to do it is to sell to customers what they want. As his business expanded, his stock became dictated by current fashions so the retailer has had to act more like a mainstream retailer and become adept at identifying trends in the market.

From both suppliers' and retailers' perspectives this process has become more sophisticated, changing dramatically from the the early days of vintage in the 1980s. Some products prove particularly problematic to source; good womenswear is very difficult to buy, and dresses are probably the hardest category because "they generally won't be right. There'll be something wrong and you'll have to re-work them". Vintage particularly lends itself to unisex clothes that are not so formal and don't have to fit particularly well so sweatshirts or jeans are very easy to sell to both sexes. A second general buying principle is to locate products that seem to be missing from more conventional outlets, for example that use real materials such as leather. Many customers want to buy leather products, handbags, belts, leather jackets, and leather skirts, which in vintage fashion are generally competitively priced compared to many of the 'vintage inspired' fashions offered by mainstream fashion brands.

There have been concerns about whether the supply of authentic, older pieces can meet the increasing demand for vintage fashion. But although they are becoming more expensive to buy, retailers indicated that new markets, including the Far East, were emerging for both suppliers and buyers. Suppliers themselves range from recyclers to specialist vintage suppliers. One retailer has several suppliers in the UK and Europe, two in America, and some in the Far East as well. As vintage retailing has expanded so global sourcing has become both more accessible, becoming more like fast fashion itself.

Personal involvement in sourcing is important. The emphasis is on the buyer, usually the owner or senior manager using their knowledge of their business and the market to handpick types of product. Some retailers said it was very easy to start buying overseas by sourcing nearly all their supplies from the USA. It was described as a learning process rather than formal market research, and that by building up knowledge through trading the retailer got to know people who sold second hand clothing to importers. As the suppliers would not divulge this confidential trade information, the retailer simply visited a library, which held a trade directory for every major city in the USA and made lists of the traders. These were phoned up to ask if they were looking for new customers. Two suppliers responded and the retailer 'hit it off' with both of them straight away, remaining close friends after many years. Other important suppliers in the USA are charities, as the amounts donated to them are so large that they require specialist contractors to clear all their surplus stock.

An increasingly commercial approach among the suppliers was evident in their investment in digital inventory systems in response to increased demand and a need for an immediate and accurate recording of types of available merchandise. Digitised lists of stock or bales of clothing are made available to retailers who can request popular items or styles of clothing. As with mainstream fashion retailers, it highlights the need for suppliers and retailers to develop close working relationships. Moreover, this level of organisation ensures that the right quality of clothing can be supplied to avoid waste. For retailers, sustainability of the clothing and textile industry has become a competitive element of their business, as their customers are more knowledgeable about clothing waste and the re-use of garments.

Where overseas buying is the norm, different patterns of supply emerge. A more direct approach saw regular visits by the retailer to overseas suppliers to grade the clothes is necessary. During those trips, retailers were able to sort and grade the clothes based on the style, size and quality of the clothing to ensure they brought the right products to the market. Some contractors undertake the grading into different categories such as denim, wool, overcoats, jeans for onward sale to their vintage fashion retailers. A second, relatively informal process was less direct: images of currently popular products were sent to trusted suppliers. The popularity of the look and its on-trend features are described with a request for "anything you've got that you can send us in these quantities". In these cases sometimes the first batch of what is sent can be difficult to sell, as for example, the garment print may be in fashion but not the shape. However they can be re-worked by the retailers'

sewing teams to adapt them to a more sellable shape. This level of informality extends to feedback from the stores about what is selling; photos from new deliveries are sent to the buying director for products to be “like not this, not this, not this...” As the store staff observed, the buying director doesn’t really know the details of sellable lines and relies on their customer knowledge.

Other retailers rarely go abroad and handpick. Sourcing can be sub-contracted but its disadvantage is that deliveries are made in large bales that require secondary sorting. A visit to the processing factory shows how it works: a guideline for what goes in what box, which is marked up as a certain grade, its price and so on. The buyer specifies a grade/ bale, and undertakes a second level of sorting to remove ‘imperfect’ items. Trust and expertise are key as despite the sorting process, fakes, can sometimes appear in the deliveries. Avoiding fakes is a continuing problem, but over time it becomes easier for the buyers to tell the difference and trusted suppliers remove many of the fakes. Nevertheless is vital that retailers can rely on suppliers to select goods that are of the correct quality, and the vintage buyer always checks the merchandise to be sure. From the larger suppliers, the retailer can simply enquire about a specific product availability or get a list from some of them of what they've got or what they offer and they'll tell you if they've got any. A supplier’s list can show what’s available as a crude but quite accurate summary. The problem is that the lists are readily accessible to any vintage buyer, which reduces product availability and drives the price up. Consequently it stimulates a different sourcing strategy, to “find different routes to getting that stuff that aren't as conventional”.

Despite the complex sorting and grading process and increased retail of second-hand and vintage the barriers to entering the vintage industry remain low. Indeed, there is a notable increase in entrepreneurial businesses that focus on curating and trading vintage products. The low cost of online vintage trading provides opportunities for specialist as well as more general opportunities for a global vintage clothing community that connects vintage sellers and buyers (Ford, 2017).

Previous studies show that vintage has regularly featured in leading fashion and lifestyle media and promoted as a sign of individuality and connoisseurship ( Palmer 2005; 197, Cassidy & Bennett 2013, 247). The internet and social media in particular have had the most profound effect in popularising vintage due to the ease and accessibility of sites ranging from vintage retailers to vintage forums and vintage communities on sites such as pintrest and facebook. An increasing number of blogs that are dedicated to giving advice on how to shop vintage on the high street. In these ways online media provide easy access to up to date information. Social media allows retailers



the opportunity to promote their brand of vintage and capitalise on the desire for vintage promoted by celebrities and designers themselves. Celebrities like Kate Moss with her vintage inspired collections for Topshop in 2014 have given extra exposure to the trend.

The recycling of fashion trends in this sense is not new but the reappropriation and reinvention of symbols of past design linked to the term vintage may be. It contributes to the movement of vintage from its earlier place in the margins of retailing and consumption, to become a highly commodified mainstream phenomenon (Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013, 356). In this customers are no longer passive recipients in the marketing exchange process (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011), but rather they become pivotal authors of brand stories through networks of consumers and brands formed through social media and the easy sharing of brand experiences in such networks (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013). Developing a strong and personal customer-brand relationship is a crucial part for vintage retailers. Employees in the stores are encouraged to promote merchandise via platforms such as Instagram and the research demonstrated how this helped them develop retellable content that added to the personality of the customer-brand story.

## **Conclusion**

Vintage fashion retailing has evolved from its origins in independent specialist stores and the informal practices of these retailers that relied on detailed, personal knowledge of vintage fashion suppliers. Its position as an alternative lifestyle, through its clothes but also store merchandising and locations, encroches on the practices of mainstream fashion. However, 'vintage acceptance' (Butchart 2017) can mean anything that has been pre-owned or looks old; it's becoming very accessible to everybody. This has significant implications for the vintage supply chain, from fashion trends, often inspired by vintage and throwback looks, to the 'sorting' process, store merchandising and displays.

A practice-based approach to the market of vintage fashion retailing demonstrates how retailers, suppliers and consumers, each knowledgeable in specialist areas of interest define the buying and selling of merchandise. They can identify and define authentic vintage items that originate in a period in time and fashion context. Specialisations have proliferated as consumers have the ability to access looks and styles online and through social media, becoming knowledgeable partners in the process. Informal practices typify the early development of vintage fashion retailing and remain evident in the personal involvement of the owner or senior manager in buying from known and

trusted sources. The research shows that they are closely engaged in the sorting processes, partly to grade but also to establish real and fake - in their terms – merchandise. However it also requires the engagement of employees, consumers and suppliers with the material objects. The vintage retailers' strategy for merchandising is constructed around a strong organisational culture, an awareness of feasible and acceptable of the strategic options provided by the micro-level activities of these elements in the market.

Increasing numbers of vintage retailers are turning to other distribution channels in fast fashion retailers, such as Topshop, Urban and e-tailers. Further, there are very few barriers and a growing consumer base for new online platforms. Meanwhile, fashion brands have introduced archive collections, which are limited editions of pieces that aim to reinterpret fashion history. Consequently the boundaries between 'vintage' and 'high-street' fashion are fading fast leading to the commodification of vintage and the adoption of more formal practices. However, as Veenstra and Kuipers (2013) observe, expansion of the market leads to a paradox where the originals continue to be recognised by those 'in the know' while critical awareness is commodified in reaching a larger audience.

In this process, the selection and retailing of vintage merchandise occupies marketing space on a spectrum between new and second-hand merchandise. Exchanges between buyer and seller, mediated by the clothes themselves contribute to its authenticity, adding value to second-hand clothing and transforming it into 'vintage'. Steiner's (1994, 1995) discussion of authenticity of African artefacts in the art trade finds a strong resonance with the commercial development of vintage fashion that at "all levels of the trade individuals are linked to one another by their vested interest in the commoditization and circulation of an object in the international economy" (1994, p.164). But unlike the objects traded in the art market, vintage fashion is distinguished by knowledgeable individuals and a close understanding of participants in the trade, of its value and meaning. The marketing as practice approach, with its attention to routine, micro-level interactions between multiple actors seeking to create value for themselves and others (Araujo and Kjellberg, 2010) provides valuable insights into vintage, its authenticity and the fashion market.

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