

## **Reconceptualising Prosumption beyond the ‘Cultural Turn’:**

### **Passive Fashion Consumption in Korea and China**

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**Published in *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2018)**

#### **Abstract:**

While the processes of production and consumption are increasingly interrelated in society, there is a burgeoning literature on consumers’ increased power through the prosumption process and its evolutions and manifestations in various industries, markets and social contexts. This article challenges the theoretical assumption that all types of ‘prosumers’ become directly empowered by digital technology or have an equal opportunity to participate in the production process through Web 2.0. By extending Ritzer’s reconceptualised idea of prosumption beyond the Global North, our research analysed two specific East Asian cases of fashion consumers whose countries shared rapidly rising economic status and cultural significance yet underwent different sociocultural trajectories. Using focus group interview, we investigated how these consumers interact differentially with the existing social structure, cultural values and other emergent social agents, and the extent to which they are able to exert an influence on the production of immaterial fashion. Contesting the expressivist take of the ‘cultural turn’ which overemphasises consumers’ awareness of and control over symbolic fashion, this article’s major theoretical contribution relates to symbolic consumption in the case of fashion – as a unique case blending material, immaterial and symbolic consumption – among young Chinese and Korean consumers geographically located out of the global fashion centres. We explored prosumption’s vicissitudes and limits as a theoretical concept, challenging its universality across different cultures, political-economic models and product categories, also demonstrating the multifaceted relationships and dissimilar types of power balances between production/producer and consumption/consumer. The study concluded with the new and differing orders of fashion consumption in Korea and China: the recognition of the overlapping effects of economic, sociocultural, habitual and technological factors which constitute different levels of empowerment and create different types of ‘prosumers’, including ‘elite prosumers’ and ‘passive prosumers’; and the power reshuffling among fashion producers, emergent social agents and consumers in the digital age.

#### **Keywords:**

China, cultural turn, East Asia, information and communications technology, Korea, prosumption, passive prosumer, consumption, production, fashion

## **Reconceptualising Prosumption beyond the “Cultural Turn”:**

### **Passive Fashion Prosumption in Korea and China**

Prosumption has arguably taken centre stage in society and in scholarly debates, as the pace and nature of technological changes and the rise of Web 2.0 have brought about a significant impact on the processes of production and consumption and on consumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2014, 2015). As Ritzer (2014: 11) asserts, “production and consumption should have been treated as [...] “ideal types” [...] that do not exist in the ‘real world’ economy...sociologists, social theorists and other students of society should have *always* focused on prosumption...”. There is an array of theoretical assertions of consumers’ increased power through the prosumption process (e.g. Toffler, 1980; Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008) and its evolutions and manifestations in various industries, markets and social contexts (Büscher and Igoe, 2013; Ritzer, 2014, 2015). In a “prosumer society”, however, do the “new prosumers” (Ritzer, 2014: 13) always become directly empowered by digital technology? Do consumers have an equal opportunity to participate in the production process *through Web 2.0* and become active “prosumers”, as Ritzer optimistically prophesised? Or can (i) **different natures of consumption**—be they material (e.g. an IKEA DIY bookcase), immaterial and digital (e.g. MOOC) or a combination of material, immaterial and symbolic (e.g. fashion), and (ii) divergent and overlapping effects of *sociocultural, economic, habitual* and *technological* factors, constitute *different levels of empowerment* and create *different types of “prosumers”* between the two poles of “prosumption continuum” (Ritzer, 2014: 10)?

Based on our grounded research, the key theoretical and empirical contribution of this article relates to and focuses on *symbolic* prosumption (which has not been clearly discussed by Ritzer so far) in the case of fashion, especially among consumers geographically located out of the global fashion centers such as Paris, New York, Milan and London. We revisit and extend Ritzer’s (2014, 2015) reconceptualised idea of prosumption beyond the Global North and analyse two specific East Asian cases of young fashion consumers – China and Korea. These two countries shared a common

trajectory of rapidly rising economic status and cultural significance in Asia, yet they underwent different cultural and social trajectories from each other and “Western” societies. By focusing on the complex interplay between fashion production and consumption in China and Korea, our study demonstrates how their consumers interact differentially with the existing social structure, cultural values and other emergent social agents, and the extent to which they are able to exert an influence to the production of *symbolic* fashion. The study throws light on prosumption’s vicissitudes and limits (as a theoretical concept), which are “confront[ing] social and economic transitions that raise political issues dormant in countries complacent about extant modes of consumption” (Warde, 2015: 129). Furthermore, the study supplements previous scholarly work on different human and non-human social agents’ (or *actants*’) power in (re)shaping symbolic fashion values in Asia (Entwistle and Slater, 2014; Ritzer, 2015; Tse, 2015; Tse and Tsang, 2017).

We argue that prosumption should not be crudely understood as a universal concept applicable to all types of production/consumption and sociocultural contexts. Since the “cultural turn” in 1970s, a cultural expressivist perspective has been dominant over decades, which at once overshadows the force of other key economic and habitual factors and neglects the nuances of the prosumption process (Warde, 2014, 2015). Although cultural factors are acknowledged as influential to consumer behaviors reinforcing materialism, status consumption and conspicuous consumption (e.g. McCracken, 1986), the individual fashion consumers’ ability in producing and articulating cultural/symbolic meanings is often oversimplified or overemphasised (Rocamora, 2002; Warde, 2015). By contrast, our starting point is that information and communications technology (ICT) plays a significant *yet* mixed role in altering material, immaterial and symbolic prosumption patterns, at least in the case of fashion: ICT is simultaneously empowering and constraining to producers (or “prosumers-as-producers” [p-a-ps]), social agents and consumers (or “prosumers-as-consumers” [p-a-cs]), and it reshuffles different social agents’ power relations and **recreates new types of “prosumers”**. Overall, our theoretical premise challenges (i) the universality of “active consumers”/“agentic prosumers” paradigm across different cultures,

political-economic models and product categories, and (ii) the expressivist take of the “cultural turn” overemphasising consumers’ awareness of and control over symbolic fashion, even in the “prosumer age” and the era of global connectivity. While Ritzer has recently discussed the ongoing decline of “human prosumers” due to the upsurge of “prosuming machines” and automation (2015: 412), we go beyond his technologically deterministic viewpoint and argue that (human) prosumers are caught in a strategically monitored, collective, *passive* or *passively active* form of symbolic consumption, what we theoretically coin as “**passive prosumption**”.

While looking at *how* divergent, interactive and interwoven effects of sociocultural, economic, habitual and technological factors constitute different levels of empowerment and create different types of “prosumers”, our empirical study could go as far as to validate relevance of different phases of development in the social science of consumption, as what Abbott (2001) asserted as the “shifting and cyclical nature of social theory” (Warde, 2014). Abbott critiqued the outward progression of social theories through different phases as partial and one-dimensional because they are only instruments of selective attention. “Since the late 1960s, the social science of consumption has had three broad, partly overlapping, phases of development, each of which has had a distinctive focus. Schematically, emphasis shifted between the three fundamental dimensions of consumption – acquisition, appreciation and appropriation” (Warde, 2014: 281). This perspective can advance our understanding of the multifaceted relationships and dissimilar power balances between production and consumption, also the reason why prosumption is, in Ritzer’s terms, “...simultaneously, something that is primal, ancient, recent, new and even revolutionary” (2014: 19).

In the following, we first discuss relevant consumption theories, multiple layers of meaning intertwined through fashion consumption, fashion consumption behaviors in Korea and China, and the differences among material, immaterial and symbolic prosumption in the Web 2.0 era, before explicating our research methods and findings.

## **Convergence of Consumption Theories in the Case of Fashion**

Before the close of the Second World War, key social theorists' interest in consumption studies had a **productivist bias** (Ritzer, 2014: 9) and was primarily linked with the normative critique of leisure and luxury neglecting its sign-value (Ritzer, 2010; Warde, 2014). In Marx's perspective, consumption should always concern about a commodity's use-value, and he viewed it as being intentionally exaggerated as a form of false consciousness by the capitalists through which human needs and desires were blurred and given a common price tag (Bauman, 2007). In other spheres of the social world, what Veblen (1902) regarded as conspicuous consumption created an illusion of sustaining or uplifting a consumer's social class, and was perceived "at best trivial and at worst as a wasteful social practice." (Ritzer, 2014: 5). Following these economistic viewpoints, Baudrillard's (1981) work represented a pivotal shift to a **consumerist bias** characterising consumption studies during the "cultural turn", asserting that all types of consumption carried a metaphysical sign-value beyond use-value, and that the two had become mostly inseparable in the market—although one may also consider it as an oversimplified claim. Baudrillard demonstrated, through his studies of art auctions, that economic value was exchanged depending on the uncertain taste of the aristocratic class and to the largest extent based on sign-value alone, signifying a radical shift to the study of "norms, values and meanings associated with a society dominated by consumption" (Ritzer, 2010: 16).

Echoing both "economistic" and "cultural" turns of consumption theories, fashion consumption is a **unique case** that not only comprises the *material* (e.g. a wearable piece of clothing) and *immaterial* (e.g. the design concept) aspects but also manifests a *symbolic layer* (e.g. the cyclical notions of "fashionability"), supposedly leading the consumer to different sorts of satisfaction (Barnard, 2014; Rocamora and Smelik, 2016). These multiple layers of meaning and usage are intertwined, ranging from *intuitive material needs* such as bodily protection, camouflage, comfort, decency and other pragmatic functions (Evans, 2003) to *normative social needs* defined by social norms and a need to conform to the "uniformity" defining a particular group (Aspers, 2010; Simmel, 1904/1971). One's appearance is a major instrument in the social construction of identity

and for interpreting “...the connections between her/his sense of her/his personal identity and the social identity” (Crane, 2000: 13). *Cultural stereotypes/needs* influence how one chooses to style oneself based on age, body type, class aspirations, cultural affiliation, educational level, ethnicity, gender, marital status, occupational role, sexuality and perhaps even religious faith (Entwistle, 2000; Tse, 2016b). Feeling young or mature, attractive, confident, excited, unique, respected, relaxed and so on can bring *psychological gratification*. Fashion, as distinct from mere apparel, contributes to all of these. Such viewpoints, all together, challenge any simple top-down or bottom-up theory of fashion consumption (Tse, 2016a). On the one hand, they contest the purely economic explanation and moral condemnation of consumer behaviour, highlighting how fashion as mass-produced goods can expand one’s cultural experience, be used in personal self-expression, and established social relationships; on the other, the manifold layers of fashion meaning also remind us to look into the sociocultural, economic, material and habitual aspects of fashion consumption, rather than just embrace an expressivist stance (Warde 2014).

### **Fashion Consumption Behaviours in Korea and China**

Highlighted by disparities in terms of values and beliefs that stem from China and Korea’s distinct sociocultural and socioeconomic agendas, Chinese and Korean fashion consumers are motivated by *different* factors. Based on the socialist values infused in the Chinese population since the Cultural Revolution in 1960s and 1970s, Chinese people “consumed the same type of music and movies, read the same books... regardless of their different combinations of economic and cultural capital” (Zhang, 2017: 647). However, with the country’s economic reform in 1978, its economic system focused on “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” (Zhang, 2017: 648) and Chinese locals were highly inclined to purchase branded fashion goods as symbolic of their lifestyle attitudes (Zhang, 2017). Distinctively developed from their individualised cultural repertoire, Chinese people ascribe to both Chinese and Western values in eliciting hybridised consumption patterns and behaviour, intermixing traditional ideas of *guanxi* (cultivated relationships or social connections) and *mianzi*

(face – reputation and dignity) with materialism and capitalism (Chen and Kim, 2013: 30; Zhang, 2017: 648).

While consumer behaviour in China is driven by one's individuality, Korean consumers' fashion choices emphasise a sense of belonging to their peers and proximity to celebrities (Park, 2015). When it comes to fashion, Koreans are much influenced by its own popular culture, notably the nation's celebrities and the apparel items they showcase in television dramas and movies (Hong and Kim, 2013; Park, 2015). As pinpointed by Park (2015: 126), "Korea is a country where not only teenagers and youths in their twenties look up to celebrities..., but older generations keep an eye out for which famous person wears what, too", indicating a strong sense of in-group culture as an avid trait of Korean fashion consumer behavior.

### **Consumer's Agency in the Web 2.0 Era? Rethinking Fashion Prosumption**

Pioneered by Toffler's prediction of the rise of the "prosumer" and the breakdown of the producer-versus-consumer binary relationship as an integral part of the social transformation and changes in lifestyle and culture (Toffler, 1980), various scholars had discussed the progression from all power resting with the producers and nothing with the consumers to be accelerated by technological developments which today connect all members of the network (seemingly) equally and enable "collaborative, user-led [digital] content creation" (Bruns, 2008: 6), among other discussions and extensions of the concept (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Büscher and Igoe, 2013; Ritzer, 2014). Web 2.0 technology has enabled new forms of digital consumption with active participation as a vital element of the process (Beer and Burrows, 2010). These insights motivated numerous scholars to study the different digital platforms and tools involved in the process (e.g. Laughey, 2010; Büscher and Igoe, 2013; Morreale, 2014). Following this participatory logic, consumers supposedly have increased power to become prosumers partaking in fashion's material, immaterial and symbolic production: ordering bespoke fashion online, creating a fashion design on one's computer digitally and materialising it with a 3-D printers (Ritzer, 2014), or to co-create and change others'

perceptions on what is “fashionable” as an alternative to the mainstream fashion discourse manipulated by fashion producers in the traditional model.

Other empirical fashion consumption studies suggest intricate exchanges and interactions between fashion producers and consumers, and many did highlight *consumer’s agency* across the material, social and symbolic worlds. For example, in their ethnographic study of Thai fashion market, Arvidsson and Niesson (2015) suggested a considerable consumer agency and involvement in innovation and trendsetting, for there is an active, continuous socialisation and interaction between designers and consumers in the Bangkok street markets. The direct social exchange between the two agents was observed to be important for consumers to exert influence, where “the density of social interaction that characterises the fashion markets and the social proximity between designers, consumers and even producers” (Arvidsson and Niesson, 2015: 122). In Aspers’ ethnographic study of the EuroAmerican fashion markets, he concluded that both the competing counterparts and consumers participate in dissenting the order amongst the brands through an *interactive* rather than an action-reaction process (Aspers, 2010: 40). Competition drives fashion brands (producers) to differentiate from each other not just on the basis of price and material quality, but also of brand identity and positioning narratives (symbolic fashion). Through fashion communications which “form and control narratives”, brands create ideal types of consumers whom they aspire to target (Aspers 2010: 39-42), and such interaction also results in ordering the consumers and their perceptions of the symbolic utility of fashion.

Going beyond a technologically deterministic approach, however, what is the true utility and significance of prosumption—as a theoretical concept—across various sociocultural contexts? To what extent can it apply to the three faces of fashion consumption—*material*, *immaterial* and *symbolic*? Although technological progress has caused a power reshuffle among producers, social agents and consumers in the age of “digital prosumer” (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), it is questionable who—producer or consumer—actually wields most power in the virtual space. We argue that the new media environment does not always enable all consumers to become active



prosumers of symbolic fashion, especially those who are geographically located out of the global fashion centers. The consumers are affected and motivated by *different* values and beliefs that stem from their distinct sociocultural and socioeconomic agendas, and in general lack the symbolic power to alter the flows of global fashion discourse.

## **Methodology**

This study is based on a series of focus group interviews with young Asian adults to understand their fashion consumption patterns. Merton and Kendall (1946) first used focus group in the field of social sciences and defined it as "... the explicit use of the group interaction to provide data and insights that would be less accessible without the interactions found in the group" (12). Apart from developing and stimulating new ideas through interactions amongst interviewees (Knodel, 1995: 8), focus group can also test the validity of a hypothesis generated from previous research studies (Yelland and Gifford, 1995: 257). This firmly aligned with the study's focus of examining prosumption and its validity in cultural contexts aside from the Global North.

Snowball sampling was applied to recruit the study's respondents. Three universities—one in Northwest China, one in East China and one in South Korea—were approached between December 2014 and June 2016 to recruit fifty respondents aged 19 to 28; half were Chinese and half were Korean; 25 female and 25 male; either studying at or recently graduated from a Chinese or a Korean university. The interviews were conducted in Hong Kong, Lanzhou, Shanghai and Seoul. We divided the focus groups based on gender, thereby minimising participants' unwillingness to discuss sensitive issues regarding fashion consumption with people of opposite sex. With interviewees being able to speak comfortably and openly, the depth of the data collected is enhanced (Yelland and Gifford, 1995: 258). According to the respondents, most of them came from middle-income families and frequently used digital technology and social media in their everyday lives.

Regarding the mechanisms of data processing and analysis in this study, research team members who were more familiar with the cultural context and spoke the native language of the participants in the respective focus groups [English (2), Korean (2) or Mandarin (4)] would be the moderators. The overall aim was to discuss, understand and compare the interviewees' interpretations of fashion as a notion, what influenced their fashion consumption choices, what contextual driving forces (both symbolic and material desires or rewards) and constraints to fashion creation and consumption were they aware of. To enhance inter-coder reliability, we took a team approach in terms of data codification and analysis, where the types of codes and themes generated from the focus group interviews were discussed, compared and fine-tuned amongst the moderators (Knodel 1995; Yelland and Gifford, 1995). This rendered the coding process to be more collective and less biased. After data codification, representative quotes labelled with the gender and pseudonyms of the respondents were selected and presented in explaining the results.

## **Research Findings**

### **Patterns of Passive Prosumption in Korea**

#### *i) Fashioning Individuality or Conformity?*

While Korean fashion styles are progressively perceived to stir up a global wave and symbolic impact (Park, 2015), the increased power of Korean consumers to actively engage in symbolic prosumption was not observed. Most young Korean consumers interviewed consistently emphasised that they aim to align with others rather than outshine them in style. For them, active symbolic fashion prosumption seeking to be different tended to be regarded as a moral deviation from proper social behaviour. That said, Korean respondents regarded fashion as an instrument in passively constructing their collective rather than individual social identity. Most do not feel comfortable deviating from the general style of their age, gender, parental guidance, cultural and social group unless it is for their jobs or special occasions consistent with the social expectations for their profession and occupational roles. This interactionally constituted act is strongly associated

with the trend by which Korean people first define their social status, then dress themselves accordingly. New fashion trends observed in the media, retail space and everyday encounters between friends also help Korean consumers to habitually “blend in” by dressing in a way which is conspicuously similar to others, attempting to maintain their outward socioeconomic status.

*“I don’t know if the unified fashion trend comes from our [Korean] **traditional** notion of how **we shouldn’t stand out**. It’s **often bad to stand out** and be different from others.” (Min, F)*

*“We wear things like a girl—a **good girl in social manner** or social etiquette... especially women, always think about that and fit [into] the standard... of **peer evaluation** in the community... there is **no respect for** somebody’s **unique style** of presentation or choice.” (Yuh, F)*

*“... because **my mother told me** that others will see [and] look at you [as] **weird or like a pervert** or something like that... what you like **should** be really **blending in with others**...” (Jang, M)*

Notwithstanding their general desire to “blend in”, Korean consumers do not simply embrace the strong association between fashion choice and proper social behavior. While our interviewees may feel safe in following the mainstream trend which cyclically determines what fashion items are offered (material) and their derived meanings (symbolic), they recognise that they sacrifice any proclivity for “edgy” choices. Most found the prevailing mode of fashion consumption constraining, some deemed it acceptable and normal, and there were a few who paradoxically rationalised it as an *active* and *consensual* form of symbolic expression. These responses and sentiments demonstrate what we discern as a **passive form of prosumption**.

*‘I have certain clothing that I would like to want more people could see... but **most of the time**... I **don’t want it to go viral [online]**...’ (Kim, F)*

*‘When we wear something eccentric, they [**family and friends**] will be like “oh you wear that?” They will say something. When I was young, I did not wear makeup on my eyebrows... I hated it at*

*the time, but nowadays, I do makeup because I feel like I have to do. It's kinda sad, but it's just a natural thing in Korea, I guess.'* (Gim, F)

*'Fashion use [in Korea] can be some kind of social structure... also a form of conformity to the social norms, but clearly expressing that you conform to a certain type of structure is in itself a type of expression, so I don't think it really clashes that much.'* (Moon, M)

*'When I was in Korea it was really interesting how I could spot so many people wearing the same thing. And I am not feeling sorry; there is nothing wrong...'* (Kim, F)

## ii) ICT Empowers Fashion Producers more than Consumers

Based on the respondents' views, under the globalising force of Korean wave, the traditional plethora of fashion styles in Korea has shrunk to a much more unified yet uncharacteristic trend, what they described as “a global fast fashion trend”. In physical and virtual spaces, the “prosumed” fashion preferences of these young consumers were actually shaped and structured according to their social group as well as by what was being offered by major fast fashion retailers/producers (Aspers, 2010), such as 8Second in Korea's case. It seems that their choices of material fashion were still highly limited from the production end, and their symbolic meanings were also strongly driven by the popular culture promoted and curated by mass and social media. In our discussions, no digital-savvy consumers consider themselves empowered by ICT to show their individuality through expressing a preference for an alternative style. Instead, the use of digital technology has predominantly reinforced the media's power as an Althusserian *ideological apparatus* and as a means of producer-initiated marketing and branding, rather than bypassing them. Together these “means of prosumption... that make it possible for people to prosume goods and services” (Ritzer, 2014: 15) shape symbolic fashion and reduce the possibility of “going astray” in the choice of fashion, empowering the producers rather than the prosumers-as-producers and prosumers-as-consumers. Interestingly, according to the respondents, many overseas Koreans (e.g. in Hong Kong and mainland China) continue to take up this trend of “fashion uniformity” via ICT—learning from

and dressing and wearing make-up alike the Korean celebrities and their counterparts in Korea despite being outside the country. In a sense, they “actively” seek information online and are constantly updated of the Korean fashion through traditional and social media, which they think they ought to conform to [e.g. the Korean celebrities’ “airport fashion/looks” instantly publicised by Korean paparazzi and fans online and widely circulated by the brand communication teams (Cheng, Leung and Tse, 2017: 98-99)]. Even the information flow has seemingly shifted from a product-push model to an information-pull model (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008), the observed *pattern of social conformity* reveals a **passive fashion prosumption** in Korea, particularly in the aspect of trendsetting and sharing, and can even be viewed as a symbolic force (first generated by the fashion producers and reinforced by the “prosumers-as-consumers”) reversely driving the diminishing material and immaterial difference among the offerings of branded garment retailers in Korea.

*“... so every brand is the same, only they are different brands... that makes every guy wears the same.... There are very few options for consumers, in this current situation.” (Ju, M)*

*“I wish there were many options in Korea because now I think I don’t choose fashion. Fashion chooses me... One fashion item trends in all of the shops, the entire Internet, all merchandise, all advertise one item, one size.” (Yuh, F)*

Conflictingly, most Korean respondents also considered the multitude of media platforms provides many style references, and they seemed to mainly get inspiration from (but not directly copy) certain “dress codes” or “sets” coordinated by websites or through social media. They perceived celebrities and opinion leaders, rather than individual consumers, as being able to provide guidelines for fashion and dressing. However, the way they followed the celebrities and opinion leaders and prosumed their fashion styles were not a straightforward act: it is less about what is fashionable and trendy to follow, but more about **what not to wear**, revealing another layer of the

**mechanism of passive prosumption** and emphasising the negative impact of deviating from the social norm.

iii) *Peer Influence versus Symbolic Shaping*

Contrasting the assumption that the rise of peer-to-peer modes (Bruns, 2008) will enhance individual consumer's potential influence as a prosumer-as-producer (p-a-p) (Ritzer, 2014), the Korean consumers felt unable to influence their friends in any way. As a result, Korea fashion consumption is seen as a *collective and negative act* (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). In the Korean consumers' fashion choices, the majority strive to fit in the current social norm pre-agreed by their **peer group**. The explicit and tacit peer pressure within their physical (rather than virtual) social sphere, as revealed by the informants' responses, is actually a *stronger* driving force to bond individuals to the mainstream trend.

*"I think in Korea, people look at the media and the celebrities **to see what does not fit in**. To see what is acceptable and what is not."* (Won, M)

*"... it's the **individuals who don't really have a chance to change** the way people think about certain items, **but** when it comes to **the media**, it just becomes trendy."* (Won, M)

*"But in Korea a lot of people really care about **how they appear to other people or how others appear to them**... it thus creates rather a unifying trend, a strong trend..."* (Min, F)

*"I think I am **more influenced by my friends, if everyone is wearing something** then I will think 'oh why is everyone wearing tennis skirts?' ... 'is it a trend?'"* (Liu, F)

In contrast to Ritzer's optimism, most Korean respondents in the study did not think that they were fashion influencers despite being well aware of the many online platforms available for studying and expressing (prosuming) trends and knowledgeable in fashion. Convergent tastes were evident, and again they were derived from a passive form of prosumption. Korean consumers did not view

trends as being created in any single part of the fashion value chain. Most considered ordinary individuals' influence on fashion styles as trivial without realising that they were constantly observing and following what their peers wore, underpinning a specific type of fashionability through the prosumption process.

*“I have [social networking] accounts like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but **I don't upload my pictures ...and I enjoy seeing pictures of and following my friends' or fashion celebrities' Instagram accounts.**” (Yuh, F)*

*“But then they **won't take [celebrities'] image straight into their everyday lives** because they know that celebrities are different from them. So they tend to **tone down** their colours and tone down the parts that stick out and scream 'I'm a celebrity!'” (Won, M)*

Also, consumers' “constructing-through-consumption” is reduced to negation of anything deviating from the current social and habitual norm (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016: 22). As our respondents elaborated, even fashion designers and celebrity opinion leaders can innovate only performatively within the “currently-acceptable range”.

### **Patterns of Passively Active Prosumption in China**

#### *i) Displaying Fashion as a Positive Act of Self-Expression?*

By contrast, the strong and constraining influence of social norms expressed by the Korean respondents was apparently not evident in the interviews with the Chinese groups. At a first glance, displaying fashion was treated by most respondents as a **positive act of self-expression**. Nearly all Chinese interviewees were very conscious and articulate about the ways they conceived of and prosumed symbolic fashion that was not predetermined by the brands (producers). During their discussions, many claimed to actively appropriate, twist and pluralise mainstream fashion to demonstrate a *desired* social identity or cultural affiliation, albeit within economic constraints. They

agreed that fashion choices are a **powerful means of symbolic differentiation** that sets up a visible boundary to cordon off the “unfashionable others” from the “fashionable self”.

*“I feel that [fashion] is the creation of each of us. Our creativity is unbounded. **China’s population is 1.3 billion, and there are 1.3 billion ways of thinking and creating fashion**” (Yu, M)*

*“Fashion is the way and the attitude for us **to communicate with the world... Fashion to the younger generations is an attitude of life.**” (Cong, F)*

*“... **personality match** [is important], it depicts the **social class** I am representing. That affects my **social relationships**... If you wear the same style as a famous online blogger, you can **easily fit in with the group.**” (Lou, F)*

Money was a constant economic (material) constraint and foremost concern on these young consumers in fashion consumption, but they nevertheless emphasised brand values and imagery as *more important* (symbolic) factors. The respondents claimed to purchase primarily based on a brand’s projected value (sign-value), which aligns with the particular socioeconomic class they felt the selected brands represent. Unlike the Koreans, the Chinese respondents explicitly ranked fashionable brands, but it was the social position of the consumers that somehow defines the ranking. Judging a fashion purchase, the Chinese respondents said they considered both the price tag and how “highly ranked” the brand was perceived to be. Intuitive material needs (e.g. comfort, bodily protection, dressing “imperfect” body shapes) were only occasionally mentioned as a major consideration. Rather, through symbolic prosumption, their active attempts to relate with high end brands and converge with the tastes of the wealthier class (or the salaried professional class, “with a household income somewhere between US\$12,000 and US\$33,600... tend to rent or buy an apartment with the help of loans... can afford domestic, and occasionally, international travel” (Zhang 2017: 643)) was, however, cited as a stronger driving force affecting fashion purchases among the mass consumers.



*“The key concern is the brand image... my feelings towards the brand image.” (Niu, M)*

*“Yes I agree...budget is important, but I will try my best to get a reputed brand within my budget.” (Wang, M)*

*“[Besides price], brands are also important. I can’t understand the rise of advion (an adidas imitator) and Peak Sport (imitating Nike) if it is not related to brands... Some insist on having cottage products, while others insist on getting adidas original products.” (Cong, F)*

However, the Chinese respondents disagreed that the boundary between producers and consumers is becoming blurred. While highlighting their ability in appropriating and pluralising mainstream fashion to create a desired social identity, most Chinese consumers in the study were simultaneously skeptical about the extent of their influence to fashion production system (material and immaterial), the larger fashion discourse (symbolic) and other consumers, undermining the empirical relevance of prosumption theory while pondering the overlapping effects of *economic, sociocultural and habitual factors* which constitute different levels of empowerment and create hierarchical types of prosumers. They regarded celebrities and KOLs as the “elite class” having more cultural, symbolic and “attention” capital (Cheng, Leung and Tse, 2017: 12) and thus power to mediate the influence of designers and brands. All interviewees recognised their role as subsidiary to that of the celebrities and KOLs—the “elite class” being respected as the prosumers of better options or interpretations of fashion.

*“I have zero influence on fashion... Fashion [influence] is too far away from me.” (Su, F)*

*“I think [the bloggers] have more knowledge on this and are more professional compared with us when defining fashion... Their opinions are important.” (Cong, F)*

*“For example, I like Yang Mi [famed celebrity in China]... I like her image, so I will follow the style like hers...” (Yue, F)*

*ii) New Social Agents but Consumers Wield the Power Shaping Symbolic Fashion*

Such consciousness of brands seeming to rank symbolic images which define or are defined by the elite class and consumer's aspired socio-economic status seems to confirm what the productivist theorists would view as conspicuous and wasteful consumption, being directly manipulated by the economy's production and traditional fashion producers. However, that may oversimplify China's fashion landscape where production and consumption increasingly interpenetrate. The Chinese respondents' perspectives reflect the *increasing influence of new social agents* who bridge between producers and consumers and enable prosumption (Rocamora, 2013). Via social media, designers, KOLs, political leaders, media celebrities, "micro-celebrities" and bloggers wield the significant power in shaping consumers' choices of fashion products by defining the derived *symbolic meanings* which supplement or supersede pragmatic utility.

*"... nowadays these [key] opinion leaders (KOLs) have manifested their significance, like those bloggers on Weibo. I feel that they are to a certain extent leading the trends... which are what we ordinary people in our daily lives can't really follow and focus on... they act like a communication medium."* (Ma, F)

*"Such as [what] President Xi Jinping [wore when] delivering a speech, the luxurious wedding banquets of Huang Xiaoming and Angelababy, and Nicky Wu and Liu Shi Shi's...their clothing styles, the brands they wore became an instant hit overnight and were being followed by the public... being circulated widely online... Just a few days after their wedding on Taobao we can find style similar to that worn by those celebrities... Fashion consumers will receive such messages and then consume the products, also passing on the messages to other consumers..."* (Niu, M)

Many Chinese consumers were well aware of the commercial collaboration between these social agents and the fashion brands/producers, but it did *not* undermine their trust in those prosumed and

mediated fashion styles by celebrities and KOLs. Why is that? In fact, many of them found it more approachable and useful than the guidance presented by Western or Asian supermodels (directly recruited by the brands) whose impeccable body shapes were just unattainable and incomparable.

*“When you pay attention to the offerings on Taobao you will discover a very interesting phenomenon. Within that [e-commerce] platform a lot of ‘Net Pops’ were born, and at this moment those [key] opinion leaders generate a great deal of influence.” (May, F)*

Some interviewees compared the role of “net-pops”—a unique kind of KOLs that is widely discussed on the Internet, but whose true identity may be hidden or fictional unlike traditional KOLs whose true identities are well-known to public—with that of traditional commercial media gatekeepers. They perceived that web 2.0 technology “liberates” ordinary consumers, such as the “net-pops”, in receiving, re-creating and prosuming symbolic fashion (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). The multifaceted and seemingly first-hand fashion content disseminated by the net-pops they contrasted with the forceful monologue of the traditional media through advertising, product seeding and many other promotional tools (Tse, 2015, 2016b). In today’s society, they felt that the utility of traditional media communications tools may today have been weakened (Tse, 2016a).

*“As for [traditional] media... they are **less acceptable than those fashion bloggers**. The bloggers not only try on the clothes themselves, but also tell us how to mix-and-match... when I buy a similar item but I don’t know how to pair it up with other clothes, and he [the blogger] matches it with some pants with a specific style, and then I am guided. In this respect, **traditional media are much more rigid and outdated.**” (Ma, F)*

Some Chinese interviewees reflected on the fast reaction of fashion suppliers, particularly the e-tailers and individual sellers on Taobao (the largest e-commerce platform/e-shopping website in

China owned by Alibaba, similar to eBay and Amazon) (Tse and Tsang, 2017), to pop culture and to the “privileged” fashion consumers who have strong influence in society in other ways. ICT enabled the fashion producers and retailers in China to replicate the freshly propagandised styles and resell them to the market within a short lead time. The symbolic fashion meanings originated from these key opinion leaders highly ranked on the social ladder (for instance, the styles of President Xi and the first lady) are obviously not manipulated by these producers. Politically or economically powerful persons being idolised is not something new, but studying their fashion style and spreading the information directly to the other end consumers involves a lot of surveillance work in tandem with brand knowledge, indicating a different “means of prosumption” which renders different levels of empowerment among Chinese prosumers.

To sum up, the sophisticated ICT infrastructure in China privileges only a small group of web-savvy fashion consumers, bloggers and net-pops in disseminating opinions and influences. They are the few ones enabled to effectively curate and monitor the social dissemination of symbolic fashion. However techno-savvy s/he is, not every fashion consumer can become a “prosumer”.

## **Conclusions**

Tracing the theorised increased consumer power in the prosumption process and its evolutions and manifestations in various social contexts, we have extended Ritzer’s reconceptualised idea of prosumption beyond the Global North, and reassessed the divergent producer-consumer dynamics in two East Asian fashion consumption markets undergoing different cultural and social trajectories. Strongly influenced by web 2.0 technology, we have examined how the two groups of consumers differently and cyclically interacted with the existing social structure, cultural values and other emergent social agents, such as buyers, KOLs, media gatekeepers and the non-human technologies including various types of social media platforms and algorithmic setting. In our analysis, we have also recognised the overlapping effects of economic, sociocultural, habitual and technological

factors which constitute different levels of empowerment and create different types of “prosumers”, most of whom could merely engage in a passive form of fashion prosumption with its material, immaterial and symbolic facets all come into play and interpenetrate.

In both Korea and China, the young consumers expressed mixed feelings in prosuming fashion in their own cultural and social contexts. Most respondents did not consider themselves fashion prosumers who were actively interacting with other players in the fashion market and affecting material, immaterial and symbolic fashion production on a macro-level. Korean consumers did not view trends as being created by consumers or any single social agent of the fashion value chain, whereas the Chinese ones did consider specific social agents as most influential in shaping fashion meanings, and that did not exclude the existence of prosumption. The very same respondents were well aware of the dynamic interaction between the traditional fashion producers and **emerging social agents**: bloggers, media celebrities and other KOLs, and traditional consumers (themselves). They have rendered several social agents, especially bloggers and other KOLs, as having a strong influence to them as end users of fashion (prosumers-as-producers). And that influence extends to the traditional producers as well. This demonstrates a power reshuffling among fashion producers, new social agents and consumers, also rendering hierarchical types of prosumers.

In the Korean context, “peers” deserve further discussion. Peers are a collection of indifferent consumers who are supposed to have no influence in fashion matters according to the respondents. But these indifferent consumers are somehow unified to form a stream which gathers momentum, absorbs more consumers and eventually **habitually** defines fashion norms. They affect the whole market and shape daily consumption behaviors, rendering a passive form of prosumption. **Economically**, money was a constant and foremost concern on both Chinese and Korean young consumers in fashion consumption, but the Chinese respondents deemed symbolic/cultural factors as more important, reflecting their active attempts to use fashion objects as signs to construct an image of their aspired superior/elite class, whereas the interviewed Korean consumers often

engaged in a more passive form of (symbolic) fashion prosumption seeking to be similar to their peer groups and those from the same social class, avoid morally deviating from proper social behavior.

**Technologically**, through the social media communities, fashion consumers' needs and wants are constantly shaped, altered and negotiated; certain normative social needs, cultural meanings and psychological gratifications can be twisted or magnified, sometimes by the "camouflaged" producers and sometimes by the prosumers-as-producers and prosumers-as-consumers themselves who amplify the ideological values online, putting general fashion consumers under an even more confined scrutiny and passive position in the consumption or "prosumption" process. Social media has facilitated prosumers' establishing more of a continuum between the industry's production and consumption sides, particularly in the case of China. Today's KOLs gain influence and reach differently from the traditional celebrities who obtain their fame from their socioeconomic status or through the entertainment businesses covered by mass media. Particularly in China, KOLs are perceived as empowered *elite prosumers* who adeptly acquire related fashion information and skills to create a personal fashion image. That group is pioneering the current shift towards prosumption. Some interviewees preferred the information that these prosumers provided over traditional media messages, especially when they felt that a traditional medium has been directly controlled by major fashion producers. We argue that, among the digital-savvy consumers, only the "elite prosumers" are in a privileged position to prosume fashion—those who have professional skills, low opportunity cost and are highly motivated to generate shared value for and among themselves; the "means of prosumption" are the structures that facilitate varied types and levels of prosumption (Ritzer, 2014: 15).

However, we do not intend to dichotomously stereotype Korean consumers as "conformists" and Chinese consumers as "expressivist". The Chinese interviewees were not always aware of the fact that fashion prosumption, as a positive act of self-expression, interplays with other sociocultural, economic, habitual and technological factors. Also, the uprising group of "active"

prosumers in the Chinese market is small in size and, in many ways, collaborating with the traditional fashion producers, who indirectly yet more strategically manipulate the mass of consumers much as they have done with the traditional media (Tse and Tsang, 2017). Notably, they are now progressively controlled by the traditional producers through commercial sponsorships without undermining fashion consumers' fond feeling of them. Indeed, such tacit manipulations have become a common practice in fashion industry, and inducing a KOL to generate a positive comment which effectively boosts sales might be even cheaper than traditional promotional strategies (Indvik, 2016). Such camouflaged top-down manipulation from the fashion producers may thus persist even as the industry's channels transform. Producer influence does not vanish, but simply becomes more sophisticated, often masquerading itself as prosumption stirring up quasi-consumer-oriented fashion trends, rendering fashion consumers in China passive prosumers.

As our critical examination of the new and differing orders of fashion consumption in Korea and China reveals, **in neither case** has (active) prosumption yet been explicitly established today. The interviews confirm that, fashion prosumption is apparently *perceived* to become more pervasive in China. However, there are limitations on ordinary fashion consumers' ability to become influential and to reject invisible control from the production side due to the existing social structure, cultural values, and habitual consumption patterns even amid the rise of ICT. Different perceptions of fashion and role of new agents in fashion narrative construction demonstrate the importance of cultural/social specificity over the assumed unifying notion of empowerment and individualisation enabled by fashion prosumption. The similar response of perceived personal (outward) influence of users, on the other hand, suggests the lack of (perceived) empowerment despite the increasingly network-based communication enabled by digital technology and access of such, as suggested by many scholars (e.g. Toffler 1980; Jenkins 2006; Bruns 2008; Büscher & Igoe, 2013; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2014). In fashion prosumption, the roles of trendsetting and narrative construction remain exclusive to technologically (skills and know-hows) and socially (extent of social network ties with "traditional fashion producers") privileged end-users/prosumers.

Apart from the privileged few, most consumers remain more passive in fashion prosumption. While Chinese interviewees demonstrated a larger degree of self-expression and appropriation, they do not see themselves as significant players in influencing material fashion production and re-defining symbolic fashion on a macro-level, which renders themselves passive or passively active prosumers. These supposedly knowledgeable and reflexive consumers were not always conscious of how their practices and beliefs were shaped by the automatic, reactive and habitual aspects of fashion consumption.

To conclude, we challenge the universality of prosumption as a theoretical concept across different cultures, political-economic models and product categories. While Ritzer (2014: 19) foresees “fewer and fewer activities will exist near the (prosumption-as-) production and (prosumption-as-) consumption ends of the prosumption continuum [but] move more towards the middle of the continuum... **‘balanced prosumption’**”, we have demonstrated the multifaceted relationships and dissimilar types of power balances between the two poles of the fashion prosumption continuum. Fashion prosumption—as a unique case blending material, immaterial and symbolic consumption—is still largely subordinate to production, especially among young Chinese and Korean consumers geographically located out of the global fashion centers.



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