

Fashion and the City – Social Interaction and Creativity in London and Milan

Dr Serena Vicari

Università di Milano-Bicocca
Via Bicocca degli Arcimboldi 8
Milano 20156
Italy

Tel: +39 (0)2 6448 7525
Email: serena.vicari@unimib.it

Co-Author: Dr Marianna d'Ovidio

ABSTRACT

Creative industries (design, fashion, art, entertainment) are key to the economic growth and renaissance of contemporary cities. Characterized by a constantly changing environment, high levels of uncertainty, and tacit knowledge (Scott 2000), these industries show patterns of concentration in urban quarters; the relevant literature suggests that such concentrations reflect the critical role played by frequent face-to-face interaction and exchange among individuals, organizations and institutions in fostering innovation and creativity.

On the basis of previous work (d'Ovidio 2005) and current research, in this paper we focus on the interactions among fashion designers in Milan and London, two international fashion capitals. To begin with, we show that firms in these cities are tightly clustered in specific quarters and that designers engage frequently in face-to-face interaction, which they consider to be very important. We then discuss the different functions of interaction in relation to the construction of trust, the building of in-group reputation (Storper and Venables 2003) and the nourishment of creativity (Molotch 2003). In a third section we present the diverging patterns of interaction in the two cities; despite the strong economic performance of this industry in both cities, the “creative field” is perceived to be much more vibrant in London than in Milan. We discuss these different patterns with respect to complaints regarding a perceived decrease in the creativity of the Milanese designer community and clear signs of crisis in the local fashion industry. Finally, we advance a tentative explanation for the relative weakness of the Milanese creative community based on the absence of links with other fields of creative production in the city; we argue that this absence is in turn due to the lack of effective institutional actors.

Key Words: face-to-face interaction; creativity; fashion