

TURKEY: THE INTERFACE COUNTRY BETWEEN ORIENT AND OCCIDENT AND THE FASHION VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Roberta Weiland¹, Cristina Broega¹, Silvana Mota Ribeiro²

¹*University of Minho, Department of Textile Engineering, Guimarães, Portugal*

²*University of Minho, Department of Communication Sciences, Braga, Portugal*
betaweiland@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Turkey is an interface country between Eastern and Western cultures, therefore representing an excellent “case study” concerning the meeting of cultures: Occident versus Orient, Europe versus Asia. This paper takes an approach to fashion as a social and cultural phenomenon, therefore capable of communicating and reflecting the cultural identity “traces of a given society. Knowing the importance of visual codes for the communication of the fashion message, we conducted this work, where the image of fashion is the “central pivot” to understand the cultural identity of this Country.

Key Words: Turkey, orient-occident style, fashion communication, fashion photography.

1. INTRODUCTION

Turkey is a cosmopolitan country, rich in history, as the Turkish writer Kaskiner states: “We are, today, in a possession of an extremely rich variety of cultural treasure, exhibiting diverse artistic influences that the Turkish clans scattered on a vast territory underwent thanks to their contacts with different societies and civilizations wherever they went; while they let themselves be carried away inspired by the arts of the countries they conquered, they did not fail to give a new direction to the local decorative arts thus giving rise to new and different styles” [1]. But how can we find the differentiation between Occident and Orient in nowadays Turkey?

In the verge of integrating the European Union, we know that “the Country is developing in order to adapt to the conditions to become EU member” [2]. Hungues complements: “Overall, the combination of rapid but incomplete political reform with strong internal debate over the future development of Turkish society, shows that Turkey is going through a period of radical change. This dynamic of political and social change will be most likely to continue if it is underpinned by opening of negotiations with the EU” [3]. Would these adaptations and reforms, be able to influence the culture and show up in the fashion visual communication as “traces”, symbols and signs in fashion photography?

Departing from an approach to fashion as a social and cultural phenomenon, therefore capable of communicating and reflecting the cultural identity “traces of a given society, we develop this work aiming to identify the actual identity of the Turkish fashion, “behind” the fashion photography medium present in Turkish fashion magazines, outdoors and web sites. These images include Turkish branding fashion campaigns, as well as Turkish fashion editorials.

Fashion photography is considered an important tool to interpret “the cyclic movements that contemplate and cross the fashion world, supplying images as important trail for a different point of view, influencing fashion trends, beauty values and behaviours.(...) The fashion pictures are published and distributed by the media and have different identities that reflect in the complexity of the interpretations of the content through subtle meanings that can be embedded in the pose of the model or in their own clothes. On the mimetic aspect, the fashion

pictures reproduced in the magazines and newspapers impelling the imitation – a democratization of the desire, contributing to the construction of the individual and collective subjectivity." [4]. Respini emphasizes that “fashion photography is a compelling mirror of this time. It reflects the moment in which it was made, and it has always been an excellent barometer of what’s new. These pictures tell us not only how women looked in a certain era – their hem lengths, lipstick shades, and hairstyles – but, more important, how they wished to look, live, and act. (...). The styles, mores, and worldview of an era present in pictures created by an industry programmed to the eternal now.” [5]. Castilho and Martins complement with "the valorisation is undeniable, the persistence and permanence of the visual language as a vital source of communication in the contemporary world. According to this, fashion should be recognized as a structure for an a entire visual system of meanings, and it is therefore important that we have support to understand it as a vehicle of communication, just like language, and thus from this, build it as an expression of meaning from the co-presence of significant language (...) Therefore, what is the most appropriate for the fashion analysis is the result of the visual codes work and gestures that collaborate to build the communication through it" [6].

Knowing the importance of visual codes for the communication of the fashion message we conducted this work, where the image of fashion is the "central pivot" to understand the identity / culture of this Country.

2. METHOD

To build a foundation for this research we have created a survey. It was targeted to European high education students, of Portugal (degree in textile and fashion designer in the University of Minho, Guimarães) and of Italy (European Institute of Design of Milan). In this survey there are asked questions regarding their level of knowledge about Turkish country and involvement with fashion, how the fashion magazines (e.g. Vogue, Harper’s Baazar, Elle...) are present in their daily life, how they interpret the fashion photos, how do they “see” the Turkish Fashion, and five questions about general knowledge about Turkey.

Additionally, the survey includes a sequence of fashion photographs and the participant is asked whether the picture is an European fashion photography or a Turkish one (Figure 1); after their chose, they have to answer why they select that image as being an European or Turkish fashion photography. Some of the possibilities of the answer are: the model, the background, the clothing, the model’s behaviour, etc...

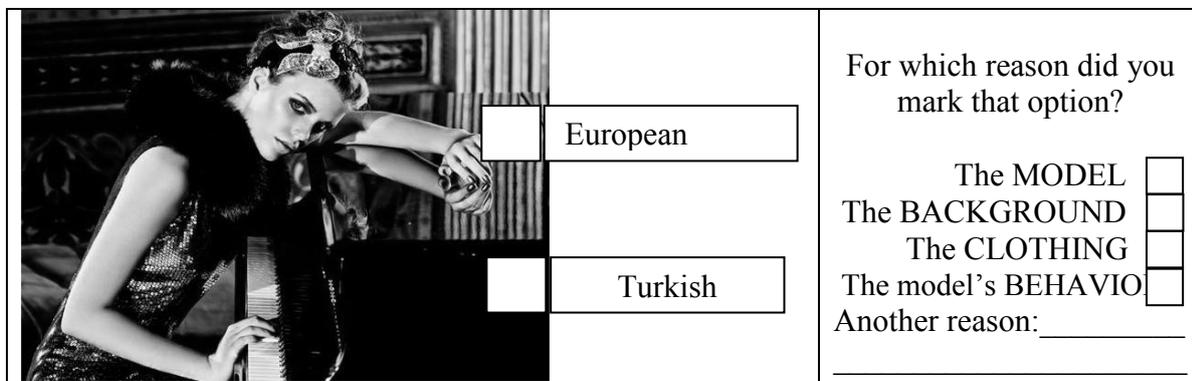


Figure 1: Example of fashion photos in the survey.

2. RESULTS

This research is part of a Master's thesis program. The data already collected has been treated with basic statistics for calculating averages, standard deviations and percentages.

So far, the collected and treated survey samples led to the following results:

The Portuguese sample from the University of Minho can be characterized as students of 25 years old (SDV 5.6%), 82.4% of the students are female and 61.8%, are attending a Master degree (38.2 % are under graduation students).

In the same way the Italian students from the European Institute of Design, are all (100%) attending the Master Degree, being the mean value of age of 25.3 years old (SDV 4.4%) and the majority are females (91.3%).

When inquired about fashion, results show that the majority of Portuguese students (42%) say that they follow fashion a little bit, while 38.2% of them affirm that fashion is not important in their lives (they don't follow it). On the other hand the Italian results show that more than half of the respondents (56.5%) follow fashion, and (21.7%) affirm to be "*fashionistas*" (start fashion trends). When asked how fashion magazines are present in their daily life, 47.8% affirm to by them monthly, while 39.1% buy them sometimes and read when they are available. In contrast only 9.8% of Portuguese students buy fashion magazines, 26.8% say they do not buy them, but always browse through them whenever they have the opportunity, and (24.4%) say that they don't care about those magazines.

Concerning the evaluation of fashion photography, the Portuguese sample says that is "useful information to know what is in fashion and maybe to buy clothes" (35.3%), while 20.6% believe that is god "as information used not to be completely out of fashion and to know what people are wearing". In Italian sample students, 31,8% say that the fashion photography is an "useful information to know what is in fashion and maybe buy clothes", but 50% believe it is "essential to evaluate and place themselves toward fashion trends".

When general knowledge about Turkey is approached, the majority of both Portuguese and Italian respondents knows that Turkey is a country in-between two continents (Europe and Asia), but 34.8% of the Italians and 29.4% of the Portuguese students believe that Turkey is situated only in Europe. When questioned about the religion of Turkey (with the highest incidence) both samples answer this rather correctly: Islam (61% of the Portugueses and 56.5% of the Italians). But on the other hand when asked about the capital of Turkey the majority of the respondents believe that it is Istanbul (58.8% of Portuguese and 69.6% of Italians) the right answer being Ankara (26.5% of Portuguese respondents, and 26.1% of the Italians answered correctly). About Turkish political issues, when asked about the government system of Turkey, most answered "I don't know", but 37% of the Italians students knew the right answer: Parliamentarist. Also when the question was about the most important character of the history of Turkey – Ataturk (the founder of the Republic of Turkey) – 85.3% of the Portugueses and 56.5% of the Italians didn't know this.

Moving to issues related to Fashion in Turkey, the question was "how do you 'see' Turkish Fashion?". The Portuguese majority (61.8%) believes that is it has an oriental style with some occidental features, but the Italian students believe the opposite: 59.1% answered "has a lot of occidental influences, but with some oriental features".

About the Portuguese and Italian respondents' perception of fashion photographs, we will comment about two specific examples of pictures present in the survey (Fig. 2(a) and (b)).

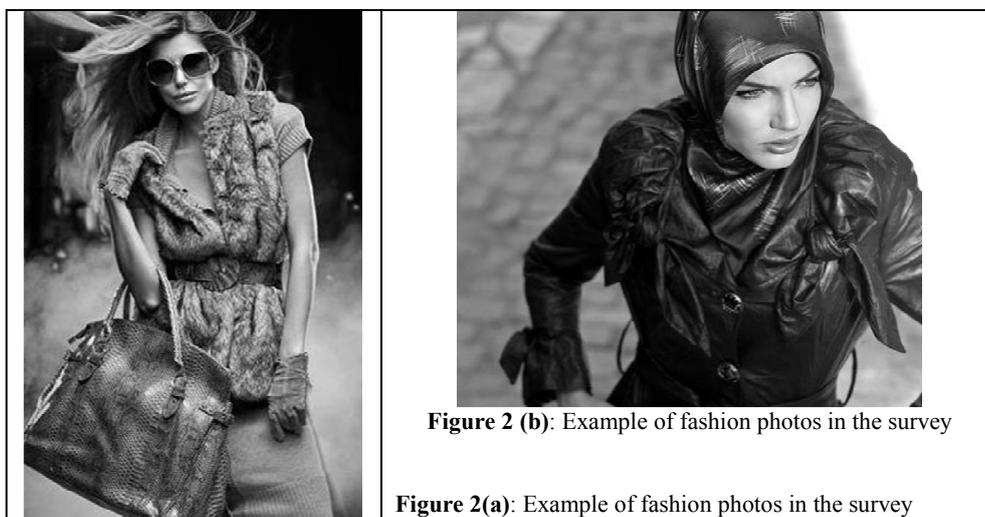


Figure 2 (b): Example of fashion photos in the survey

Figure 2(a): Example of fashion photos in the survey

Both of the pictures above are Turkish fashion photography. However, differences are noticeable. In figure 2(a) the woman is a blond, with a kind of sexy attitude (keeping eye-contact with the observer – behind of sunglasses). She is wearing a skirt, and on the top a vest made of fur, showing parts of her skin in an “inviting way”. The other image (Fig. 2(b)) we shows a more “serious”, covered woman in a fully buttoned black coat, looking away from the viewer and not confronting him.

About the origin of Figure 2(a), both samples believe in their majority it is an European fashion photography (97.1% of the Portuguese and 87% of the Italians). When inquired about the reasons for their answer, the Portuguese go for the clothes (46.4%) and the model's behavior (25%), while the Italians justify their choices relying on the model (40.8%) and the model's behavior (24.5%).

When it comes to Figure 2(b) both groups agree in their answers, saying that is a Turkish fashion photography. The Portuguese and the Italian students, in this case justify their choices based on the same features: the clothes (56.5% of Portuguese and 44.7% of Italian respondents) and the model (17.4% of Portuguese and 36.8% of Italian students).

3. CONCLUSION

Results show the level of knowledge that European Students (Portuguese and Italian) concerning the fashion culture of Turkey and illuminate their their perception of Turkish fashion versus European Fashion.

From the results above, we can see how similar the respondents are, in terms of age, gender and level of education, but, on the other hand, they present a different relationship with the subject fashion, fashion magazines and the importance of the fashion photography. It is clear that the students from Italy are more involved with these matters, when compared to Portuguese students. However, in what concerns their perceptions and the way they deal with the images (Figure 2(a) and 2(b)), results are quite similar. Even if the majority of Italians think that fashion in Turkey is more Occidental and the Portuguese consider it to be more Oriental, they show the same ideas about the images.

Nonetheless, as mentioned previously these results consist of primary research in the development of a Master's thesis, therefore the conclusions are not yet final.

It is important to explore how images of fashion photography are connected with the identity of a culture and the process of identity construction. The eye of the photographer, model photography, shapes, colors, clothing lines and trainers are components of an individual and social identity, created and run by fashion magazines. [7]

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