There is no doubt that fashion reflects society. Fashion mirrors the changing environment in which it is set. One of the reasons why fashion is intrinsic to culture and time is because it is constantly questioning its own identity. Cultures do not end, they evolve.

Fashion too evolves by definition. While historical facts cannot be changed, their description as a narrative can be altered to suit interests. Thus meaning, fashion can render its past to best suit her present and future interests. One such case is of the German fashion brand, ‘Hugo Boss’. Boss was responsible for producing uniforms for the Nazi Party during their reign of terror. While the uniforms emitted a dangerously elegant aura, they also depicted what fashion statements and popularity was built on. A piece of clothing was portrayed as true power.

Culture may be the best tool for the interpretation of fashion trends. What one wears is the poster or image of who they are. This is what makes fashion extremely powerful. In 1923, Hugo Boss founded his own clothing company in Metzingen, Germany, where it is still based. Due to the economic climate of Germany at the time, Boss was forced into bankruptcy. Hugo Boss back then was a completely different company as compared to what it is now. Shortly after the Second World War in 1947, the company tried to change its public perception. The brand discovered like so many others, the power of positive advertisement, meaning, establishing character traits that they espoused to. Hence, they advertised around the brand’s name, Hugo, and especially, ‘Boss’, which sounded ‘manly’ and exuberated control and efficiency.

It worked perfectly well from the advertising firms’ point of view. The brand’s advertisement till date tries to create an alpha male character and, ‘separates the men from the boys’. One can look at a Hugo Boss suit and evidently, one is more or less buying into their idea of the ‘Hugo Boss’ who is the alpha male. The Hugo Boss man wants to feel like the suit is a uniform and that a ‘boss’ (male) should wear the suit. In short, the brand tried to establish a connection with strong masculinity in a corporate dressing.
History, heritage and fashion brands

Marketing is all about signs and symbols, meaning thereby expressing the brand to create a very specific and certain impression. Luxury companies create an impression almost like religion does. The whole point of branding is to be very clearly defined. The values of a brand thus represents how the brand represents her history. Older fashion brands tend to use the heritage of their history to add value to the brand. Fashion is an unusual case where the founder’s name is on the door, and brands like ‘Yves Saint Laurent’ and ‘Loro Piana’ epitomize this. The founding father may have passed away, but it is a responsibility for those who follow him to maintain the history and ethos of the brand. Older fashion brands have a history of making a particular item that is the best in the business. This garment, in turn, grants them international coverage and recognition. If a brand does not have heritage it is hard to establish credibility, authenticity, and trust. All iconic brands are likely to talk about who founded them and that they are likely to talk about who started the business. Not surprisingly they have launched heritage campaigns, reminding the consumer of their history and achievements. But this does not happen with Hugo Boss.

Hugo Boss in Nazi Germany

Hugo Boss for a long time remained silent about their history. During the Nazi years and in the late 1990s, it became known that the company produced SS uniforms and that the company had employed around 150 forced laborers to meet the growing demands. This is linked to the company’s history in 1931 which changed when Hugo Boss became a member of the Nazi Party. As more people joined the political movement, more uniforms were needed and companies like Hugo Boss got the jobs of producing them. Tailoring for the Party became Hugo Boss’ main business. From 1937, Boss’ only business were the uniforms they produced for the party. The Nazis created a huge demand for uniforms and all ministries in the Party had their uniforms. Note, and remember, that a totalitarian regime sets up and opens up new possibilities. A company can make big deals and sign contracts which are huge in terms of their impact on jobs and contracts. Companies that collaborate with the regime as Hugo Boss did was because of Hitler. Hitler promised not just that he would make Germany ‘Great Again’ but that he would bring jobs back to Germany. He would revive the industries in Germany and many of those businessmen saw an opportunity in the Nazi Party as a possible partner.

The future of Hugo Boss

The reason why fashion is so interesting is because it constantly questions its own identity but I do think fashion speaks volumes about people's inherited histories, societal values, and taboos. Hugo Boss with its very specific historical situation is a good example of this. It faces a documented chapter of its history as an accomplice to one of the worst totalitarian rulers. It is now grappling with the heritage design of her past. It is unclear whether there is an opportunity for the brand to redefine itself as a fashion brand in this age. However, the company can still attempt to define the future. How it does so will be an interesting evolution to witness.

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