Fashion adoption behaviors of women in Manhattan related to spring 2012 apparel fashion trends

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Lee Honors College – Senior Thesis
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Introduction & Summary:

I have been a subscriber to fashion magazines since I learned how to read. Of course, my age determined the kind of magazine I was receiving each month, but for 15 years, I have been opening the pages of these magazines and learning - learning about the new books and movies the editors were enjoying, about up and coming models and designers, about powerful women who had made it in the fashion industry, and, my personal favorite, the new trends in fashion. While I do not rush to the store and buy a new wardrobe based on these new trends for the season, I do always keep them in mind, try to tailor my own wardrobe to what is supposed to be “in,” and purchase a few new things for my closet based on what I read in that latest issue. I believe that what you wear is a great reflection of who you are as a person, and even women who choose to adopt the new apparel fashion trends for the season will wear them differently, based on their personality. In this study, I wanted to understand some of the ways that women adopted the Spring 2012 apparel fashion trends and made them their own.

It would be impossible to study Spring 2012 apparel fashion trends for the United States in its entirety during the short amount of time I had for a research trip, so I worked on narrowing my focus to just one location, where I would be able to observe many people. In the world, there are four acknowledged fashion capitals, which include Paris, London, Milan, and New York City. (Emling, 2006) A “fashion capital” can be defined as “a city, which has a major influence on international fashion trends and is a key centre for the fashion industry.” (Gemperli, 2010) During
the course of this study, I looked at women’s spring fashion apparel trends for 2012, as defined in fashion magazines and other media outlets, and then compared them to what women in Manhattan were actually wearing, during the same season. This was done in order to determine how some women in Manhattan were adopting the trends to fit their own personal style aesthetics.

To identify what women’s fashion apparel trends were for the Spring 2012 season, I used the February and March issues from a variety of sources, including: Vogue, Elle, Marie Claire, Harper’s Bazaar, and People. Inside each issue, I focused my research on their “top trends for spring” or “how to wear this [spring] season’s trends” feature that they all had, or had a variation of. I also studied the advertisements for women’s clothing that appeared in the same magazines. After I studied the magazines, I picked four trends, as a sampling of all the trends, to focus on. The four trends I focused on were 1) colored denim, 2) florals, 3) tangerine/peach/orange tones, and 4) metallics.

My father, Norm Powell, and I went on a research trip to New York City from May 6 to May 12, 2012 and spent about 12-15 hours per day, on the streets, observing and taking pictures of what women in Manhattan were wearing. On the trip, a combination of field notes and photographs were used to record my and my father’s observations. The pictures were taken without disruption to the lives of the women who appear in them, and because the photos were taken in a way that protects anonymity of subjects, consent was not sought. Anonymity was achieved by
purposively framing the photos so that the faces do not appear. (I received approval for this approach from the Human Subject Research Board.) After I returned from New York, I set out to study the photographs and notes my father and I had taken, and was able to draw conclusions from this research.

**Research Question:**

Before starting the research for my thesis, I looked to answer the question: “How do women in Manhattan adopt the Spring 2012 fashion apparel trends and make them their own?” As a lover of both fashion publications of all varieties, as well as fashion trends, each season I look at what the newest styles and colors are going to be, and try to adjust my wardrobe accordingly. However, the way I adopt a trend will be different from the way others choose to adopt them. I wanted to understand how the trends are adopted and the different ways that women take these trends and make them their own.

New York City, and more specifically Manhattan, is one of the “big four” fashion capitals of the world, the others being Paris, London, and Milan (Emling, 2006). Within its 23 square miles, the island of Manhattan is home to a great number of different fashion trend and style groups, with noticeable differences among the various neighborhoods (“Manhattan: Neighborhood Highlights,” n.d.). The United States Census Bureau estimates Manhattan’s daytime population to be 2,874,003 people (Daytime Population, n.d.).
In the fashion world, spring is a time of great style renewal and an outpouring of new apparel trends from both fashion designers and fashion publications. This is due in part to the spring fashion weeks that happen each September, in the cities of the “big four,” and the designs and trends that editors take away from these shows (“Fashion Week: Overview”, n.d.). The purpose of this study is to study the 2012 spring fashion apparel trends and then look at the individual style identities of the women who live in these Manhattan neighborhoods. More specifically, it is to see how they take what is being offered as “new trends” for the Spring 2012 season and express them as a part of their own style. As stated above, these trends were determined from what was found in Vogue, Elle, Marie Claire, Harper’s Bazaar, and People magazines from the Spring 2012 issues. Due to the number of trends that are offered, a sampling of four trends were selected: colored denim, florals, tangerine/peach/orange tones, and metallics.

**Importance of Topic:**

As a fashion merchandising minor, this topic was of great relevance and interest to me. Each season, different magazines present different trends so the public knows the types of things that are “in fashion.” As a fashion merchandising minor, I wanted to see how people responded to the trends and the ways that they incorporated them into their already established style.

My peers at Western Michigan University would also find importance with this topic. As much as I have learned from my professors in these last four years at WMU,
I have also learned from my fellow students through many forums - from presentations we share in front of our classes, to simple conversations we have before class starts for the day. I share the common interest of understanding fashion adoption behaviors with my fellow students in my programs and I believe they would be interested to hear about my findings from this project.

In addition to personally finding it important and my peers taking interest, retailers and those who study consumer behavior would find significance with my thesis topic. Both retailers and consumer behaviorists study consumption behaviors, and understanding how women in Manhattan adopted the Spring 2012 fashion apparel trends may help them draw conclusions about their adoption behaviors in the future.

**Prior Research on Topic:**

Prior to leaving on my research trip to NYC, I did a great amount of research in order to better familiarize myself with both the Spring 2012 fashion apparel trends and also New York City. I wanted to make sure the fashion apparel trends that I based my project around were truly the overall trends, and not just take the word of one publication, so I studied different publications and issues/months. I started with the “People” issue from March 5, 2012. This magazine, while not specifically a fashion-based magazine, featured their “Style Watch” section with “Spring’s Top Trends.” I had a lot of magazines I was studying and I needed to start my list somewhere, so from this specific list from this People edition, I developed my four
trends that I would be looking for in NYC. The trends were floral patterns, tangerine/peach/orange tones, colored denim, and metallics. I then cross-referenced this list with the rest of the magazines I chose (Vogue, Elle, Marie Claire, and Harper’s Bazaar). Using post-it flags, I marked other indications of these trends from the pages of the other magazines. These apparel fashion trends were common throughout the other publications, and I went ahead and made these four trends the official ones I would be looking for in NYC.

After determining the four Spring 2012 apparel fashion trends I would be focusing my researching efforts on, I moved on to studying the island of Manhattan. I looked at multiple maps to get an idea of the different neighborhoods. From previous trips I have made to NYC, I knew that each neighborhood has a different feel and style to it, so I wanted to know where each of the neighborhoods started and ended. The specific neighborhoods I planned to visit and photographic were Morning Side Heights, the Upper West Side, the Upper East Side, Midtown, Chelsea, Greenwich Village, SoHo, Tribeca, and the Financial District. I also did research on the different neighborhoods themselves: their history, the people who have lived in each of them, and what style these neighborhoods have. Some of this information came from my prior knowledge – I had been to Manhattan four times before this research trip occurred. I know a lot about the city, but I wanted to know and understand specifics to help my overall thesis.
Methodology & Research Approach:

The approach I took with this thesis was hands-on field research. During my six days in NYC, there was never a time I was without my camera and notebook. I was constantly looking for women displaying the trends I had set out to photograph. Prior to leaving for the research trip, I mapped out the different neighborhoods in NYC that I wanted to visit. I used a map that I printed out from the Internet to section off the different neighborhoods in combination with a nicer laminated one I had purchased from Barnes and Noble. The paper version was my reference before we would head out for the day, but the laminated one was what I kept with me to help my father and I get around the city. We generally photographed one area per day, but, because we had access to the subway, we were sometimes able to cover more than one area in a day, or re-visit areas where we felt we needed to conduct more research and take more pictures. I used these maps as a guide, but I was always prepared to take a picture or write down a quick note, no matter where we were.

My camera, a Canon DSLR 30D, was my main tool for gathering my research. My father acted as a contributing researcher on this project, using his Canon DSLR 7D to assist me in gathering photographs. A goal of the research gathering was to ensure that subjects remained anonymous. The taking of the pictures reflected this. We mostly shot from behind or the side, rarely catching a subject straight on, due to the fact that that would show their face and thus who they were. Our shots show the subjects as close as our lenses and the situation would allow, in order to ensure that
an observer of the photograph could clearly see the trend they were wearing and how they were wearing it.

As advised by my thesis advisor, I kept with me information sheets about who I was and what my project was about, in case a subject protested their picture being taken and wanted more information on who I was and why I was attempting to take their picture. While I kept these sheets with me every day that I was in the field, I never had to use them.

I also took notes in a notebook, though not as often as I was taking pictures. I wrote down the places we visited, things I noticed, ideas of places we could go and photograph should it rain, and general things about the trends.

**Limitations & Key Assumptions:**

- Placing NYC tourists and NYC local women on the same field, since it was impossible to differentiate between the two with 100% certainty
- I could not visit each neighborhood all at the same time, so the timing of my visits may show some inconsistencies with each other
  - At certain times of the day it may be more working women and at others it may be non-working women
- The time of day that I was able to photograph could also have affected the way the trends were worn that I observe and the frequency with which I observed them
Certain trends may lend themselves to certain times of the day. Example: Metallics may be more popular to wear when going out at night instead of when dressing for the daytime.

- Assuming that what I photographed women wearing was a reflection of who they are and how they like to dress.
  - Assuming that they picked out their outfit instead of someone else helping them pick it out/picking it out for them.
- The limitation that some trends may seem more prevalent than others, but it may be just because it is more obvious.
  - Colored denim is a lot easier to see on someone than a metallic strap on a sandal.
- The time of year and weather often times dictates what we wear and how we wear it.
- Taking photographs from mostly behind a subject results in only a portion of an outfit being observed.

**Findings:**

After my research trip to New York City, I was able to study the different ways that women incorporated the Spring 2012 fashion trends that I was focusing on into their wardrobe. In my six days in NYC, I found and was able to study how the trends of colored denim, floral patterns, tangerine/peach/orange tones, and metallics were incorporated into different women’s wardrobes.
**Colored Denim**

Colored denim was by far the most prevalent fashion apparel trend of the four I was focusing on, that I observed while in New York City conducting research. However, this could be due to the fact they are very easy to spot on women, even when they are not very close in proximity to you. While most women that I observed decided on the full pant length instead of a cropped version, the majority of colored denim pants that I observed were skinny, 5-pocket jeans. The pants hugged the legs and were a slim fit throughout. They also were between mid to low rise in the way they sat on the women’s hips. I did not observe any high waist fitting colored denim jeans worn on women when I was in New York City. I did, however, notice women of all ages wearing this trend; from mothers pushing their child’s stroller to young teenagers, all ages took part in this Spring 2012 trend.

The range of colors on these denim pants that I photographed was very large. I saw all shades of pink, turquoise, yellow, and burgundy pants, for example, being worn around the city at all times of the day. I saw people in the morning wearing them and I saw people at night with them on.

Based on the photographs that I took of women wearing colored denim, I noticed that many of them decided to pair their bright colored denim with a neutral on the top. The neutral colored tops I observed were various shades of grey, black, and taupe. These neutrals came in the form of t-shirts, tops, and jackets. I also noticed women pairing their colored denim with traditionally blue denim on the top, as well
as pattern tops or sweaters, like animal print. In addition, there were a few bolder choices made by the women I photographed, and they paired their colorful denim with an equally colorful top and jacket.

The vast majority of women that I observed decided to wear ballet flats or sandals with this look. Ballet flats and sandals were not necessarily specific to the colored denim look, in that I saw women wearing ballet flats and sandals with other garments besides colored denim, but in the photographs that I have of women in colored denim, they are mostly wearing ballet flats or sandals.

Primarily taking photographs from the back or side does pose some challenges when trying to understand the ways women accessorized their colored denim, but I was able to observe some things. Most women I saw carried a purse with them, but like the tops many of them wore, the purses were neutral more often than not. The size of these purses really varied from large totes to small cross bodies, but the colors were generally neutral. On the cooler days, I also noticed women wearing scarves with their colored denim.

Many of the subjects I photographed conformed to many of the outfit examples I studied in the magazines prior to my research trip. Multiple styling pages and advertisements in the Spring 2012 fashion magazines showed colored denim pants with neutral tops. As stated above, many of my subjects decided to pair their colored
denim pants with neutrals on the top, whether that be in t-shirts, sweaters, or jackets.

See appendix for example “colored denim” photographs.

**Floral Patterns**

Flowers and the spring fashion season generally go together, no matter what the trends dictate, but this year, it was forecasted to be a bigger trend than usual. The weather during my research trip to NYC was on the cooler side, which could have had an effect on the amount of floral garments I saw while there. However, some New Yorkers were still able to wear this spring trend even before the weather really turned warm.

I saw floral prints worn in a few different ways, but layering was a theme among the women that I photographed. I noticed a few women wearing a floral tank top, which they layered with other pieces of clothing. One woman had layered her floral top under a jean jacket. Another woman had layered it over a different black tank top. Another woman also wore floral prints in a sweater, paired with scarves and boots on a day that was cooler outside. However, on a different day, I was able to photograph another woman wearing a mid-thigh floral skirt, paired with tights, boots, and a leather jacket. I photographed women wearing floral garments or accessories at all times of the day and on women of all ages.
I faced similar challenges as described above when studying the accessories that were worn with this trend. I found that, again, the carrying of a purse or bag was popular, but there was more color variation in the women’s purses that I studied. As stated above, on the cooler days, pairing a floral top with a scarf and jacket was a popular combination. I also photographed a few women that were not wearing the floral trend on their bodies, but, instead, were carrying it on their wrist or back in the form of a floral patterned handbag or backpack.

Similar to the way subjects conformed with their completed outfits and their colored denim choices, subjects also conformed to what the fashion publications published in regards to floral prints, on a smaller scale than with colored denim. The magazines showed bright floral color schemes in blues, reds/pinks, and greens, but mostly in dresses and skirts. The subjects I photographed also wore similar bright color schemes, but I did not see as many skirts and dresses during my field research. As stated elsewhere, while spring time, the weather was fairly cool during my trip, which could have led to a lesser amount of the overall skirts and dresses that I was able to observe and photograph.

See appendix for examples of “floral prints” photographs.

**Tangerine/Peach/Orange Tones:**

The trend of the tangerine/peach/orange family of colors that forecasters predicted to be the “in” colors of the season, and from the way I observed it being adapted by
the women I photographed, showed up in the widest variety of places of the four trends I was focusing on. I observed and photographed this color in tops, bottoms, outerwear, shoes, accessories, and even toenail polish. Again, there was not one specific age group wearing this trend, but instead, each age group in my photographs found ways to make it their own. I noticed younger people wearing the brighter versions of this color, and in a more obvious way, meaning these women were wearing more of the color, instead of using it as an accent. The older the wearer appeared, the more likely it was to be on the peach side of this color spectrum and wearing it simply as a top, instead of experimenting and pushing the limits with the color. For example, I photographed a younger looking woman wearing a bright coral trench coat, but I did not witness any of the women I judged to be older wearing a garment such as this.

For the women who chose to wear this trend as a top, I noticed that they usually layered it with a sweater or jacket over the top of it, and this over layer was usually in a neutral color. For the bottoms, I noticed some wearing colored denim, some in athletic type bottoms, and some wearing colored cotton pants. I photographed many women wearing this trend as a coat. As stated above, it was cool during my trip, so coats were necessary many of the days I was there. The coats were of the trench coat, zip-up with a hood, and windbreaker variety. A neutral bottom of a dark color, such as black, was prominent among my subjects. I also photographed one woman wearing a vest in this color trend, and she had layered it over neutrals as well.
Accessories in this trend were also popular among the women I observed. I saw purses, scarves, and even shoelaces all in these colors, and saw them occur multiple times. Again, pairing these bright accessories with neutrals was something I observed more than once. Tangerine/peach/orange colored nail polish was also something I observed in NYC, pairing these colorful toes with a neutral sandal.

Again, many subjects did conform their final outfit choices or accessories to what I studied in the fashion magazines before leaving for NYC. The fashion layouts I studied showed handbags, hats, jewelry all in this color family, in addition to tops, bottoms, dresses, and skirts. I saw numerous examples of these accessories in tangerine/peach/orange tones. In fact, I saw just as many examples of accessories in these colors as I saw clothing items.

See appendix for example “tangerine/peach/orange” photographs.

**Metallics**

Metallics were predicted to be a top Spring 2012 fashion apparel trend and one I selected to be an area of focus. However, I could not find much evidence of it when observing in the field. In general, metallic details on a person’s outfit are harder to identify, and when photographing, I found that women were less likely to be wearing metallic garments than some of the other trends I focused on. When I saw metallic at all, it was often a smaller detail on shoes or a purse.
Metallic shoe details were the most common metallic item I photographed. Rivet details on a sandal, or shimmery metallic straps on a flip-flop were both items I observed women wearing. I also noticed small metallic details on purses and handbags, either by the straps or in the zipper, or rivets on the front.

A possible explanation for this lack of observation of this trend was the time of day I was photographing. My photographs were mainly taken during the morning and afternoon, with some in the early evening. However, by the time the sun went down, it was too difficult to get a photograph of quality from the distance I was attempting to take them. Metallics may have been worn in ways other than I was able to observe as well as with more frequency than I observed them, but the time of day I was in the field was most likely another factor in why I noticed it so few times.

The metallic trend was the one area that did not reflect what I had studied before I left. The magazines predicted many accessories, jewelry pieces, nail polish colors, and dresses all in metallics, in addition to shoes. However, during my research trip, I observed and photographed women wearing metallic shoes, but nothing else. There are many different reasons why this could be which are highlighted above.

See appendix for examples “metallics” photographs.
Conclusions:

I was not quite sure what to expect when my dad and I left for my New York City thesis research trip in May of 2012. I had with me the knowledge of what I had studied about both the predicted spring fashion apparel trends and the island of Manhattan, my camera, my notebook, and the desire to understand how women adopt new fashion apparel trends into their everyday life.

While I cannot draw conclusions on all women or even all women in New York City from my research, I was able to make certain conclusions from my project. The first is that I was able to find and photograph women wearing spring fashion apparel trends in New York City. This may seem obvious, but this conclusion was important to draw in order to understand how the women wearing these trends adopted them.

The second conclusion that I can draw is that I was able to observe some level of trend crossover. For example, I observed and photographed orange colored floral prints, coral denim pants, metallic sandals with peach colored nail polish, etc. The magazines dictated the top trends, but because of the way they were presented (colors, individual garments, and prints that would be popular) there was a possibility for crossover between trends, and I was able to observe several instances of this during my thesis research trip.

The final conclusion is that, while I saw some similarities between the women I observed and photographed, there was not one woman who had interpreted any
trend in the same exact way as the other women. Women may have access to the same magazines and articles, receiving the same information about what will be popular, but each person decides how to put together their outfit and in turn, how they will display the trends.

I learned a great deal from this research project and the entire experience was a great conclusion to my time as a student in the Lee Honors College.
Work Cited


Appendix:

Colored Denim
Florals
Tangerine/Peach/Orange Tones
Metallics