

## A Funky-Formal Fashion Collection: Struggling for a Creative Concept in HUGO BOSS

*Kasper Tang Vangkilde*

### **Abstract**

In this case study, we follow a group of five young talented fashion designers in HUGO BOSS charged with creating a new concept for the brand BOSS Orange. The concept is to be neither formal nor funky but, precisely, funky-formal. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among these designers, the case describes in detail how the initial idea of a funky-formal fashion collection gradually grows into a more concrete creative concept for such a collection. In particular, it shows how the designers struggle to get to know the HUGO BOSS brands, to become truly inspired, to generate a compelling concept and, finally, to make a decision between competing concepts. These processes involve not just the talented designers but also, and not least, the Creative Director of BOSS Orange, making it evident how creativity in fashion is by no means an individual idiosyncrasy but rather a social phenomenon.

### **Keywords**

Brand, Creative processes, Evaluative practices, Fashion designers, HUGO BOSS.

### **Introduction**

In a meeting room inside HUGO BOSS, a group of five young talented fashion designers, the so-called Talent Pool, has just presented a fashion collection which is perceived to be neither funky nor formal but, precisely, funky-formal. All items in the collection have special features, an ergonomic cut, functional and eco-friendly fabrics, and are more widely aimed at both men

---

Page 1 of 17

Case Study #2  
Autumn 2011

---

© The Author(s) 2011

---

[www.cbs.dk/jba](http://www.cbs.dk/jba)

---

and women. More than six months of intensive work with many long nights have passed, and the five talented designers can only sit back and wait. The Creative Director of the brand BOSS Orange looks carefully at the collection, touches the various features and fabrics, tries on the men's jackets and coats, and observes himself carefully in the mirror. Right from the beginning, he has emphasized that he does not want to see just another fashion collection but that he wants the designers to come up with something truly creative and innovative. Now he breaks the silence: "What you have done here is highly remarkable. It is really exciting. It is very close to what I had in mind, and you have done a remarkable job in interpreting and realizing my vision." To be sure, the Creative Director is satisfied and impressed. The collection is "classic but different," he says. In this sense, the Talent Pool designers have not created a spectacular collection, but this is, in fact, only positive. The hard part is not, as the Creative Director puts it, to design a shirt with three sleeves and thus create something exceptional. Rather, the key challenge is to make changes and still keep a balance. "With all these elements," he therefore concludes, "I strongly believe that we have a very good opportunity to attract a new consumer to our brand."

In January 2007, the Creative Director of BOSS Orange initiated the Funky-Formal project. In HUGO BOSS Ticino situated in the south of Switzerland, a subsidiary within the HUGO BOSS Group, the idea of having a small group of talented designers employed for half a year to work on a specific project had been realized a couple of times before. This year, one Swiss, one Danish and three German designers had been selected for the group, because they had created remarkable fashion collections as part of their diploma work in acclaimed European design schools, thus being seen as talented, promising and creative young designers. For the first time, the Talent Pool project involved the top creative management of the company personalized in the Creative Director of BOSS Orange, the more experimental and casual brand in the HUGO BOSS brand world. Known to "... offer leisurewear for men and women who enjoy dressing in style and sporting surprising looks," as it says in the brand profile, BOSS Orange had not hitherto offered formal wear as part of its collections. Offering "... versatile fashion ranges with a rich array of elegant 'modern classics' in business-, leisure- and formalwear," such clothing belonged instead to BOSS Black, one of the other HUGO BOSS brands. So if BOSS Orange were to create formal wear, it had to be done extremely carefully in order not to interfere with the identity of BOSS Black. According to the Creative Director, there was, however, a still untapped market potential in creating a concept of formal wear, which would suit all those people who need to dress formally from time to time, but who nevertheless want to stand out and thus do not feel comfortable in formal wear, as we commonly know it. Would it be possible, in other words, to create formal wear which would not be entirely formal but

rather funky-formal? And what would such a collection look like? This was the challenge set before the Talent Pool designers.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in HUGO BOSS, especially among the Talent Pool designers, my purpose in this case study is to describe in detail how the Creative Director's initial idea of a funky-formal fashion collection gradually grew into the Talent Pool designers' more concrete creative concept for such a collection. Needless to say, this involved several evaluative practices, the most important of which I shall sketch out in the following, focusing on the processes of getting to know the *brands*, of becoming *inspired*, of generating a *concept* and, finally, of making a *decision* between a number of competing concepts. But let me now begin with the significance of the brands.

### **Getting to Know the Brands**

As soon as the Creative Director of BOSS Orange had introduced the Funky-Formal project to the Talent Pool designers, the supervisor of the project initiated the next step. Over the next two weeks, the designers were to thoroughly explore the HUGO BOSS brand world with particular focus on the three most prevalent brands, i.e. BOSS Black, BOSS Orange and HUGO. Based on various sources of information such as the official brand profiles, previous collections, etc., the designers created three mood boards – i.e. a kind of poster design or collage composed of images, text, fabrics and any other kind of object – which were to express the particular “mood” or “feel” of each of these brands. The mood boards were then presented to, and evaluated by, the Creative Director in an upcoming meeting. We shall, therefore, spend a few minutes in this meeting.

The first brand to be presented is HUGO. The designers ask the Creative Director to focus attention on the mood board for HUGO, while a short piece of rock/electro music by a band named Check is played on the computer. The mood board consists mainly of a number of pictures in predominantly dark colours, showing young people, urban environments and various kinds of objects, for instance, a laptop, a record player, and some barbed-wires. When the music stops, Lisa, one of the designers, says that HUGO can, in their eyes, be portrayed in three keywords: sexuality, youth and rebel. She explains that these words indicate that HUGO is at once avant-garde, retro, provocative, daring, urban and rock 'n' roll. Following this portrayal, she continues by saying that the HUGO consumer can be imagined as a single guy who lives in a loft in Pigalle in Paris, spends his holidays in Saint-Tropez or Tokyo, works as an event manager for a record company, listens to electro and lounge music, drinks champagne with raspberry and mango, and prefers sushi for dinner.

The subsequent presentation of BOSS Black follows exactly same structure. While we listen to the song “Santa Maria (del buen ayre),” a jazz and swing track by the Gotan Project, we glance at the mood board for BOSS Black, which displays an elegant and classic atmosphere created by means of a number of different pictures: for instance, a man dressed in a dark blue suit, a shiny Audi, the International Herald Tribune, a glass of martini, as well as some fairly exclusive pieces of furniture. Rebecca, another of the designers, explains that the essence of BOSS Black can be summed up in three keywords: intellect, grown-up and professional. These terms denote the fact, she continues, that BOSS black is, by its nature, sophisticated, exclusive, elegant, classic and minimalistic. It follows that the BOSS Black consumer is, contrary to the HUGO consumer, a married person who works as an editorial journalist or banker, lives in Zürich and goes on holiday to New York and St. Moritz, reads the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, prefers swing and jazz, and enjoys red wine and *haute cuisine*.

Lastly, we turn our attention to BOSS Orange, which is presented to the rock and funk sound of “Can’t Get Enough” by Infadels. The mood board is composed of pictures displaying primarily young people in various contexts, often dancing, jumping or being otherwise dynamic. Katja, yet another of the designers, explains again that the identity of BOSS Orange can be encapsulated in three words – spirit, child and feeling – as these capture the playful, open-minded, casual, adventurous, dynamic, as well as surprising, nature of this brand. The Orange consumer is, moreover, imagined as having a girl- or boyfriend, working as a graphic artist, illustrator or communication manager, living in Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, listening to funk and Britpop, drinking Desperados beer and eating shawarma. For his/her holidays, s/he prefers to backpack in Eastern Europe either by train or bus, as this is a good way to get to know the local people. However, the Orange consumer often stays in exclusive hotels where different kinds of foods, along with wellness treatments and massages, can be enjoyed. In this way, s/he is truly a multi-faceted character.

Now, it is time for the Creative Director to provide his feedback. He immediately zooms in on his own area of responsibility, as he stresses that BOSS Orange aims to attract a person who is very conscious of both his own background and the outside world. Contrary to the Talent Pool’s portrayal, BOSS Orange is, therefore, neither childish nor immature but highly mindful and reflective about developments in the world. He is so, however, in a relaxed manner, although this should not be confused with being childish. Consequently, it is truly difficult to predict how BOSS Orange will develop in the future, because it has to reflect on the present or, as the Creative Director has it, on the concrete spirit of the time.

By comparison, BOSS Black, the Creative Director continues, is much more static as the message of this brand always remains the same despite of the constant minor changes in the designs. HUGO, on the other hand, is more complex, because the brand is very avant-garde in the sense that HUGO strives to “think-outside-of-the-box” or “cross boundaries.” This is not to say, however, that the brand is rebellious, as the designers argued, because BOSS Orange is, in fact, far more seditious due to its reflective attitude towards the world. Although both HUGO and Orange are thus individualistic, they are so in different ways, since Orange is clearly more reflective than HUGO. Orange is, of course, affected by its history, but it will not simply accept what once was; instead, it strives to find its own perspective and be distinctive, which is its very soul. For this reason, Orange is always unpredictable and, while the HUGO consumer might be called a fashion victim, the Orange consumer is, as the Creative Director puts it, “not following, but reflecting.” As such, it makes perfect sense that s/he is backpacking one day and then checking into a five-star hotel the next. This, furthermore, indicates that the Orange person is not necessarily less rich than a Black or HUGO one but that s/he definitely does not enjoy flashing his/her affluence about.

During the meeting, I was truly overwhelmed by a number of impressions, not least by the fact that this evidently constituted a basic learning session in the sense that the exchange between the Talent Pool and the Creative Director served to further the former’s understanding of the latter’s ideas and thoughts about the HUGO BOSS brand world in general and BOSS Orange in particular. With the designers trying to describe the brands as accurately as possible and the Creative Director correcting the descriptions, their different structural positions within the HUGO BOSS organization were indeed made manifest. The key point seemed to be that the designers had to get to know the brands in detail, so that their work would fit the particular identity of BOSS Orange. As the Creative Director explained in a presentation which he gave inside HUGO BOSS Ticino:

What is most important for me is to have a clear vision. When we are talking about Orange, this means always having a movie in mind, a long story or a book, which is divided chapter by chapter, and every chapter is one season. Then it is, one season after the other, a matter of finishing one chapter and opening another one, but in the end it is the same book, the same story, which is evolving every season.

So, it is relative to say what is right, and what is not right. When you have a movie or a book in your head, and you are, for instance, in front of a fantastic [prototype for a new] shirt, maybe it doesn’t fit in your story, and then you simply don’t do it. Because what is important is that everything fits together. It is no longer about a single item – a single shirt, a single t-shirt, a single

piece of knitwear, or whatever – it is a combination of all the products together.

This spells it out quite clearly. Since the story or identity of BOSS Orange is so essential, it is obvious that the Talent Pool designers should thoroughly understand its specific features and attributes. The brand, in other words, thus functions as a kind of stabilizing framework in the sense that various ideas are pursued or rejected on the basis of their compatibility with the brand identity.

### **Becoming Inspired**

In the second part of the meeting, the designers went on to show a number of sketches and prototypes. All of these, they argued, were neither funky nor formal but funky-formal. Although the Creative Director listened attentively to their explanations, he was quick to tell them his overall opinion. “I have to be honest,” he began, already indicating his stance. “There is nothing wrong with each sketch and prototype but it is, indeed, not what I am looking for. What you show here are fashion items, some of which may be nice enough for a season or two, but this is not your task. What you have to create is a distinctive and durable *concept*; that is, a concept which may form the basis for several collections and thus extend beyond just one or two seasons. Your task is to change Orange in five years.” Clearly, this was not the response that the Talent Pool designers had hoped for, so the Creative Director hastened to elaborate: “You are one step too far ahead. You need to step back and create a durable concept within the overall funky-formal idea. Only when this concept is clear, should you begin to develop a range of exciting styles. This part is easy enough. It is the first part, to create the concept, which is the big challenge. And here, I have to be honest, you still need to work hard.”

Not surprisingly, all of the Talent Pool designers were rather disappointed. As they now had no clear idea on how to proceed with the project, they soon decided that they needed to get away from the office in order to find new inspiration. Early on a Wednesday morning in February, therefore, I joined them on a so-called inspiration trip to Milan. In what follows, I will give a brief account of our tour in the fashionable Italian city.

Having arrived in Milan, our first activity is to visit the Galleria Carla Sozzani in which the Maison Martin Margiela Artisanal Collection is exhibited. Since its beginnings in 1989, the fashion company Maison Martin Margiela has accompanied its prêt-à-porter collections with more artistic and extraordinary pieces under the name Artisanal. A selection of the most important of these is on display in the galleria: for instance, a waistcoat for women constructed out of broken porcelain, a jacket made out of sandals and

a motorbike helmet transformed into a handbag. The Talent Pool designers are really excited; the exhibition is both fascinating and inspiring. When I ask why, Katja explains:

It's just *so* cool when things are combined in a way that you don't expect – like, for instance, when sandals are turned into a jacket.

Each of the designers carefully looks at all the exhibited creations. Rebecca tells me that she is not searching for anything in particular, as she is more focused on taking in the creations in their entirety. This, she explains, may give rise to some good ideas to reflect upon and perhaps incorporate into a concept or design of her own. Louise adds with a big smile that it is partly a matter of stealing other people's ideas with the purpose of making them one's own. She hastens to underline that she does not, of course, really mean to steal, but rather to become inspired by observing and reflecting upon other people's ideas and creations in the light of the particular concept or style on which she herself is working.

The galleria is located on the famous address of 10 Corso Como, which is considered to be one of Milan's most fashionable spots. A bookstore as well as a store offering clothing, arts and crafts can be found right next to the galleria, so it is obvious that we should visit these stores before continuing. In the stores, the designers walk around more or less separately, looking carefully at all the different things. Not all of these are, of course, equally exciting, as some of them are almost ignored while others are seen as much more fascinating. The latter category includes not only bags, shoes, clothes and other fashion accessories but, just as often, or perhaps even more so, things of a quite different nature. Katja, for instance, is very interested in a book, which she finds really cool. She shows me a few pages of the book, in which pictures of various CD covers from hard rock or heavy metal bands are surrounded by pictures of completely different things such as a teddy bear, a flower, a puppet, a sunset or the like. She explains that she really likes this unusual and surprising combination, and Louise elaborates that it is always very exciting when you see something that you have not seen or thought of before.

After some time, we continue on to another museum, La Triennale di Milano, which is hosting the exhibition "The New Italian Design." This exhibition presents a wide range of designers in areas such product design, graphics, food design, interior design and much more and, once again, the designers are highly enthusiastic. As in the stores above, it is not only things such as handbags, pieces of jewelry and other accessories that attract the attention of the designers. Rather, it is more often the other kinds of designs which they find truly fascinating. One creation, in particular, called *Un Seconda Vita* – A Second Life – inspires Rebecca. At first glance, the creation

shows a broken bowl but the bowl is broken in a particular way so that each of the broken pieces has become a small plate. Rebecca tells me that she really likes this idea of something getting a second life, and she ponders whether it could be applied to clothing as well. She says that she will indeed think more about this and, in much the same way, several of the other designs become sources of possible new ideas, because the designs are found to be surprising and quite exceptional.

After a few hours, we decide to turn our attention to Milan's famous shopping areas. Since our plan is flexible, we spend the next hours going from shop to shop, looking at all sorts of things such as furniture, antiques, interior design, books, art, magazines, expensive designer clothes, more mainstream fashion and so on and so forth. In general, we visit all those stores which, for one reason or another, attract our attention; for instance, because of a great amount of weird stuff in the window, an unusual interior design or something else. In these stores, the designers explore and discuss a great deal of different things, and both the minor details and the overall construction of the things are examined. Some items of clothing are even put on in order to see how they really look.

We leave Milan here on the more general note that the designers' attention to things and people around them make them appear much like a kind of "urban hunters", tirelessly in pursuit of things, pictures, atmospheres and other constituents that could provide food for thought, so to speak. As they move from museum to museum, shop to shop, street to street, etc., the designers carefully observe and explore a wide range of people and things, activating all their senses in the process; that is, things are touched, materials smelled, people observed and so on. They go for hours without leaving much time for breaks, and with hardly any indication of losing their curiosity or focus on what the next store, the next museum, the next street or the next thing might bring. This resonates quite well, I think, with what another educated designer in HUGO BOSS, named Catherine, explained to me, when I asked her what she finds to be significant in order to make a good fashion designer. Although Catherine is not a part of the Talent Pool, as she works as the style coordinator of Product Development BOSS Black Shirts, her explanations may nonetheless be pertinent in the present context. Catherine explained:

I think that it is very important to always look at things in a new way and never take things as they are. You have to be really open-minded, and I think that you always have to, you know, look at everything that is happening around you, take everything inside in a way.

In another context, the Creative Director of BOSS Orange explained somewhat similarly:



As a person, I am very curious. I see how people are dressed, what they are doing, how they are, and what they want to communicate in the way that they are dressing. So, I am always looking left and right, and sometimes it is too much. I have to admit that it has happened more than once that people have come up to me and said: "Do you have a problem?" But the reason has always been that I was just attracted by a pair of jeans, a pair of shoes, or whatever.

When the Talent Pool designers move through Milan, a similar kind of acute attention to everything and everyone around them may be said to be turned on to its utmost level of intensity, as they carefully explore a broad range of people and things. As we have seen, a number of these things are perceived to be inspiring, because they are surprising, unusual, exceptional, wild, crazy, or the like: that is, somehow causing a stir and thus capturing the designers' attention. The things serve, in this way, as sources of inspiration in the sense that they contribute significantly to how the designers envisage a fashion collection. As Catherine furthermore explained:

I could also take that lamp over there and say, "Okay, this is my inspiration." You can get something out of it. It is no problem. You can do a collection with this lamp as an inspiration. It just has to be your inspiration. I could see, for example, big white tops, and then really thin trousers. It is just an example, and that would run through. And then this round shape of it, you could try to have this as a topic going through as well. I would do big tops with thin trousers, and then I would find something else. I think that this round shape could be included as well.

This description could just as well, I think, be said to characterize the Talent Pool designers' engagement with the various things in Milan. Just as the lamp prompts Catherine to see big white tops, really thin trousers and something with a round shape, so the things in Milan likewise allow the designers to envisage a funky-formal fashion collection in a way that would hardly be feasible otherwise. It should be noted, though, that not just one thing but numerous things are found to be inspiring in Milan, which leaves us with a key question: How do the designers determine, or evaluate, among all the different things that they are inspired by, what actually to do? Faced with this question, it is more than typical to hear the designers say that "this is so difficult to talk about." What is more, they repeatedly refer to what they term the *zeitgeist*, or time spirit. Listen, for instance, to Rebecca, one of the Talent Pool designers:

I think that you have to know the time spirit. You have to have a feeling for the time. It is, eh, I don't know how to explain it. Just to have a special feeling regarding what is going on.

*Can you describe that feeling? Or can you describe how you think that you get ...*

No. I think that it is just a feeling. Some people are doing foresight research to tell what is going to happen, and I think that a good designer should have just a feeling, so that when he sees something he knows that maybe it could become important. Just a feeling about the time and what is going to happen. I cannot describe it exactly. It is just a feeling, I would say.

In his presentation inside HUGO BOSS Ticino, the Creative Director also argued:

... it comes quite automatically for me. I don't have a crystal ball. I just have a feeling that tells me what is right, or what I think is right, and what is not right. [...] In a way, it is just to follow the wave because from my point of view a designer is a kind of shaman. It is a person who has a possibility of catching something which is not really visible; something which is in the air, which everybody can breathe, but which only some people have the possibility, or the faculty, of translating into reality, into real and concrete things.

According to Rebecca and the Creative Director – as well as several other agents in HUGO BOSS for that matter – it is largely their feeling for, or knowledge about, the time which makes them able to determine what to do.<sup>1</sup> “If you know a lot about what is happening in the world,” Catherine also argued, “you can also already imagine what could be in one or two years’ time.” In this sense, the Talent Pool designers’ inspiration trip to Milan should not merely be seen as a matter of getting out of the office in order to see and experience new things and thus be able to envisage a funky-formal fashion collection in a new way. In addition, the trip also served to enhance the designers’ feeling for the time in the sense that being away from the office made them more in touch with trends and developments in the world. Hence, as they returned from Milan, and later from Berlin (another inspiration trip), the designers felt better equipped to determine in which direction to take the funky-formal project. This is the issue to which I now turn.

### **Generating a Concept**

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this feeling for the time is, of course, not the only factor influencing the decision of what to do and not to do. Rather, a wide range of aesthetic, economic, technical, material and other kinds of factors are significant. Here, however, I mainly focus attention on those issues that are closely related to the processes of becoming inspired.

The processes of moving from inspiration to an actual concept are not altogether straightforward and may also be somewhat difficult to grasp. In some cases, one inspiring thing may give rise to a concrete idea for a concept – such as happened, for instance, with the above-mentioned creation *Un Seconda Vita*. Based on this creation, Rebecca generated a concept which she termed Double Life, because it centered on what she saw as the dual demands of life. As Rebecca described the concept:

For me, Double Life means to achieve a balance between *who we are* and *how we act*. It is about the individual person and the society. Life has different demands: on the one hand we have to act according to rules, customs and structures; on the other hand we want to realize ourselves. So, because of the different demands we are playing different roles. Every day we try to combine the different roles/lives [...] The Double Life concept is about integrating individual features into the anonymity and uniformity of society. The formal wear, which is the standard uniform, is given a face.

In addition to these more abstract or general meanings, Rebecca moreover suggested that Double Life might more concretely be realized by using double-face fabric, double layering, unusual cutting or the like. In this particular case, the relation between the inspiring thing and the concept was thus rather evident.

In most other cases, though, the processes were by no means as straightforward. As it was typical that not only one thing but several things were perceived to be inspiring, the Talent Pool designers often hastened to create a number of mood boards composed of pictures of all the inspiring things, when they returned from their various inspiration trips. The purpose of these boards was not merely that they should be able to take the designers back to the specific mood or feeling that they had in Milan or Berlin (as the Talent Pool supervisor explained), but also that they should give rise to more concrete concept ideas. In this respect, two distinct approaches in particular seemed prevalent. While Anne, Lisa and Rebecca were much focused on devising an abstract or theoretical concept before proceeding to draw any sketches, Katja and Louise were much keener on drawing a range of sketches in order to see where this might lead them. Although the designers thus worked rather differently, they all tried hard to constantly keep the interplay between concept and sketches in focus. This points us to the fact that one of the key challenges facing them was to strike the right balance between abstraction and concreteness in the sense that a concept ought to issue concrete design guidelines *and*, at the same time, hold an overall story or message.

A couple of weeks later, the designers had, more or less individually, generated more than a few concepts. The task set before them by the Creative Director was, however, not to be solved individually but collectively. This invites us to explore in more detail how the designers actually distinguished the good concepts from the bad. Or, in other words, by which criteria did they evaluate the different concepts? As this evaluation mostly took place in a number of meetings, we shall now spend some time in a couple of these.

It is Friday afternoon, and the Talent Pool designers, the supervisor and myself are about to begin the meeting which has been planned all week. The designers are to present and discuss the various concepts, and Katja and Louise, who have been working rather closely together, are eager to begin. The first concept to be presented is called On Edge. Katja and Louise describe how raw, flossy edges and a used look have been a trademark of Orange in recent years, but On Edge "... suggests a more formal, sharper and dressier way to continue the line of Orange." By using specific cutting and finishing techniques such as laser cutting, glued edges and the like, the idea is to maintain raw edges but now in a much more clean and sharp way. This, they argue with enthusiasm, will express nothing short of a younger, more open, experimental, casual and playful approach to formal wear and, they add, life more broadly. The supervisor and the three other designers listen attentively but then the supervisor interrupts the presentation. "I can clearly see what you mean, and your concept holds some interesting ideas. But I just wonder if much of it has not been done before." Louise responds immediately: "Perhaps some of our ideas have already been realized by others but always only as details, never as a general and consistent concept." "Precisely!," Katja exclaims. "This is in fact what makes On Edge really new." Neither the supervisor nor the other designers raise any objections, so we move on to the next concept.

This is Surface and Soul. Katja and Louise emphasize that because formal wear is generally very neutral, almost amounting to a sort of shield that allows the person inside to remain hidden, it is obviously at odds with "... the freedom and expressive personality connected with the Orange person." However, now and then this person also has to dress in formal wear, for which reason Surface and Soul is all about being able, as Katja and Louise put it, "... to present the world with a pleasingly formal attire, while remaining true to oneself." By means of special buttons, creases and other such features, the concept thus centres on allowing the wearer to show additional details of pattern, decoration, colours, etc. without compromising the formality, letting in this way a part of one's soul shine through the surface, so to speak; for instance, by unbuttoning a part of a sleeve so as to disclose another colour or even some of the skin.

Now, the ball is in the court of the three other designers. It is the supervisor, though, who first comments that the concepts are, in her view, hardly workable as more than just themes for single collections. Katja and Louise object immediately that they truly think that both concepts can form the basis of several collections and that they can thus be reinterpreted and evolved continuously. Then Rebecca interrupts: "Of the concepts, I would say that On Edge is my favorite. I find, however, that the concept ought to be understood more broadly, since it is far too limiting to reduce it to the edges only." This prompts quite some discussion. While Katja implies that Rebecca has not really grasped On Edge, Louise exclaims more directly that she does not at all understand why Rebecca so unambiguously likes this concept more than the other. Rebecca responds that they should not take her comment to mean that she does not like the other concept, but simply that she likes On Edge more. "This is," she says, "just my personal opinion."

The meeting lasts for quite some time, as the designers discuss a number of different concepts. For now, however, it should merely be noted that the meeting ends without any decisions being made. None of the concepts gains so much support from the designers that one stands out as more valuable or better than the others, for which reason the meeting does not lead into more than a presentation and brief discussion. The supervisor suggests that they should now try to rotate the concepts between them, so that Rebecca will work on some of Katja and Louise's concepts, Louise on Anne's concepts, Katja on Lisa's and Rebecca's concepts, and so on and so forth. This will likely show, the supervisor contends, which of the concepts have most room for creativity, as well as it may reveal that some of the concepts could appear stronger if combined. As meetings typically do, also this meeting thus generates yet another meeting in which the designers are to share their experiences of working on each other's concepts.

We shall not go into detail with this other meeting but merely note that at various points, perhaps not so surprisingly, it gives rise to a fairly heated discussion. Rebecca states, for instance, that a concept called Combining Free and Structured Forms does not, in her opinion, have much potential, since it is far too narrow in focus and since its basic idea has been used before. Katja and Louise, who have created this concept, evidently disagree, arguing that numerous different forms can be combined which makes the concept truly durable. Louise, on her part, declares that a concept termed Knowledge of the Hidden is not exciting enough to form the basis of a complete collection, for which reason the concept should rather be seen as a set of details that may be added to another concept. Lisa then claims that a concept called Jeans Formal is nowhere near multifaceted enough, since it is far too simple to just "stonewash suit fabrics," as she phrases it. She admits, though, that the concept may work as part of a single collection within the framework of one of the other concepts, but it does not have what it takes to constitute the

overall, durable concept. Needless to say, Louise, who generated this concept, totally disagrees. Quite the reverse, she believes that Jeans Formal contains exactly those qualities that make it an overall concept under which some of the other concepts might be included.

Now, to draw some of these threads together, it seems fairly evident that the designers are intensely involved in creating a certain degree of order out of the chaos that their various concepts appear to represent. Since each concept lays out a distinct design direction, it is momentous to make clear sense of, and evaluate in detail, all features of relevance, which, we may now sum up, revolve considerably around the following specifics. First, a concept must be perceived to be new in the sense of not having been used before. Second, a concept must fit well with the given brand, here the identity of BOSS Orange. Third, a concept must have a fixed content while simultaneously being flexible enough to allow for continuous reinterpretation, thus making it durable for more than merely a season or two. Fourth, a concept must strike the right balance between concreteness and abstraction, i.e. between specific design guidelines and an overall story or message. Fifth, a concept must be realizable in terms of material as well as technological implementation. And sixth, a concept must be possible to present in an exciting and somewhat positive way so as to make it appear truly compelling.

### **Making a Decision**

One of the most striking features of the meetings above was, however, that they did not lead to any clear decisions. During the course of the negotiations, the designers critically scrutinized and evaluated the concepts, and although some concepts were, of course, dismissed or reworked, the designers reached virtually no clear-cut conclusions. Towards the end of one of the meetings, a manager of innovation and research projects was therefore asked to let us know his opinion, but even though he listened carefully to the concept descriptions and asked a few clarifying questions, he took no clear stand on the concepts. Somewhat spontaneously, the supervisor then suggested putting the concepts to a vote, in which the concepts called Wildcard and Knowledge of the Hidden came to stand out as the concepts most well-liked by the designers in general. But, rather tellingly, it soon turned out that the vote came to have no significance whatsoever. Not even once was it brought up or mentioned again.

Crucially, I think, this was due to fact that the decision of what would ultimately be the right or most valuable concept was up to the Creative Director to judge. The challenge facing the designers revolved, then, not only around the demand to generate a concept but, even more crucially, around

the fact that this concept should in principle not be the one in which they themselves believed in the most, but rather the one in which the Creative Director would believe in the most. Over and over again, therefore, a discussion arose concerning the preferences of the Creative Director, and various strategies were initiated in an attempt to identify what precisely he tended to like and not like, and how he might accordingly be persuaded to believe in the value of the concepts. The designers carefully analyzed and discussed, for instance, a number of the collections of which he had recently been in charge, his specific criticism of their sketches and prototypes in previous meetings, what he had said and done more generally (including, to some degree, what the rumours said), as well as any other information that they were able to obtain. However, these strategies notwithstanding, the designers had no way of escaping the fact that, at the end of the day, they could not know with absolute certainty which concept the Creative Director would prefer. Hence, they all eventually came to agree that the best strategy would not be to present just one concept to the Creative Director, but rather to let him choose between a variety of concepts. These concepts were then presented in yet another meeting, and we shall therefore listen to the Creative Director's response to these.

Now, the suspense is at its peak. The designers have no more to add and we all sit down at the table, anxiously awaiting the judgment of the Creative Director. Apparently, he does not need much time to mull over the concepts, as he is immediately set to provide us with his feedback. "What you have to understand from the outset," he begins, "is that my comments do not concern what is good and what is bad but rather what fits best with what we are searching for in this context: that is, within the overall Funky-Formal idea. And in this regard, I believe that three of your concepts can, in combination, grow into something new and exciting." A deep sigh of relief goes through the room. The Talent Pool designers have certainly not forgotten the previous meeting with the Creative Director, in which he practically dismissed everything that they had done. The relief is, therefore, not amiss. "I have to add, though," he then continues, "there is nothing distinctly new in any of your concepts. But if you combine certain elements from three of these, you may potentially create something not yet seen; or something, which I, at least, have not seen before." The Talent Pool designers are clearly content. After all, they were not completely off track. But now the suspense grows again. Which concepts? And which elements?

The Creative Director only comments on the three concepts that he finds of value, simply passing over the others in silence. The first of these is a concept called Liquid Cut; or, more specifically, the aspect of organic or ergonomic lines. The Creative Director stresses that although this is not a new concept, in that such lines are used extensively in sports wear to create clothing that follow the movements of the body, it is surely innovative in

connection with classic and more formal clothing which tends to be rather stiff and uncomfortable. He likes, therefore, that the concept respects the body and thus strives to make it more at ease by way of what could be termed ergonomic formal wear. The second concept comes, indeed, as a surprise to the Talent Pool designers or, at least, to four of them: Energy. Louise, who really fought hard to have this concept included in the presentation, brightens up, as the Creative Director explains that the idea of “giving a sense of spa,” as it was described in the presentation, is truly exciting. “In all big hotels nowadays,” he says, “spa and wellness are paramount. This fits well with the aspect of organic lines, since these elements in combination will create formal clothing centered on wellness and stimulation of the senses. However, you need to work hard to come up with something new in this regard, as many things in this area have been done already.” The Talent Pool designers have still not said a word, being all ears. Finally, and rather briefly, the Creative Director highlights Twisted, the concept that focuses on how a particular item of clothing may be used in different ways. He stresses that he likes how this concept allows people to use their clothing differently, which is always very surprising and thus of potential value.

At this point, the concept of funky-formal was now clear: a combination of something ergonomic, something energetic and something to be twisted. The five Talent Pool designers were truly thrilled.

### **Closing**

I end the case study here. A creative concept for a funky-formal fashion collection for the brand BOSS Orange had come into being. As a final note, though, it is crucial to stress that this is not to say that a funky-formal fashion collection could now simply be materialized. The creation of a fashion collection is *not*, I contend, a matter of thinking up or constructing a creative design concept which may then be implemented more or less mechanically. Rather, it is a continuous process of growth or becoming by which a new fashion collection gradually grows forth. Crucially, this entails that the processes of materializing the funky-formal concept, i.e. making it into a tangible collection, was also inherently creative in the sense that also the concrete engagement between the designers and the concrete materials with which they were working gave rise to further ideas as well as involved a number of evaluations along the way. To mention just a few of these, the concept had precisely to be turned into something tangible, meaning, for instance, that the concrete *materials* played a key role in shaping the collection; that the actual *human bodies* to wear the collection had to be considered; that the *production facilities* and *technological equipment* ought to be taken into account; that the concrete *presentation* of the collection in a



photo shoot had to be kept in mind; and so on and so forth. Together with all the various aspects discussed above, all these components contributed significantly to how the funky-formal fashion collection eventually came to look, making it – and creativity more broadly perhaps – something like *an entangled knot* of various threads and lines.

**Kasper Tang Vangkilde** is a Ph.D. Scholar at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. He is currently completing his doctoral dissertation on creativity in fashion based on ethnographic fieldwork in HUGO BOSS. He may be reached at [kasper.tang.vangkilde@gmail.com](mailto:kasper.tang.vangkilde@gmail.com)