

# Fashion in consumer culture

*Laurie A. Meamber, Annamma Joy and  
Alladi Venkatesh*

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## Introduction

Fashion can be considered “. . . a cultural phenomenon, (as) an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society”

*(Wilson, 1985, p. 9).*

This quote by Elizabeth Wilson exploring fashion as an aesthetic mode of expression underscores the importance of fashion in contemporary culture, or more specifically, consumer culture in an aesthetic economy (Gaugele, 2015; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012; Solomon, 1985). The study of consumer culture is certainly becoming an important area of inquiry. Scholars continue to study how fashion reflects prevailing cultural modes of bodily décor and ornamentation (Batterberry & Batterberry, 1977; English, 2007). Fashion has a long-standing history as a pervasive element in consumer culture, which has continued into contemporary culture (Barthes, 2006; Blumer, 1969; McCracken, 1988; Roche, 1994; Simmel, 1904/1971; Veblen, 1899/1925). The substance of fashion is considered simultaneously ambiguous and challenging because it is multi-dimensional and multi-contextual; it involves aesthetic content and meaning that change with time and space as well as cultural modes of behavior and expression, and elements of social distinction (Crane, 2000; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Fashion is also equated with bodily adornment, involving more than just clothing and accessories (Ma, Shi, Chen & Luo, 2012), and extending to such elements as body piercing, tattoos, and the like. In this chapter our focus is primarily on (but not limited to) clothing and personal adornment and appearance, what role they play in the daily lives of fashion-conscious consumers, and the breadth of their exposure to fellow consumers (Bruzzi & Gibson, 2013). Just as there are multiple contexts of fashion, there are multiple definitions of fashion. In this chapter, we discuss fashion as a process in which the fashion system and object as well as fashion-related behaviors are aesthetic representations embedded in consumer culture (Entwistle, 2000).

## What is fashion?

Fashion can be viewed as a style or appearance to be noticed, embraced, admired, and sometimes regarded critically (Venkatesh, Joy, Sherry & Deschenes, 2010). It can signify age, social status, and

gender. For example, concerning social hierarchy, Veblen (1899/1925) and Simmel (1904/1971), taking a critical perspective, discussed novelty in fashion within a Western sociological context and as part and parcel of the consumption imperative of society. Simmel (1904/1971) describes the acceleration of fashion that occurred when the upper classes began to adopt the logic of distinction, and were compelled to engage in constant appearance innovation in order to escape the undermining of status markers by the appearance imitation of the masses.

While Simmel's (1904/1971) orientation was top-down, that is, fashion started at the top of society and moved downward, fashion is shown to operate from both the top-down and bottom-up (i.e., originating with consumers to fashion designers) in studies from around the world (Ma, Shi, Chen & Luo, 2012). While fashion, as noted previously implied status competition, as a display of wealth evolved into a display of style, today, the competitive display of wealth via fashion continues, but also provides the opportunity to mock status seeking.

Fashion-related behavior can represent a conscious effort to be socially provocative (Entwistle, 2009; Sproles, 1979). A way of describing fashion more inclusively is to consider it an object of consumption itself, whether as clothing or bodily adornments (Joy, Sherry, Troilo & Deschenes, 2010). In sum, fashion can simultaneously be considered an aesthetic system or representation in which objects are imbued with meaning and become aesthetically significant or "fashionable," so to speak. Some fashion scholars (e.g. Davis, 1992; Godart, 2012; Kaiser, 1990; Sproles, 1979) view fashion as a dynamic social process by which novel styles are created, introduced first to specific fashion-conscious segments, and then diffused more widely to the public at large. In other words, styles are experimented and promoted first among a select group of people at a particular point in time based on prevailing or novel tastes and cultural dispositions before they are disseminated more widely, resulting in acceptance or rejection (Rocamora & Smelik, 2015; Scott, 2005).

## **Fashion in a culturally constituted world and meaning transfer**

McCracken's (1988) work on meaning transfer suggests that meaning moves from the culturally constituted world via modes of advertising and communication. Accordingly, the fashion system facilitates the diffusion of aesthetic goods and adoption by consumers via rituals of possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment. The culturally constituted world incorporates a system of categories and principles that may vary across sub-cultures of consumers. In essence, fashion as a communication system is dynamic, as meanings can evolve when the system connects consumers to goods or objects. The transfer of consumer objects to eventual adoption also occurs through a variety of rituals and systems of identity formation such as gift exchange.

More recent work on meaning transfer extends McCracken's model of cultural adoption (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). Culture and consumption are thus mutually constitutive and account for the constantly changing meaning flow in culture. The cultural production process provides opportunities for consumers to develop and form their own identities by consuming cultural products, such as fashion. Some other examples include the work of Polhemus (1994), which showed that there is freedom to sample a supermarket of styles or consume a pastiche of pluralistic fashion. Accordingly, while advertising and fashion systems may attempt to transfer agreed-upon cultural meanings to objects, the consumer can challenge these in their quest for self-identity within a fashion system. As Banister and Hogg (2007) suggest, fashion provides the consumer the opportunity to accept or reject fashion as "not me." There is thus a perennial tension between fashion discourses created by designers (and marketers) and the consumers whose unique, personal meanings can subvert the intended meaning.

Barthes (1967/1983) conceived of the fashion system as one of signs and language. Examining the written garment as found in fashion magazines, he proposed a relationship between

images and text and the dissemination of fashion to individuals. Clothing is communicative and operates like a language, code, or a signaling system we use to convey our feelings, group identities, and sense of selves (Damhorst, 1999; McCracken & Roth, 1989). Accordingly, in this context, fashion becomes a code.

Given the important role of fashion in consumer culture, we approach fashion from an interdisciplinary perspective. Singular approaches and viewpoints on fashion can be questioned as being limited and potentially reductive (Barnard, 2007). To present a comprehensive overview of the subject, one has to consider the relations between fashion culture and marketing practices. Research on fashion cuts across disciplinary boundaries, including scholarly work in the social sciences, humanities, and cultural studies, and is critically examined in feminist discourse (Broby-Johansen, 1953; Flügel, 1930; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Skov, 2002). Thus, for example, some early discourse on feminism has struggled with the subject of fashion (Parkins, 2008; Wilson, 1985), critically focusing on the body and the exploitation of body image (Joy & Venkatesh, 1994). In this chapter, we discuss fashion from a cultural standpoint. Here, for example, the body is central to the notion of fashion, and high fashion becomes wearable art. This in itself is indeed worthy of further inquiry.

## Elements of fashion

### *Clothing styles and bodily adornments*

According to Jensen (1999), clothing can be defined as a means of expression of style, and aesthetic appearance as a synthesis of styles of clothing and related accessories. Much of the early research on fashion in consumer culture has focused on clothing and personal adornment as well as psychological functions of clothing (Dearborn, 1918). Scholars consider clothes as integral to the fashion process, and fashion, in turn, as a key element of clothing culture. Jensen (1999) elaborates on the concept of style, which represents how fashion is displayed outwardly and also which is sometimes positioned in opposition to fashion (Östberg, 2011), which is considered intrinsic design.

The notion of fashion also extends beyond clothing to other aesthetic categories and a variety of bodily adornments comprising jewelry, cosmetics, and ornamentation, as well as tattoos and the like (Bloch & Richins, 1992; Langman, 2008). As shown by Bloch and Richins (1992), when considering the history of almost all cultures, such adornments contribute to a pervasive sense of attractiveness and have become indispensable to consumers' quest for beauty. According to Langman (2008), they also enhance consumers' self-esteem and empower them within their social milieu.

### *Fashion aesthetics*

The original meaning of *aesthetics* can be traced back to the Greek word *aesthesis*, which refers to sensory perception (Barilli, 1989/1993). One meaning locates the sensory experience or response in relation to the arts, media, or entertainment, which includes its visual forms (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985; Venkatesh, Joy, Sherry & Deschenes, 2010). This is especially true of high fashion or luxury fashion. Luxury brand stores are considered hybrids between retail stores and art galleries/museums that sell and display fashion (Joy, Wang, Chang, Sherry & Cui, 2014); fashion is considered a form of aesthetic creativity (Wilson, 1985).

A related meaning of *aesthetics*, which extends the original, refers to the sensorial experience of everyday objects (Forty, 1986; Heilbrun, 2002). Consumer scholars have used the

sensorial idea of aesthetics to discuss fashion as adornment and the relation between the body and body image (Venkatesh et al., 2010). A third definition concerns the visual substance of aesthetics such as form, expression, harmony, order, symbolism, and imagery (Carroll, 2001). Sproles' (1979) model of fashion-oriented consumer behavior is premised on the idea that the aesthetics of fashion overwhelm merely utilitarian concerns (Eckman & Wagner, 1995). The perspectives on aesthetics mentioned here are key to understanding fashion.

### ***Fashion, the body, and aesthetic labor***

In consumer culture, there is a preoccupation with the body (Joy & Venkatesh, 1994) and adornment to augment physical attractiveness (Bloch & Richins, 1992). In terms of the relationship with the body, fashion not only adorns the body but also accentuates it. As noted by Venkatesh et al. (2010), "It has become a truism in studies of fashion that garments cannot signify without a body, real or imagined, and that even an unworn garment refers to the materiality of an eventual wearer" (p. 462). For some consumers, the pleasure of beautifying the body is to understand oneself as an artist and to exert cosmetic agency, leading to greater self-expression and satisfaction.

Research on the body and fashion integrates and extends work on aesthetics of the body found in marketing and consumer research, fashion theory, and gender studies, among other disciplines. Clothing reformers of the nineteenth century noted the different functions of fashion, which included decoration that in turn contrasted with the elements of modesty and protection for which it was originally intended (Flügel, 1930; Wilson, 1985). Unlike these "clothing reformers," twentieth-century thinkers (e.g., Baudrillard, 1981; Finkelstein, 1991), including psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists (e.g., Dunlap, 1928; Flügel, 1930; Westermarck, 1921), and cultural critics (e.g., Broby-Johansen, 1953), have considered fashion as a false extension of the wearer's true identity, and have argued against the need for such clothing unless it contributes to an honest representation of the body (Jensen, 1999). Sproles (1979) articulated the functions of dress more widely as contributing not only to utility (usefulness), modesty, and adornment (including psychological self-enhancement), but also to sexual attraction, symbolic differentiation, and social affiliation. Taking a communications perspective, Holman (1981) suggested that apparel functions include parasomatic, utilitarian, aesthetic, mnemonic, and emblematic elements. In this regard, the parasomatic, utilitarian, and somatic functions relate to the body. In other words, the parasomatic function of dress can camouflage (hide or alter) the body and/or display (reveal or draw attention away from) bodily elements. That is, the body becomes an object of fashionable attention (Barnard, 2007). While the utilitarian function of dress protects the body, the aesthetic element enhances the alluring element of the body.

Contemporary fashion theorists examine how fashion, particularly clothing and dress, contribute to the intensification of the normative aesthetics of the body. Work on the body and fashion highlights the role of embodiment, the consumer experience, and some socio-psychological elements (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Venkatesh et al., 2010). These studies focus on attitudes and preferences concerning bodily appearance, as well as on perceptions of the aesthetics of luxury fashion – that is, dress and accessories. The resulting theoretical framework emphasizes the aesthetics of production, reception, and labor. The attention is on fashion as a cultural production process and system, leading to the notion of embodiment of fashion, and identity formation.

Embodiment can be explored at multiple levels (Pettinger, 2004). At the level of the fashion model, it refers to their physical features: the body and face that are carefully manipulated to display clothing and accessories. In this sense, models (as well as the consumers that are inspired

by these models) engage in body modification/display practices (e.g., plastic surgery) in order to achieve a certain aesthetic ideal. As Venkatesh et al. (2010) noted, “. . . we see the body as an externalized object to be worked on by the self, as well as an integral aspect of the self . . . There is a lot of aesthetic labor that goes into sculpting oneself and one’s appearance. Often, negative emotions and dissatisfaction with one’s looks trigger aesthetic labor” (p. 467). Likewise, Parmentier & Fischer’s (2011) work on fashion models suggests that while the models are operating within the realm of fashion, their identities are inscribed within the fashion system. As a result, models are anxious about conforming to its normative aspects such as maintaining an industry-accepted body weight. Mikkonen, Vicdan and Markkula’s (2014) paper on wardrobe self-help literature indicates that consumers who adhere to these practices become self-critical about their bodies and are obliged to follow norms of dressing for their body type. In general, aesthetics and bodily appearance have become critical as fashion culture has begun to evolve and become a visually oriented culture (Schroeder, 2002).

“Fashion labor” or “aesthetic labor” has historically been associated with the production of garments and textiles by factory workers (also known as retail service workers). With the rise of the cotton industry in the West in the nineteenth century and extending to present day “sweat shops,” we have witnessed the exploitation of aesthetic labor (for example, it is widely known that workers who toil and produce fashionable items typically work under unsafe and/or unhealthy conditions for low wages, Wilson, 1985).

## **Fashion, brands, and identity**

In the late twentieth century, many social-science disciplines began to explore fashion and its role in understanding cultural phenomena, identity construction, and the role of consumption in the constitution of self and society. Hetzel (1994) suggested that fashion affects all sectors of activity in which a fashion object contributes to the construction of an individual’s personality. Sahllins (1976) characterized the system of American clothing as a veritable map of American cultural ambiance. Broby-Johansen (1953) described clothing as a second skin to the self or as a magnification of one’s self. Because of its visibility and close connection to the body, clothing creates a bridge between the cultural meaning of objects and the individual consumer’s self-concept, signifying associations with brands and lifestyles (Jensen, 1999).

Consumers appropriate cultural products, such as fashion, for their functionality as well as for their symbolism. In the case of fashion objects, symbolism extends to such intrinsic aspects as fabric (Weiner & Schneider, 1989), color (Schneider, 1987), and design (Lurie, 1981). Consumer research suggests that consumption contributes to identity formation (Ekström & Brembeck, 2004; Wattanasuswan, 2005). This is certainly true of fashion. Finkelstein (1991) proposed that the notion of self is often equated with one’s fashion image. As Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett (2009) also noted, identity is no longer thought of as a unitary, fixed, or stable property, but rather that which is constantly assembled, reassembled, produced, and re-reproduced. Fashion therefore contributes to consumers’ self-definition. That is, consumers can create meanings for themselves to incorporate or subvert the dominant fashion discourses created by designers and marketers. By extension, consumers are able to appropriate fashion discourses and generate unique fashion identities while at the same time resisting dominant fashion narratives.

This is not to argue that consumer identity is a matter of complete free choice; such identities are also influenced by marketers. The social and historical realities impacting identity projects suggest that different actors play a role in the formation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). In this regard, we argue that consumers are co-producers of meaning, whether it is personal, identity-related, and/or group-level meaning.

An area of inquiry in consumer research extends to the formation of fashion-consciousness. For example, Gould and Stern (1989) examined gender differences among fashion-consciousness and the relationship to self-identity. Not surprisingly, in terms of clothing, women were found more likely to be fashion-conscious than men. In addition, Wan, Youn, and Fang (2001) found that a diverse set of factors such as brand consciousness, healthy eating, attitudes towards technology, socially sensitive sexual issues, and advertising skepticism also relate to the development of fashion consciousness. Other research has extended this line of inquiry. Auty and Elliott (1998) considered the role of self-monitoring and brand patronage in fashion involvement. Tatzel (1982) considered consumer skill to be related to fashion consciousness, and Gorden, Infante, and Braun (1985) studied communicator styles. Other studies have focused on demographic differences pertaining to engagement with fashion, matters of affluence (Belleau, Haney, Summers, Xu & Garrison, 2008), and materialism (O’Cass, 2004). In this regard, age becomes an important variable because young consumers through to teenagers (Hogg, Bruce & Hill, 1998; Kjeldgaard, 2009) and other age cohorts play a critical role. This research collectively indicates that fashion awareness and preferences begin at an early age and are influenced by exposure to market elements and brands, as well as to social elements that include the influence of family and friendship groups.

Another important variable in the formation of fashion consciousness is the significance and the role of the brand itself. Consumers use brand images to construct and communicate their identities (Elliott & Wattanasuswan, 1998; Wikström, 1996). In related research, Sproles (1979) took an information-processing perspective and proposed that fashion-oriented behavior implies that consumers make decisions based on style and brand-related information. Yet, other more contemporary research indicates that fashion-conscious consumers value brand names and make branded fashion purchases because they are closely related to identity formation (Wan et al., 2001). For example, Hokkanen’s (2014) text on Swedish fashion consumers found that consumption of particular fashion brands were used to communicate the personalities and identities of these adults, particularly in social situations.

As proposed by Björkman (2002), consumers incorporate the brand or designer symbolism into their own identities, and thus the meanings are subject to (re)interpretation. In wearing the clothing, consumers communicate its brand symbolism to others, and simultaneously develop, encode, and reinforce the organizational (designer, brand) identity found in the marketplace. Nevertheless, if consumers choose to construct alternate meanings for fashion, this can change or even undermine the intended organizational or marketplace identity (Kozinets, 2002). Therefore, while fashion is communicative, it does not convey or express a single meaning (Barnard, 2007).

## Recent fashion trends and future research

More recent work on fashion trends has focused on the interrelated subjects of sustainable fashion, eco-fashion, and ethical clothing (Beard, 2008; Niinimäki, 2010). In general, these topics refer to fashion design, sourcing, manufacturing, and wear that does not do unnecessary harm to the environment and has a positive impact on people and communities (Hethorn & Ulasewicz, 2015). Many of the studies on sustainable fashion consumption underscore that while consumers do care about the origins and production of fashionable items and have strong ethical values, quality and aesthetics are equally or more important in making fashion choices (Joergens, 2006). For example, historical treatments on the origins of ethical or eco-fashion trends do incorporate such elements as “natural” looks (Welters, 2008).

While recent research has attempted to classify sustainable fashion consumers by gender, attitudes, values, or purchasing intentions and behavior in different cultures (e.g. D'Souza, Gilmore, Harmann, Apaolaza Ibáñez & Sullivan-Mort, 2015; Jung & Jin, 2016; McNeill & Moore, 2015), additional work should focus on the lifeworld of these consumers more generally and how fashion is integrated into their lives. Work by Jung & Jin (2016) identifies potentially four distinct sustainable consumer groups in the United States and suggests consumer education approaches to reach them. Future research can extend this work to other cultural contexts and to test communication approaches that were highlighted in the article.

Extensions of research on sustainability include upcycle fashion design (Kwan, 2012), in which consumers (as producers/designers) take clothing and refashion it into something new, and which has contributed to the reinvention of the resale (thrift) industry. Future work can also consider potential parallels between ethical consumption in other arenas and fashion, such as the idea of leasing or renting clothing beyond just high-fashion or for special occasions but on a regular basis, just as car-sharing has been embraced in many parts of the world. More generally, further research on sustainability can examine questions on the potential for societal change in both the production and consumption processes.

Other related areas of study have included fast fashion and slow fashion. Fast fashion involves producing and making low-cost fashion available quickly for consumers in the marketplace (Cachon & Swinney, 2011). Fast fashion mimics current luxury fashion trends, but as with ethical fashion, fast-fashion consumers, while concerned with the environment, often engage in consumption practices that are contrary to this concern (Joy et al., 2012). In contrast, slow fashion refers to fashion that takes into consideration the design, production, and consumption of clothing, and its effects on people and the eco-system more generally (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). While fast fashion is both time and taste oriented, slow fashion is usually defined as a philosophical orientation focusing on being attentive to and mindful of all the stakeholders and impacts of fashion, rather than a slowing down of the production process, although this can occur.

The study of slow fashion and its attention to all stakeholders also relates to fashion labor, as discussed previously. Slow fashion has more recently assumed the role of a consumer movement, partly inspired by the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh in 2013 (Fletcher & Tham, 2015) where a building collapsed, resulting in over a thousand workers losing their lives while making clothes for the fashion industry. Slow-fashion consumers are interested in clothing that is eco and labor friendly. As the collection of readings in Fletcher and Tham's (2015) handbook suggests, fashion, while perhaps contributing to the economic empowerment of women globally via employment, can at the same time be exploitative and contribute to pollution, waste, and an overall decline of the eco-system. More attention should be devoted to the study of slow fashion, including consumers' desire to reflect on their fashion choices (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010) and practices which encourage this reflection, such as on the potential of new labeling standards for clothing – including sourcing of materials, compliance with labor practices, etc., similar to discussions on labeling food and other products that have occurred in many countries.

Other studies on fashion focus on global aspects of fashion marketing and consumption, including the visibility and invisibility in fashion globally. Gurova's (2014) volume on the rise of fashion in Russia and its transformation of Russia over the last two decades highlights the role of fashion in constituting consumer culture. Sandikci and Ger's (2010) discussion on veiling in style emphasizes the politics of fashion and how a stigmatized practice of veiling in Turkey becomes fashionable. Sobh, Belk and Gressel's (2014) study of fashion invisibility sheds light on how Middle Eastern consumers engage with global fashion brands and tend to create an identity that incorporates both Western consumer culture and Islamic conservatism. Findings suggest

that consumers in this part of the world engage in practices such as layering in order to hide luxurious Western fashion underneath religiously approved outer garments and thus embrace and mimic the Western excess of consumption of luxury brands. These consumers exhibit the conflicting narratives of modesty and vanity in their clothing choices. While these studies focus on relatively affluent consumers in several Middle Eastern countries, other work suggests the emergence of a cross-faith, transnational youth subculture of modest fashion (Lewis, 2015). Future research can explore the relationships and contradictions inherent in the global fashion production and consumption arena. For example, Arvidsson and Malossi's (2011) piece on customer co-creation, and Arvidsson and Niessen's (2015) article on Bangkok fashion markets illustrate alternative approaches to fashion innovation outside of the traditional fashion system.

## Conclusions

Research on fashion spanning multiple cultures, multiple disciplines, and multiple centuries will continue to be an important facet of understanding consumer culture. As Kaiser (1990) put it, "the challenge of explaining fashion change across historical and cultural contexts remains" (p. 481). Research gaps include re-examining the definition of fashion in relation to sustainability, linking sustainable fashion studies to how meaning moves in the culturally constituted world, and on global fashion culture. Questions that can be addressed are: Is it possible to reconcile the inherent contradiction between fashion and sustainability from the consumer's perspective – the tension between the emphasis on the new (or in the case of fast fashion – the new and the quick) and the harm associated with fashion production and consumption? Can the global fashion industry influence individual and societal desire for fashion that is more intrinsically sustainable? Does silence on sustainability limit the potential for transforming consumer behavior and the global fashion industry at large? For example, a recent piece by Solér, Baeza, and Svård (2016) examines fashion brand discourse, and in particular those "muted" sustainable fashion brands that attempt to reduce their negative environmental and social impact, but do not communicate this in their branding and communications. Future research can continue to examine brand management and marketing approaches used by fashion producers and the consequences of this for consumers and society at large. As a dynamic social process, fashion will be discussed and debated for many years to come.

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