

Style

Style is a concept used to describe the ways in which certain consumers, or groups of consumers, assemble, modify, combine, and act toward consumer objects and activities. The concept is notoriously hard to pin down since it is simultaneously used at different levels of abstraction and to denote a wide variety of consumption activities, both within academia and in everyday use. The most clearly defined use of the concept is within literature dealing with subcultures, but it is also applied within studies of fashion as well as consumer culture studies more broadly.

Most of the time when style is discussed, it is designated to those instances when an active stance is taken with regard to consumption; style is intentional communication, according to Dick Hebdige. Still, even the activities that are not driven by such intentionality would typically lead to something considered a style. Moreover, to be identified as style, consumption activities typically need to be perceived as deviating from a more or less coherent idea of the mainstream. Thus, Hebdige notes, it is a signifying practice where the novel assemblage of elements into style is a way of disrupting existing semiotic sign systems. This having been said, most would agree that also the mainstream has a way in which they assemble, modify, combine, and act toward consumer objects and activities that would have to be described as a style. In essence, it appears that one cannot not have a style. Whether a particular style is good or bad, interesting or boring, in fashion or out of fashion, or in essence stylish is, however, an entirely different question.

The word style has been in use in the English language for several hundred years and has typically been associated with a distinct manner of expression in writing or speech. This manner can either be formalized (as when an author is given a style guide to use correct formatting or tone of voice in contributing a text to a book, journal, or magazine) or it can be a personal manner of expression (as in the Hemingway style of writing, i.e., the basic grammar and the unvarnished descriptions). This distinction between formalized and personalized expressions of style is also prevalent in other key uses of the term— for example, when it points to a distinctive manner or custom of behaving or conducting oneself, or a particular manner or technique by which something is done, created, or performed. These latter uses are more akin to the use of the word in consumer culture instances.

Style expressions can also be viewed on a scale ranging from the idiosyncratic to the collective. On the latter end of the spectrum, we can imagine expressions such as the Mediterranean style of cooking, suggesting certain commonalities among a large collective. On a mesolevel, we can imagine the stylistic expressions of various subcultural groups, for example, punk style. On the microlevel, there are strictly personal expressions as when someone is suggested to have exquisite style rather than being a slave to fashion.

Theoretical Accounts of Style

The researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham have been most successful in trying to theorize style. Much of the early work of CCCS looked at the situations of white working-class males and attempted to understand how they grappled with changes in society, such as immigration and youth unemployment.

Initially, the dominant interpretation of the CCCS group was that specific subcultural styles, most notably in fashion and music, were developed to break with the dominant social order of the parent culture. As youth

culture evolved and the number of distinct subcultural groups existing in parallel—based on, for example, different class or ethnic backgrounds— increased, style increasingly became a means to carve out a cultural space distinct from other youth groups. Rebelling against the parent generation or fighting a class war was de-emphasized, as style expressions were increasingly seen as a rather mundane part of everyday life. Still, the political aspects were emphasized, and style was interpreted by Hebdige as homology, that is, the material expression of an ideological set of values.

The group identity aspects of style, at the core of the work of CCCS, have been complemented recently by more individualized accounts of style expressions, increasingly devoid of explicit political content. Even early theorists of the emerging consumer society, such as Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen, noted a movement away from an entirely class-based taste position toward a more individualistic expression. In their respective studies of urban life, they noted that the display of wealth through adornment and entertainment leads to an increased awareness of style and that this term, rather than the term taste, best captured current practices of consumption. More recent studies of consumer culture have also attempted to see style less as resistance toward the dominant forces in society by emphasizing that stylistic expressions belong in all kinds of class positions. The more rigidly designated ideas of taste—an inherently coherent class-based signification system—has been gradually replaced by an emphasis on the aestheticization of everyday life. This, according to Mike Featherstone, implies that even the most mundane goods and practices can be stylized in the pursuit of a reflexive lifestyle. Much contemporary social theory focuses on such individualized identity projects rather than the collective—class-based—identity projects of counterculture and subculture in the 1960s and 1970s. In the individual's ongoing process to create a coherent narrative of the self, style reflexivity is said to be an important ingredient. Style expressions have thus been moved from a collective mode to a personal mode of expression.

When trying to theorize style, as previously mentioned, it is typically understood as the ways in which certain consumers, or groups of consumers, assemble, modify, combine, and act toward consumer objects and activities. The unique way in which consumption is thus orchestrated becomes a style. The communicative potential of style can be explained through Roland Barthes' basic semiotic processes of selection and combination. In every consumer culture, there is a wide range of available options concerning, for example, clothing, and to create an intended style, certain elements from the overall range of apparel need to be selected and then combined. A unique style is then created through the reordering and recontextualization of objects to communicate fresh meanings, within a total system of significances, which already includes prior and sedimented meanings attached to the object used, notes John Clarke. Style can thereby be seen as bricolage, that is, the appropriation, innovative recombination, and ultimately perversion of readily available signs and material culture. Hebdige, in his studies of the punk subculture of the 1970s, showed how the disassembling of pieces of apparel—by ripping and tearing—and the subsequent reassembling with the use of safety pins brought new meanings both to the clothes and the household items. The style thus created functioned to symbolically illustrate the "crisis of modern life." Similarly, the teddy boys of the 1950s used pieces of clothing traditionally associated with the upper class, such as drapes, and gave them an entirely new meaning through the juxtaposition of the neat and tidy appearance and the illicit delinquent identity of the teddy boys, involving an overtly sexual and violent lifestyle.

Style in Popular Culture

Although style was a promising theoretical concept in earlier consumer culture work, it has lost some of its theoretical rigor in recent academic use. One plausible reason for this is that style belongs to that group of illusive concepts circulating back and forth between lay use and academic use. In neither of these sites does there appear to be any consensus on the precise definition of style. Rather, the concept is used in a taken-for-granted manner where disagreements about what should be deemed stylish obscure the lack of consensus over what dimensions should be included in a theoretical rendition of style.

In contemporary consumer culture discussions, style is omnipresent, especially in discussions of dress and fashion. It has even been suggested by Dannie Kjeldgaard that style can be regarded as a "folk theory" of

consumption. When the word is thus used today, most political overtones are lost and discussions of class seldom surface. Instead, style has often taken on a meaning as a counterbalance to fashion. In these popular culture discussions, style is portrayed as a unique, innate character of an individual. Style, according to this mythology, cannot be acquired; it comes with mother's milk. A related mythology of style is illustrated by a popular quote attributed to the late Yves Saint Laurent: "Fashions fade, style is eternal."

It appears that the concept of style is virtually unavoidable in describing and analyzing contemporary consumer culture. Should the concept really live up to its potential, a serious theoretical discussion, following the lead of the CCCS work of the 1970s, probably needs to be undertaken.

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Further Readings

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