

# FASHION AND SOCIOLOGY

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## Abstract

Fashion as a research topic has been marginal and never been popular or mainstream in the field of social sciences. It was a topic often taken up by philosophers and moral/social critics in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as René König. Fashion scholars such as Yuniya Kawamura, Gilles Lipovetsky, Sandra Niessen, Anne Brydon, and Elizabeth Wilson have pointed out the academic devaluation of the topic. But with a growing number of academic journals and publications on fashion and dress studies in the past few decades in addition to academic conferences around the world, the study of fashion and dress, along with its scholars, has gradually gained the respect and recognition that it deserves.

- [Classical Sociologists' Discussions on Fashion](#)
- [Contemporary Sociologists' Discussions on Fashion](#)
- [Moving Beyond the Idea of Fashion as a Western Social Phenomenon/Concept](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [References and Further Reading](#)

Fashion as a research topic has been marginal and never been popular or mainstream in the field of social sciences. It was a topic often taken up by philosophers and moral and social critics in the first half of the nineteenth century. Fashion scholars such as [Yuniya Kawamura](#), [Gilles Lipovetsky](#), [Sandra Niessen and Anne Brydon](#), and [Elizabeth Wilson](#) have pointed out the academic devaluation of the topic. But with a growing number of academic journals and publications on fashion and dress studies in the past few decades in addition to academic conferences around the world, the study of fashion and dress, along with its scholars, has gradually gained the respect and recognition that it deserves.

Many fail to see that among all the social science disciplines, sociology, in particular, has made a major contribution to fashion and dress studies, since classical sociologists are the ones who laid the foundations of a theoretical framework for fashion that later diversified into a variety of conceptual understandings of contemporary fashion. This article consists of three major sections: (1) classical sociologists' discussions on the concept of fashion (not clothing or dress), an overview of which is provided by [Michael Carter](#); (2) contemporary sociologists' analysis of fashion, such as collective selection, modern/postmodern identity, and fashion as a system; and (3) an examination of the sociological debate on fashion as a Western concept.

## Classical Sociologists' Discussions on Fashion

The classical discourse on fashion was mainly provided by [Herbert Spencer](#), [Ferdinand Tönnies](#), [Thorstein Veblen](#), and [Georg Simmel](#), who made an attempt to theorize and conceptualize fashion (which is an abstract idea), and separate it from clothing or dress, which is a material and tangible object/artifact. They all shared a common view that fashion is about the process of imitation, since social relationships are essentially imitative relationships—each scholar with a variety of analytical emphasis. Fashion, with its imitative nature, is a crucial phenomenon in understanding society, and this comes from a social hierarchy embedded in the system which implies that the imitators are the ones who are in the lower end of the social spectrum while the imitated ones are the ones in the upper end. This is a fundamental principle of a “trickle-down” theory of fashion, later called a “class-differentiation” theory by Herbert Blumer.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), a British sociologist and philosopher, was one of the first European social scientists to discuss the idea of fashion toward the end of the nineteenth

century. In his view, fashion is a symbol of the manifestation of relationships between superiors and inferiors that functions as a social control. There are various expressions of respect and deference through presents, visits, forms of address, titles, badges, and costumes that express domination and submission, and fashion is one of these examples and represents one's social rank and status. Spencer does not explicitly discuss the distinction between clothing and fashion but implies that what is important is not actual clothes that are worn, but the wearer's social placement in society, which has the power to transform clothing into fashion.

For [Spencer](#), writing in 1896, fashion is intrinsically imitative: "Imitative, then, from the beginning, first of a superior's defects, and then little by little, of other traits peculiar to him, fashion has ever tended towards equalization. Serving to obscure, and eventually to obliterate, the marks of class distinction, it has favored the growth of individuality." He suggests two types of imitation that are still applicable to contemporary fashion: (1) reverential imitation which is prompted by reverence and adoration for the one imitated, and (2) competitive imitation that is prompted by the desire to assert equality with another person.

Furthermore, [Thorstein Veblen](#) (1857–1929), an American sociologist and economist, who wrote a famous book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, includes a discussion of fashion which remains within the framework of the creation and institutionalization of the leisure class through consumption activities. He identifies three properties of fashion as follows:

- Fashion is an expression of the wearer's wealth (as pointed out by Spencer). Expenditure on clothing is a striking example of "conspicuous consumption." What people wear is the evidence and the indication of economic wealth at first glance. What is not expensive is unworthy and inferior.
- The less practical and functional a dress is, the more it is a symbol of high class since it is an indication that one does not need to earn one's living or is not engaged in any kind of productive physical labor. The dress may require help to put it on. Elaborately elegant, neat, spotless clothes are also a marker of a leisure class member.
- Fashion is up to date. To be "in fashion" means that it must be appropriate for the present time. That is why fashion always changes so that it remains new and timely.

Veblen argues that increasing wealth made the ruling class pay attention to the display of leisure as well as leisure goods. This idea of "conspicuous consumption" is at once an expression of wealth and a demonstration of purchasing power. Veblen's theory explains why some consumers prefer to pay more.

[Georg Simmel](#) (1858–1918), a German sociologist and philosopher, shares the view of Spencer and Veblen and points out that fashion is a form of imitation and social equalization, but paradoxically, in changing incessantly, it differentiates one time from another and one social stratum from another. The elite initiates fashion and, when the mass imitates it in an effort to erase or weaken the social distinctions of class, and abandons it for a newer style, this is a process that is accelerated with the increase of wealth. Fashion contains the attraction of highly changeable differentiation. He explains that demarcation constitutes an important factor in fashion in addition to imitation, since the act of imitation arises out of the desire for class distinction. Fashion serves to unite a given class and to segregate it from other classes. It poses a threat to the upper bourgeois class and offers an opportunity to the lower working class to cross that class boundary. He postulates that "The fashions for the upper classes develop their power of exclusion against the lower in proportion as general culture advances, at least until mingling of the classes and the leveling effect of democracy exert a counter-influence."

In addition, [Simmel](#) stresses the exotic elements required in fashion, and recognizes that those are what sets fashion apart from nonfashion: "People like fashion from outside and such foreign fashions assume greater values within the circle, simply because they did not originate there. The exotic origin of fashions seems strongly to favor the exclusiveness of the groups which adopt them ... This motive for foreignness which fashion employs in its socializing endeavors, is restricted to higher civilization." Unknown and unfamiliar objects are not easily accessible, and that is also one of the characteristics of fashion, that is to say exclusivity.

[Ferdinand Tönnies](#) (1855–1936), a German sociologist, treats fashion as a social custom and is influenced by Spencer's account of fashion. His basic argument in his *Community and*

*Society* is based on polar types of society that come from two kinds of human interaction. He contrasts a personalistic, traditional type of society with the impersonal, rational, modern society. He describes custom as a kind of “social will” formed through habit and from practices based on tradition. Custom points toward the past and people legitimize it through traditional usage. Customs, which are unwritten agreements, determine and guide how people dress according to their class, gender, or religion. This power of custom begins to wane and die in times of revolution and great social change, such as a time of transition from a small community (*Gemeinschaft*) to a larger society (*Gesellschaft*), which allows more creativity in dress with less traditional customs to follow. What begins as a mark of distinction often ends as a common custom. Tönnies suggests that when “reverential imitation” occurs, the manners of people of distinction are copied by their subordinates, and new manners are created by those who wish to distinguish themselves from their imitators, which is the idea proposed by the aforementioned classical sociologists such as Simmel and Veblen. The manners of the elites are distinct from those of the lower ranks in society. Elites base their manners in common custom, but at the same time do everything possible to differentiate their manners from the customs of the common people. For Tönnies, fashion is about making distinctions.

## Contemporary Sociologists’ Discussions on Fashion

The classical discourse on fashion primarily relates fashion to the concept of imitation, while some treat it as a sign of democratic society and others explain it as an expression of class distinction. Although none of the classical writers uses the term “trickle-down theory,” their basic premise is that fashion is supposed to begin and trickle down from women of the wealthy higher classes to the masses and the lower classes. Many contemporary sociologists in the twentieth century and beyond have opposed that view, and they argue that fashion is not a product of class differentiation and emulation but a response to a wish to be up to date and to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world. Fashion implies fluidity and mobility of the social structure of the community, and it requires a particular type of society—that is the modern world where the social stratification system is open and flexible. There must be differences in social positions, but it must seem possible and desirable to bridge these differences. Therefore, fashion is not possible in a rigid system of social hierarchy.

One way to draw a line between the classical and contemporary discussions of fashion is to see when, how, and who rejected the idea of imitation in the process of fashion dissemination. An article written by [Herbert Blumer](#) (1900–1987), an American sociologist, in 1969, was probably the first to explicitly reject the idea of imitation or the class differentiation model of fashion, followed by a number of contemporary sociologists, such as [René König](#), [Elizabeth Wilson](#), and [Fred Davis](#), who have explored fashion as a modern phenomenon with its characteristics, such as mobility in a flexible social system. Similarly, [Diana Crane](#), an American sociologist, focused on fashion not only as a modern phenomenon but also a postmodern phenomenon, stating that today’s fashion is no longer class-driven but consumer-driven, and that fashion starts from the masses.

Blumer does not believe that the class differentiation model is valid or appropriate in explaining fashion in contemporary society, and replaces it with collective selection. While appreciating Simmel’s contribution to the study of fashion, which he uses to set off his own argument, Blumer argues that it is a parochial treatment, suited only to fashion in dress in seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Europe within a particular class structure, but it does not fit the operation of fashion in the contemporary epoch with its many diverse fields and its emphasis on modernity. While not rejecting the power of the prestige of a wearer, he argues that one does not set the direction of fashion. [Blumer](#) argues: “The efforts of an elite class to set itself apart in appearance take place inside of the movement of fashion instead of being its cause ... The fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation, but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world.” For Blumer, fashion is directed by consumer taste and it is a fashion designer’s task to predict and read the modern taste of the collective mass.

On the other hand, [Pierre Bourdieu](#), a French sociologist (1930–2002), shares many of the views on fashion with the classical discourse of fashion as imitation. He used the notion of taste as a marker that produces and maintains social boundaries, both between the dominant and the dominated classes and within these groups. Taste is one of the key signifiers and elements of social identity. Bourdieu's interpretation of clothing and fashion lies within the framework of cultural taste and of class struggle. The upper class emphasizes the aesthetic value and the importance of the distinction between inside and outside, domestic and public; while the working classes make a realistic and functional use of clothing, and they want "value for money" and what will last. This reinforcement of the line between classes is best seen in a society where there is no one absolute authoritative power, such as the aristocrats in medieval Europe.

Like Blumer, [Fred Davis](#) (1925–1993), an American sociologist, rejects the class-differentiation model and argues that the model used by classical sociologists is outdated because although what people wear and how they wear it can reveal much about their social standing, this is not all that dress communicates, and under many circumstances, it is by no means the most important thing communicated. Davis shares with Blumer the view that it is the collective facts of our social identities that fashion addresses. His focus is a relationship between fashion/clothing and individual identity in modern society. According to Davis, as one's identity becomes increasingly multiple, the meaning of fashion also becomes increasingly ambivalent.

Moreover, discussion of modernity and the link between the emergence of fashion and democratization by [René König](#), a German sociologist (1906–1992) is compelling: he agrees with Blumer and others that the radical difference between the old upper class and the lower classes has disappeared, but this does not mean that the minor differences need also disappear. These subtle and slight differences can be felt far more strongly when social equalities are claimed by everyone in modern advanced industrial societies. The delicate difference is the most perfect expression of the increasing democratization of society. And this applies not only to politics but also to fashion consumption. It is fashion that plays a significant role in the manifestation of subtle differences. The class boundary has become blurry, and people wish to make what fashion in the modern world has become. Because there are more opportunities for everyone, the competition is more democratic and the right to participate in the competition is prevalent; at the same time, fashion as a concept and clothing-fashion as a phenomenon and practice emerge in many democratic societies.

[Diana Crane](#), an American sociologist (1933–), specifically focused on a discussion of design as an occupation. Designers are rarely included in the sociological analysis of artists, such as painters, sculptors, writers, dancers, musicians, or writers. Crane analyzes the social position of designers in the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Japan, and also examines the styles that the designers create. She argues that a single fashion genre, haute couture, has been replaced by three major categories of styles, each with its own genres: luxury fashion design, industrial fashion, and street styles. She also explores how the nature of fashion organizations affects what is available to consumers, how certain types of consumers influence what is defined as fashion, and how the organizations affect designers. By the late 1960s, the increasing decentralization and complexity of the fashion system necessitated the development of fashion forecasting, and fashion bureaus play a major role in predicting future trends and what types of clothing will sell.

[Yuniya Kawamura's](#) work on fashion as a system is based on Crane's several empirical studies on the fashion industry and designers in Paris, New York, and London in addition to Davis's discussion on fashion as a system, as well as the literature on sociology of the arts and culture. Kawamura suggests that fashion can be studied as an institution or an institutionalized system in which individuals related to fashion, including designers among many other fashion professionals, engage in activities collectively and perpetuate not only the ideology of fashion but also fashion culture sustained by the continuous production of fashion, which is separate from clothing. She argues that the production process of fashion must be clearly distinguished from that of clothing because clothing does not immediately or automatically convert into fashion, although every clothing item does have the potential to become fashion. [König](#) also consciously separates fashion from dress and clothing and takes a systemic approach to fashion. Fashion is not only about what we wear and consume, and König distinguishes between the socio-psychological, structural form of fashion as a social regulator in its own right and its various and forever variable contents, saying that we must take fashion completely as an independent social institution, and pointing out that we must analyze the "system of fashion."

An important debate in sociological theories is the relationship between individuals and social structure. The debate revolves around the problem of how social structures determine what individuals do, how structures are created, and what the limits are, if any, on individuals' capacity to act independently of structural constraints. In viewing how the institutions of fashion function and the individuals involved in fashion participate in those institutions, the system of fashion becomes much clearer, and at the same time, it is possible to understand how the two, clothing and fashion, are interdependent and interrelated.

## Moving Beyond the Idea of Fashion as a Western Social Phenomenon/Concept

In the multicultural and diverse world of the twenty-first century, people dress in different outfits, and styles move around from one culture to another. But the permeation of fashion as a Western concept and phenomenon is still a strongly held belief throughout the world. The term "fashion" in English, *mode* in French, *Mode* in German, and *moda* in Italian all originated in the West. These terms are used even in non-Western languages with slightly different pronunciations.

In the classical discussions of fashion, some European theorists, such as J. C. Flügel and Ferdinand Tönnies, have explicitly and implicitly argued that fashion originated in the West and is a Western product. Flügel explained differences between fixed costume found in simple societies and modish costume found in complex societies, implying that costumes that change frequently exist only in the so-called civilized West. Tönnies's discussion of fashion was in relation to social customs and argued that fashion derives from the desire to make social distinctions, and that it is a sign of the weakening traditional customs in the modern Western world. Such statements reinforce the idea that fashion first started in the West. The scholars [Suzanne Baizerman, Joanne Eicher, and Catherine Cerny](#) argue that Western fashion and dress generally have enjoyed privileged positions, and, therefore, Western scholars generally are less interested in ethnic dress or various fashion phenomena in non-Western cultures.

Furthermore, fashion and dress from non-Western cultures have been collected by European researchers since the late sixteenth century as visual evidence of the existence of so-called exotic, mysterious peoples, treating them as the Other. [Lou Taylor](#), a British dress and textile historian, explains that by the late nineteenth century, the collection and examination of garments and body ornaments were included within the emerging academic discipline of anthropology, and these were handled as cultural artifacts, such as tools and weapons. Yet in the twenty-first century, research studies and museum collections on ethnic dress are limited. It is imperative that museums across the United States and Europe collect and conserve dress and costume from non-Western cultures so that they can be made more useful in material culture studies. Researchers on dress and fashion need to focus more on cultural pluralism and multiculturalism and conduct further in-depth research on non-Western fashion phenomena to broaden the intellectual base and expand a research community that needs to be more inclusive. As Veblen pointed out, the essence of Western fashion is change and newness. In order to keep something constantly new, it has to go through the process of change, and if it changes, it always remains new. This Western bias continues to be found in fashion and dress studies. Many fashion scholars presume that fashion is a product of Western society.

Eurocentric assumptions are found even in the terminology used. According to [Baizerman, Eicher, and Cerny](#), words carry implications and connotations which may already be imbued with ethnocentrism and biases, and in order to avoid ethnocentrism and prejudices, they suggest using terms such as body supplements and body modifications instead of terms such as a veil and kimono, which have culturally specific implications, and they go further to find the most appropriate term to describe non-Western clothes. The term "non-Western" already has biases, implying that it is "not Western" and placing the West as the normative standard. Other terms such as "peasant dress" and "tribal dress" have the implications of inferior social status and therefore are not appropriate. The most neutral term that they come up with is "ethnic dress," which implies that one belongs to an ethnic group in which values, norms, traditions, and beliefs among many other characteristics are shared with the members.

Their study informs us of the significance of utilizing the correct or the most appropriate term and also the importance of understanding the cultural biases and prejudice included in these terms, so that the conclusions of any research are as objective as they can be. It is always wise to start with definitions of the terms and concepts we study so that we, as researchers, can clarify and confirm to ourselves whether we are accurately and objectively assessing the meaning of these words. [Joanne Eicher and Sandra Evenson](#) propose a specific classification system of dress and come up with a definition of dress as follows: “Our definition of dress as body modifications and body supplements includes more than clothing, or even clothing and accessories ... [it] encompasses many ways of dressing ourselves. In addition to covering our bodies, we apply color to our skins by use of cosmetics, whether paints or powders, and also apply color and pattern through tattoos.” Wearers and observers perceive characteristics of any individual’s total dress through all five senses: sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste. They explain that body modifications are the alterations of the body itself that relate to all of these five senses while body supplements are the items that are placed upon the body, most often thought of as garments by Euro-Americans.

The advantages of this classification system are that:

- It reduces the likelihood of using words that are inherently biased or imply cultural superiority, as is often the case in any indigenous language.
- The understanding of the details of the physical forms of dress items and practices and the relationship of this form to the body are important. Culturally specific terms subsume this information and can lead to misconceptions when applied cross-culturally.
- Culturally specific terms for dress items and processes also assume a social context of use for each aspect of dress.
- The relationship between the complexity and detail apparent in any dress ensemble and the role of those elements of dress in nonverbal communication about the identity, activity, and particular mood of the wearer.

Since the 1990s, there has been a gradual but optimistic shift in academia from associating fashion with the lifestyles of the Western wealthy elites to treating fashion as a culturally neutral concept without any borders. [Jennifer Craik](#), an Australian cultural historian, argues that Western fashion is not unique, and fashion is not simply the haute couture of Paris but consists of systems unconfined to a particular economic or cultural set of circumstances, and many other fashion systems coexist and used to compete with European high fashion. Similarly, [Aubrey Cannon](#), a Canadian scholar, also argues that fashion is found in traditional, non-Western cultures as well, but it may not change as frequently or as rapidly as the Western version of fashion. In order to claim that fashion is universally found in all human cultures both in the West and the non-West, it is necessary to define exactly what fashion is, and sociologists have ways to logically explore the theoretical interpretation and framework of fashion.

## Conclusion

The review of some of the classical and contemporary discourse and empirical studies of fashion provides the basis for understanding fashion as a significant scholarly as well as sociological theme. Classical and contemporary sociologists have discussed fashion within a larger theoretical framework of culture and society. Furthermore, it used to be taken for granted that fashion is a Western concept, but since the 1980s, a number of sociologists and scholars in other social science disciplines have begun to question fashion as a Western origin and are proposing a new definition of fashion.

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