

Decoding Fashion: Cultural Values and Theoretical Interpretations

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Review paper

Fashion is not only a compelling and meaningful part of culture but also a complex reflection of cultural values, theoretical interpretations and ideas. Understanding the meaning of clothing is crucial, as fashion can reveal the underlying nature of a society and its culture. This review paper presents some of the most important theoretical interpretations used to explain the phenomenon of fashion. The analysis is divided into two thematic parts: a) the linguistic distinction between fashion and clothing; and b) theoretical approaches and interpretations of fashion, which encompass Marxism and post-Marxism, structuralism and post-structuralism, semiotics, the British school of cultural studies, ontology, anthropological and sociological approaches, new visual-theoretical disciplines, and theories of fashion diffusion (trickle-down, trickle-up, and trickle-across). This literature review highlights key efforts to reinterpret cultural values through the lens of various theoretical frameworks. It concludes that the interdisciplinary nature of fashion, often falling between distinct academic fields, makes it an especially compelling subject of study for scholars.

Keywords: Clothing; Fashion Theory; Semiotics; Cultural Studies; Interdisciplinary Approaches

Pregled

Moda nije samo privlačan i značajan dio kulture, već i kompleksan odraz kulturnih vrijednosti, teorijskih tumačenja i ideja. Razumijevanje značenja odjeće ključno je jer moda odražava društvene odnose, kulturne vrijednosti i identitet zajednice odnosno društva. Ovaj pregledni rad prikazuje neke od najvažnijih teorijskih tumačenja korištenih za objašnjavanje fenomena mode. Analiza je podijeljena u dva tematska dijela: a) jezikoslovna distinkcija između mode i odjeće; te b) teorijski pristupi i interpretacije mode, koji obuhvaćaju marksizam i postmarksizam, strukturalizam i poststrukturalizam, semiotiku, britansku školu kulturalnih studija, ontologiju, antropološke i sociološke pristupe, nove vizualno-teorijske discipline te teorije prodiranja mode (trickle-down, trickle-up i trickle-across). Ovaj pregled literature ističe ključne reinterpretacije kulturnih vrijednosti kroz različite teorijske okvire i tumačenja te zaključuje da interdisciplinarna priroda mode, koja često obuhvaća različita akademska područja, čini modu posebno atraktivnim predmetom istraživanja, omogućujući dublje razumijevanje njezine uloge u društvu i kulturi.

Ključne riječi: odjeća; teorija mode; semiotika; kulturne studije; interdisciplinarnost

1. Introduction

An important function of fashion lies in the construction of identity. Individuals have always used apparel as a means to express themselves. Individualistic expression through clothing encompasses all aspects of life such as age, gender, status, attitudes and mood.

Historically, clothes have always been used to mark the dichotomy between the powerful and the weak. In ancient Egyptian times, the clothes of the pharaoh and those he placed in positions of governance were markedly different from the clothes worn by slaves and commoners. Today, fashion is much more than design and construction, branding and consumption, or historical tradition. The gaps between disciplines, into which fashion often falls, are what make it a compelling research subject for so many scholars.

Fashion is the ultimate interdisciplinary subject. It encompasses and informs a number of research areas, including art history, theater (costume design), photography, cultural and gender studies, design, anthropology, communication, identity, trend forecasting, and business/marketing. In westernized, capitalist societies, fashion as a process is a peculiar concept because products created as fashions are designed to have a short lifespan. They are designed to be popular for only a brief period of time. This is known as planned obsolescence and it is the foundation of the western fashion system. Planned obsolescence, or built-in obsolescence, in industrial design and economics is a policy of planning or designing a product with an artificially limited useful life, so it will become obsolete (that is, unfashionable or no longer functional) after a certain period of time [1]. The rationale behind the strategy is to generate long-term sales volume by reducing the time between repeat purchases (referred to as "shortening the replacement cycle") [2]. If a trend does not end then there is no need to replace it. Fashions are created to sell in one season, have a brief and hopefully prosperous life, and then be discarded for something new.

Intellectual engagements with fashion and dress have a long history that can be traced to the contemplation on fashion in philosophy and literature [3,4,5]. A rich literature on dress has appeared across the scientific and popular board in recent years. Academically, the study of fashion and dress is deeply informed by theories and approaches evolving in the context of the nineteenth and early twentieth century formation and diversification of specialized university disciplines, such as psychology, anthropology, history, economics, and sociology, with some scholars paying increasing attention to understanding and explaining

fashion as an overarching system and social dynamic, embedded in the rise and conditions of capitalism and the process and discourse of "modernity" [6].

Today, the theoretical and analytical framework for studying fashion is determined by discipline. Art historians study visual manifestations and trends of fashion in detail. Sociologists analyze how social structure and class distinctions are reflected in fashion. Psychologists study fundamental motives expressed through personal adornment. Ethnologists examine folk and regional dress. Historians and anthropologists link dress to wider issues of social, economic, and cultural change. Fashion also features prominently in studies of luxury retailing and glamour.

The fact that fashion is at the same time an (immaterial) idea and an (material) object makes all discussions partial and therefore limited to one aspect or the other [7]. Diverse and often competing perspectives attempting to explain the fashion process have appeared in the literature. Each of these perspectives adds some insight about the fashion process.

Fashion should be understood as a unique signifying system, that is not autonomous. There are several social relations that are inscribed in it, from economic, gender and sexual to ecological and political. This review presents the most important systems of theoretical explanations. These include Marxism, post-Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics, ontology, anthropological and sociological studies of fashion, as well as the school of British cultural studies which has combined all these into a convincing analytical tool for understanding of popular culture.

This review offers a general introduction to the subject of fashion and highlights its significance within the field of cultural studies. Additionally, it includes a brief overview of several theoretical approaches and interpretations of fashion, examines the concept of the fashion exhibitions and finally brings short review on the trickle down/up/across theory.

2. Decoding Fashion

2.1. The Linguistic Distinction: Fashion and Clothing

The Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology provides the following definitions of fashion: to make, to shape, mode, established custom and conventional usage. The word fashion is derived from Latin *factio* and *facere*, which means to make or to do. In the Romance languages as well as in many

Germanic languages, the word for fashion is *mode* or *moda* derived from the Latin word *modus* for shape or manner, which is also a root of the word "modernity", associated with the fast-paced urban life in European capitals for which fashion became a symbol or metaphor [8]. Charles Baudelaire has commented on the alliance between fashion and modernity in his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life". Fashion is an articulation of the now, it gives each time its distinct appearance, with every age having its own gait, glance and gesture [8].

Sproles and Burns [9] judiciously define clothing as simply any covering for the human body and, with regards to clothes, fashion as the style of dress that is temporarily adopted by a discernible proportion of members of a social group because that chosen style is perceived to be socially appropriate for the time and situation. The term "clothing" is thus regarded as a more generic term for the description of what people wear, whereas the term "fashion" connotes a sense of both synchronic and diachronic instability [10]. An example of synchronic instability in clothing semiotics can be found in the wearing of knee-high socks by Japanese high school girls in the late 1990s. While having socks that reached high up to one's knees was considered fashionable amongst Japanese students, having socks that peered out of one's shoes was considered dowdy and overly conservative amongst Singaporean students in the same time period. Diachronic instability can be illustrated by the evolution of jeans from being a practical work garment to being a fashion statement. Craik [11] observed that while jeans had been worn by the working class since the early 1900s, they only became a fashionable article of clothing for youth from the 1950s, when film stars such as James Dean and Marlon Brando donned them to appear fashionably rebellious. However, while the middle class began wearing jeans as a fashion statement from the 1950s, the working class avoided wearing jeans that were, for them, a reminder of their poor roots [11].

According to Polhemus and Procter [12], in contemporary Western societies, the term fashion is synonymous with "clothes" or "clothing", "adornment", "style" and "dress". Fashion is often related to clothing because of the nature of the industry and its products. Clothing is a product made out of a textile that is worn on the body; a shirt is an article of clothing, while fashion is a social process whereby an item of clothing or dress is adopted by many people. Covers, garments and decorations on the skin create the body, forge it in its being in the world. The clothed body is a combination of signs which include garments, hair-style, make-up, tattoos, and decorations [16]. In other words, everything that makes the body a cultural element and not simply a natural element.

Time and language are the main forms of fashion: through fashion we "see" how time passes, and fashion "speaks" via its multiple signs [16]. Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) coined the term *Zeitgeist* to explain how fashions are a product of the times in which they were developed and worn. *Zeitgeist* is a German word meaning "spirit of the time" (*Zeit* = time, *geist* = spirit). Nystrom [13] identified five areas that represent the *Zeitgeist*: dominating events, dominating ideals, dominating social groups, dominating attitudes, and dominating technology. As fashion and style are representative of events, ideals, groups, attitudes, and technology, fashion itself becomes a reflection of the *Zeitgeist*. This explains why a style becomes popular in a given time and is linked to a specific era. Fashion has a twofold nature: it marks the contact areas between the clothes and the body activating the senses; and on the other hand, it places the individual's body within the social one [14].

In recent years, the study of fashion has received increasing attention as it has come to represent an important cultural phenomenon [15]. Within the field of social sciences, Manlow proposes five major theoretical approaches to fashion: 1. Fashion as an instrument for creating and maintaining boundaries in society; 2. Fashion in the interactional process; 3. Fashion as a semiotic system; 4. Fashion as a capitalist tool; and 5. Fashion as a postmodern condition. Many authors have proposed their definition of fashion:

- "Fashion is a system through which individual and collective representations of body and identity are made" [16]
- "Fashion is a prevailing custom, usage or style" [17]
- "Fashion is the eternal recurrence of the new" [18]
- "Fashion is not only an idea but an actual visual representation of a social reality" [15]
- "Fashion is cultural technology that is purpose-built for specific locations" [10]
- "Fashion, in a sense *is* change" [19]
- "Fashion is a variation in an understood sequence, as a departure from the immediately preceding mode" [20]
- "Fashion is a general mechanism, logic or ideology that, among other things, applies to the area of clothing" [21]
- "Fashion is a specific form of social change, independent of any particular object" [22].
- "Fashion is not simply a change of styles of dress and adornment, but rather a systematic, structured and deliberate pattern of style change" [23].

Based on these definitions, we can surmise the following: fashion is an intangible force that is

manifested in tangible products, that represent newness relative to prior fashion products, which are adopted by a group of people, and are reflections of society and culture [14].

2.2. Theoretical Approaches and Interpretations of Fashion

2.2.1. Marxism and Post-Marxism

Marxism is a view on economy and society based on the political and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. While it would take veritably volumes to explain the full implications and ramifications of the Marxist social and economic ideology, Marxism is summed up in the Encarta Reference Library as "a theory in which class struggle is a central element in the analysis of social change in Western societies". Marxism is a theoretical framework that critiques capitalism—an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and distribution of goods, characterized by competitive markets and profit-driven motives. It envisions socialism as a transitional phase toward a stateless, classless society. This phase is characterized by collective or public ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, replacing the capitalist focus on private ownership and profit.

According to the orthodox interpretations of Classical Marxism, domains such as politics and economy have an external relationship to each other, so that "the truth of politics is no longer located above politics as its essence or idea. It is located beneath or behind it, in what it conceals and exists only to conceal" [24].

For Marx fashion was the very generator of the Industrial Revolution. Engels provided Marx with the details he knew on the textile industry, as his father was a cotton manufacturer. Underneath fashion lies exploitation. The textile industry inaugurated the factory system of exploitation. In the cotton mills of the mid-nineteenth century, men, women, and children labored cheaply, six days per week [25]. Marx's thoughts on fashion as motor, product, and metaphor of the capitalist system are echoed in the work of the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). Benjamin analyzed modernity, focusing on how technology and urbanization alter experience, and, specifically, how cultural forms are affected by mechanization, industrialization, and capitalism. According to Benjamin [18], fashion's tempo is driven by capitalism. Capitalism needs constant novelty in order to keep sales buoyant. Benjamin named this tempo the "eternal recurrence" of the "new". Simultaneously, Benjamin observed a modern drive toward uniformity and mass reproduction. From a Marxist perspective, fashion can be seen not only as

a driver of economic and social change but also as a cultural phenomenon that reflects and perpetuates capitalist power structures, opening space for critical reflection on its role in shaping contemporary identities and values.

2.2.2. Structuralism and Poststructuralism

Structuralism is the methodology that implies elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader, overarching system or structure. It works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel. Alternatively, structuralism is "the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure" [26]. The term, structuralism is used in works associated with schools and movements which link to Saussure, Piaget, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, etc.

Structuralists saw culture as the primary object of study, and approached it most often by way of the analysis of representative textual forms. The forms and structures that produced cultural meanings were the center of their attention. Structuralism is widely regarded to have its origins in the work of the Swiss linguistic theorist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in the early 20th century. Saussure's model of the sign is a useful tool for analyzing the language of fashion. According to him, the actual clothing items, a style or specific fashion trend represent the "signifiers". Through the codes of a society these items are linked to certain concepts, which represent the "signifieds" [27]. The association of a "signifier" with one or several "signifieds" generates specific types of meanings that are designated as "signification systems". To quote Beasley [28], "A signification system in advertising can be defined as the set of meanings that are generated for a product by a systematic association of various signifiers (brand name, logo, ad texts, etc.) with implicit signifieds relating to personality, lifestyle, desire, etc."

Poststructuralism is a theoretical framework in the humanities and social sciences that critiques and builds upon structuralist theories, emphasizing the instability of meaning, the role of language in constructing reality, and the interrelationship between power and knowledge. From its inception, poststructuralism was not a homogeneous body of thought, and many of those associated with poststructuralism are unlikely to invoke the term to describe their work [29]. For poststructuralists, to know reality means to "subjectivise" knowledge rather than objectify it [30, 31].

Poststructuralist theorists, in particular Michel Foucault (1926–1984), proved capable of offering insight that became quite useful to emerging communication theory. Foucault's work concentrated on relationships between discourse, power, and the creation of subject positions. Foucault's investigations served to demonstrate how political power was inextricably intertwined with communication and the development of knowledge.

2.2.3. *Semiotics*

Semiology and semiotics are two related disciplines, which study semiosis, the relation of signification involving sign, object and mind, and classification of signs [32]. Semiotics allows us to examine the cultural specificity of representations and their meanings by using one set of methods and terms across the full range of signifying practices: gesture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television and so on. Central here is the idea of the sign. A sign can be thought of as the smallest unit of communication within a language system. It can be a word, a photograph, a sound, an image on a screen, a musical note, a gesture, an item of clothing. Semiotics, according to Palmer [33], refers to "the theory of signs, or of signaling systems".

Semiotics, the study of signs, has become a significant discipline within cultural studies. Originating in the work of two major cultural theorists, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Peirce (Peirce called it "semiotics" and Saussure called it "semiology"). Semiotics or semiology, serves as an efficient tool for analyzing how signs convey meaning. Semiotics encompasses not only the study of linguistic signs but everything that communicates meaning [34]. Charles Morris, another influential semiotician, also stated that semiotics has an interdisciplinary scope, encompassing signs of every form [35]. Semiotics can be divided into three major fields of study. First, the study of the sign itself examines the many ways in which a sign communicates meaning as well as how it relates to the people who construct and use it. Second, the study of the codes or systems into which signs are organized explains how various codes have evolved in order to fulfill the needs of a society or culture. Third, the study of the culture within which these systems operate investigates how members of a society use certain signs [36].

All forms of dress can be considered semiotic because they are imbued with meaning. However, the specific meaning can vary among individuals, as interpretation is influenced by cultural norms and socialization. In a key study by one of the pioneers in the study of clothing semiotics, Barthes [37], proposed a

tripartite method for the study of clothing semiotics. Based on the belief that for any article of clothing there exists three separate and distinct structures: the technological structure or the actual article of clothing itself, the iconic structure or the pictorial depiction of the article of clothing, and the verbal structure or the description of the article of clothing. Barthes [37] proposes a system for the study of clothing and fashion based closely on the study of language and its semiotic properties and interpretations. Essentially, he argues that the meanings communicated by clothing are not engendered by the technological structure alone, but by the iconic and verbal structures as well.

2.2.4. *Cultural Studies*

New approaches and methods for the exploration of fashion evolved with the new art history and also particularly within the field of cultural studies, with a group of scholars, including Dick Hebdige, John Clark, Angela McRobbie, and Paul Willis focusing on postwar youth subcultural styles in Britain [38]. Informed by structuralism, poststructuralism, and semiotics, and drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Antonio Gramsci, and others, Hebdige's book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* [39] exemplifies the approach of reading subcultural styles as forms of resistance to the dominant order.

The field of fashion studies owes its formation to a variety of approaches and perspectives that inform the study of fashion and dress, including the work of philosophers, sociologists, art and design scholars, anthropologists, economists, and historians. The term "fashion studies", however, has only been used in the more recent decades in Anglo-American contexts. The term cultural studies is now well known as the title for an important set of theories and practices within the humanities and social sciences. As its international journal, *Cultural Studies*, puts it, the field is dedicated to the notion that the study of cultural processes, and especially of popular culture, is important, complex and both theoretically and politically rewarding. While the field has now achieved recognition, it is not a discrete or homogeneous formation, nor is it easy to define.

Since the 1980s, a new wave of studies has come to differentiate itself from this approach. No longer based on analyses of the object, what is today defined as "fashion studies" is a number of different approaches to the study of fashion which are not only multidisciplinary (integrating sociology, anthropology, ethnography etc.) but also "deductive". Often, coming from the frontlines of theory (from Simmel to Bourdieu, from Veblen to larger schools such as Cultural Studies), stylized ideas are presented on how

fashion takes shape, how it penetrates the world, reproduces itself and conditions the social and the power relations between individuals and society [5]. The most recognizable and possibly the most important theoretical strategy cultural studies has developed is that of "reading" cultural products, social practices, even institutions, as "texts". Initially borrowed from literary studies, and its subsequent wide deployment owing significant debts to the semiotics of Barthes and Eco, textual analysis has become an extremely sophisticated set of methods—particularly for reading the products of the mass media [40].

The European influence on British cultural studies largely came, in the first instance at least, from structuralism. Structuralism has many variants, but its common characteristic is an interest in the systems, the sets of relationships, the formal structures that frame and enable the production of meaning. The original structuralist stimulus registered within British cultural studies was not, a theory of culture, but rather a theory of language.

2.2.5. Ontology

Ontology is the philosophical study of being. More broadly, it studies concepts that directly relate to being, in particular becoming, existence, reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations. Formal ontology was introduced by Husserl [41], but the approach is best exemplified by Nino Cocchiarella; according to whom "Formal Ontology is the result of combining the intuitive, informal method of classical ontology with the formal, mathematical method of modern symbolic logic, and ultimately of identifying them as different aspects of one and the same science ... formal ontology is a science prior to all others in which particular forms, modes, or kinds of being are studied." [42, p.640].

To appreciate the approaches to ontology characteristic of the various traditions of poststructuralism, we need to briefly acknowledge the influence of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was a significant inspiration for the development of poststructuralism, and more generally, his work has been central to the way in which we think about ontology today. For the ancient Greeks, ontology was a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of "Being" or with "what is". However, Heidegger highlighted how conventional approaches to ontology – especially since Plato and Aristotle – have tended to take a foundationalist approach. Here, ontology is more or less associated with a categorizing of the basic kinds of phenomena that are said to exist beyond the realm of appearances [43].

A number of attempts have been made that tried to build ontological representations for the fashion domain. BodyXML was such an attempt, that specified a European "XML wrapper" standard that integrated body and product representations [44]. In BodyXML, a "person" is a unique individual. The person has two attributes: "details" - unique information such as their name and contact information, color of hair, eyes and skin, shopping and color preferences etc; and multiple "representation(s)" - each of which could be a picture of a body part, a point cloud from a scan, a set of body measurements, etc. In BodyXML, a "product" refers to a clothing item, and the product has two attributes as well: "details" — unique information such as retailer and manufacturer names, textiles, care instructions etc; and multiple "representation(s)" - each of which might be a picture of a specific garment, such as a size 8 red garment, and its measurements etc. Another attempt produced ontology for garments [45]. This ontology included an abstract description of the human body and an ontology for clothing patterns. The ontology introduced a "garments" class for single pieces of garments, which can be defined as a collection of clothing patterns that are sewn together. Commonly used descriptions of garments such as jackets, trousers, skirts and dresses can be introduced as subclasses of garment class. Vogiatzis et al. [45] proposed methodology named the SERVIVE fashion ontology (SFO), a "semantic" cycle which starts and ends with the ontology. A particular individual is initially mapped to the ontology, and is finally recommended a garment that fits her from the ontology. In this manner all the information of the fashion domain is stored in a common repository, described using a common language and exploited using a common interface.

2.2.6. Anthropological Perspectives

Since the late 1980s, anthropologists have set a new research agenda on clothing, placing the body surface at center stage. Traditional anthropological subjects are closely related to fashion studies. These include ritual and ceremony, dress, body, gender, sexuality, identity, meaning and globalization. Clothing research is not a separately identifiable part of anthropology; it shares the general reorientation of the discipline and incorporates many frameworks and concerns from other disciplines that also study the dressed body. Museum-based research on textiles and cloth overlaps anthropological studies of dress, complicating disciplinary distinctions. Anthropologists are inspired by interdisciplinary scholarship on textiles and dress, dress/costume history, design/art history, and social and economic history. Works on

representation and textual analysis in cultural and media studies also provide stimulus. Compared to these disciplines, anthropology's hallmark has always been its holistic and contextual approach to the cross-cultural study of clothes and their symbolic and cultural meanings [46].

Clothing matters differently across the world's major regions [46]. Aside from examining the effects on dress practice of grand-scale processes such as colonization and globalization, regional scholarship differs in emphasis. For example, works from Latin America focus on "indigenous dress" and its transformations [47,48,49]. Africanist dress scholarship stresses the importance of dressing well and its significance for dress style dynamics in contemporary clothing encounters. Scholarship on dress in Africa revolves around the enduring appeal and transformations of clothing; the effects on dress and identity of colonization, modernity, and globalization; and dress issues in the diaspora. South Asian scholarship examines the changing cultural importance of the sari in its interaction with other dress practices. Tarlo [50] offers rich insights into clothing choices over the past 100 years in India. Both men's and women's dress consisted of cloth folded in specific ways around the body. Dress became a public issue in the 1920s when Ghandi promoted the use of homemade cloth in an effort to restore both individual spirituality and public patriotism. East and Southeast Asian research explores multiple influences on local fashion and the export and import of "Asian chic" styles, and clothing research in the Pacific poses new questions about the efficacy of material surfaces.

Recent anthropological works focus on dress to examine struggles over class, gender, and generation [51, 52] are revolving around issues of national culture [53] and revolution [54]. The chief focus in this region's anthropological dress scholarship is on the unfolding dynamics of power and directional influences on fashion and design in the process of globalization [55]. Gender debates are prominent in both anthropological theories and fashion studies. In Mead's volume *Male and Female* she asserted that in all societies there is a division of labour by sex, the care of children is more women's than men's work, the sexes are thought to be different in more than procreative ways. Research among the different ethnic groups of America, however, points to the fact that expressions of femininity may vary greatly within different cultures. Within anthropology, gender and sexuality debates are closely interlinked.

2.2.7. Sociological studies of fashion and identity

In sociological and cultural studies the relationship we have with our clothes has been mostly analyzed in

terms of fashion and identity, with a focus on the ways in which we use clothing to represent ourselves to and in the world. On this theme, the work of classic and contemporary scholars in the sociology and cultural studies of fashion has ranged widely from macro perspectives, (interpreting clothes as signifiers of structural variables -such as class, gender, race and status), to micro analyses, looking at clothes as scenic props used by actors in preparation for and in the course of their social performances [56, 57].

Among the sociological contributions of the 20th century, the highest level of continuity with Simmel's interpretation of fashion is shown in the seminal work of Fred Davis. Moving, like Simmel, from an almost Hegelian dualism, in his book *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, Davis [58] argues that fashion's main role in social life is that of mediator between dialectical terms.

The preoccupation with exploring the connection between fashion and identity is shared, around the same time, by Joanne Finkelstein who also recognizes the debt that fashion studies have with Simmel and follows him in describing clothes and fashion as a way of enhancing our social persona, by attracting the attention and the admiration of others; in her analysis, clothes are ways of self promoting, aimed at representing to the world a more complex ego [56].

Entwistle [59] advocates the adoption of a framework which addresses the complexities and heterogeneity of everyday dress practices. Such a framework can be created, by drawing inspiration from structuralism (Douglas, Foucault, Mauss), which shows "the way in which the body is rendered meaningful by culture" and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, "suggestive of the ways in which dress can be understood as a embodied practice", and combining them with insights from the works of Goffman and Bourdieu, who both provide "a sociological rather than a philosophical approach and substantiate their accounts with empirical evidence of actual social practices" [58].

The symbolic interaction perspective, also called symbolic interactionism, is a major framework of the sociological theory. This perspective relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and build upon in the process of social interaction. It traces its origins to Max Weber's assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world. Symbolic Interaction theory acts as a bridge between the individual and society. It explains how the individual makes sense of meanings and symbols via social interaction. Philosopher George Herbert Mead is credited with the development of this theory, and he has established three principles of symbolic interaction: 1. People give meaning to

things and behave towards the thing based on the meaning they give. 2. Meanings are based on social interaction. 3. Meanings are interpreted by the person [12].

This theory means that people use symbols to interact with each other and those symbols are created by, and interpreted by, the person. The theory posits that people are not interacting with the object per se, but with what they believe the object means. Thus, when you meet a stranger in a police uniform, you are reacting to what the police uniform means to you, not necessarily the uniform itself. To some people the uniform could mean safety; to others it could mean oppression.

Dress scholars Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton [60] surmise that ambivalence and ambiguity are important components that contribute to changing trends. Ambivalence is the feeling of being conflicted or drawn in multiple directions. Through the 20th century, the black leather jacket held both ambivalent and ambiguous meanings in American and European societies due to shifting changes in male identity. Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton [60] argue that all people experience ambivalence and that products produced in capitalist marketplaces (such as America and Europe) express ambivalence. The black leather jacket thus expressed the ambivalence of male identity. As the black leather jacket was worn by different male archetypical groups it created ambiguous meanings that needed to be negotiated within society. Successful negotiations of meaning rely on general consensus. Dress scholars DeLong and Park [61] noted that the black leather jacket was a symbol of military chic style in Germany during World War I, changed to total military power in World War II Germany, but perceived as brave when adopted by American military officers during World War II. Thus, the black leather jacket represents an example of symbolic interaction. Ambivalence of male identity created ambiguous meanings that needed to be clarified. Meanings were assigned to the jacket; meanings were based on social interaction; and interpreted given the situational context.

2.2.8. *New Visual-Theoretical Disciplines*

New visual-theoretical disciplines, including *Bildwissenschaft* (Image Science), visual studies, and fashion studies, steer fashion research toward interdisciplinary approaches. These disciplines recognize fashion as both a visual and cultural phenomenon that cannot be reduced solely to traditional social processes. A pivotal concept in this context is the iconic turn, which marks a shift toward prioritizing the study of the visual and its meanings within the humanities and social sciences. The iconic turn

emphasizes images as fundamental carriers of meaning, moving from textual to visual mediums as the dominant means of cultural representation. This shift opens new avenues for examining fashion as a visual phenomenon in relation to social and historical transformations. Such an approach enables the decoding of fashion objects through an analysis of their forms, construction, and networks of symbolic meaning, employing methodologies from visual semiotics, visual anthropology, *Bildwissenschaft*, and post-phenomenological frameworks.

Caroline Evans, in her book *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, Deathliness* (2003), provides a paradigmatic example of applying visual studies methods to fashion. Through an exhaustive analysis of the visual elements of late 20th-century fashion, Evans explores the ambivalent nature of fashion, which juxtaposes beauty and horror, luxury and "rags." Fashion, in her view, reflects the instabilities brought about by the technological and societal changes of the era. Drawing on theoretical insights from Benjamin, Derrida, Foucault, and others, Evans employs Benjamin's metaphor of history as a labyrinth to connect images of the past with the present. This method does not equate past and present but highlights how historical images resonate within contemporary contexts, offering a deeper understanding of modern culture.

The interdisciplinary approach to fashion extends beyond the analysis of visual elements. For instance, *Bildwissenschaft* contributes to the systematic study of visual representations, while visual studies examine the interplay between fashion, identity, and society, including analyses of digital fashion displays. Additionally, fashion is viewed through the lens of cultural capital, reflecting not only societal hierarchies but also serving as a key instrument in the accumulation of symbolic capital. In this way, fashion enables individuals and groups to assert social status through visual markers of taste, style, and belonging. This interdisciplinary framework underscores the significance of fashion as more than an aesthetic phenomenon; it is also a social, cultural, and economic process. By integrating perspectives from the humanities and social sciences, visual studies, *Bildwissenschaft*, and fashion studies provide fresh insights into fashion's role within broader societal changes and identity dynamics.

2.2.9. *The Trickle Down/ Up/ Across theory*

The Trickle Down theory is a classic example of understanding how styles change. Conceived by sociologist George Simmel (1904), it is based on class structure and class difference. The Trickle Down theory suggests that fashions begin in the upper class.

The class directly beneath the upper class observes what the class is wearing and copies them. This is then repeated by subsequently lower classes, until people in most classes are wearing the same fashion. At this point the upper class does not want to wear what the lower classes are wearing and thus changes style, prompting the entire sequence to begin a new. This is a reflection of what McCracken [69] called social distance, or using clothing to display one's social rank, and thereby social distance from others. The imitation of the lower class by the upper class closes the social distance and the differentiation by the upper class re-establishes the social distance.

More recently, Huun and Kaiser [70] demonstrated how the basic elements of imitation and differentiation can explain changing infants' and young children's fashions in terms of age, as well as gender. Cook and Kaiser [71] reinterpreted the trickle-down theory to explain the recent "downsizing" of teen and adult fashion into children's and "tweens" styles. Although the hierarchical (class-based) flow of the trickle-down theory may be challenged in many ways, the basic dynamic underlying Simmel's analysis of imitation and differentiation remains a critical part of fashion theory.

As the postmodern era began, the Trickle Down theory no longer adequately explained fashion change. Fashion styles were now originating from the common man as worn on the street. An alternative to the Trickle Down theory is the Trickle Up theory which explained this new phenomenon: fashions start in the lowest classes and are adopted by higher and higher classes until they reach the top class. This theory was proffered by scholar Field [72] and he called it "the status float phenomenon". Anthropologist Polhemus [10, 21] called it "bubble up". Fashion scholar Behling [73] suggested that the direction of fashion—trickle up or trickle down—is determined by the median age of the population. She argued that role models will evolve from a population's median age. When the median age is older, role models will likely be from upper classes and fashions will trickle down. However, when the median age is younger, role models will come from the lower classes, likely have little money, and therefore fashion will trickle up.

Trickle Across theory, also known as "mass market" or "simultaneous adoption", posits that fashion trends reach all markets at the same time. Thus the dispersal of a trend is not according to class, as predicted by the trickle up and trickle down theories. Rather, the fashion system coordinates the release of the trend through various channels. This is made possible by mass communication, mass production, and the growing middle class [74]. Behling [73] argued that

designs do not reach all market simultaneously but take at least a year. In the trickle-across model, there is little lag time between adoption from one group to another. Evidence for this theory occurs when designers show a look simultaneously at prices ranging from the high end to lower end ready-to-wear. Robinson [75] supports the trickle-across theory when he states that any social group takes its cue from contiguous groups in the social stratum. King [76] cited reasons for this pattern of distribution, such as rapid mass communications, promotional efforts of manufacturers and retailers, and exposure of a look to all fashion leaders. The key ideas of this theory are: adoption of new trends by all socio-economic groups simultaneously, consumers preference from a large scale of existing trends, within each socioeconomic group there are fashion innovators that meet their preferred fashion demands, the flow of fashion information and individual influence in the fashion world "trickles across" each social economic group, "vertical flow" remains evident, it is primarily in the fashion industry e.g. fashion editors [7].

Theories of fashion distribution all have in common the identification of leaders and followers. The fashion leader often transmits a particular look by first adopting it and then communicating it to others. Fashion followers include large numbers of consumers who accept and wear the merchandise that has been visually communicated to them.

Basic tensions addressed by fashion in Western culture are status, gender, occasion, the body, and social regulation. Craik [9] suggests potential fashion instabilities, such as youth versus age; masculinity versus femininity; androgyny versus singularity; inclusiveness versus exclusiveness; and work versus play [9]. Fashion systems generally establish means for self-formation through dress, decoration, and gesture that attempt to regulate such tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities. Social change is defined as a succession of events that replace existing societal patterns with new ones over time. This process is pervasive and can modify roles of men and women, lifestyles, family structures, and functions. Fashion theorists believe that fashion is a reflection of social, economic, political, and cultural changes, but also that fashion expresses modernity and symbolizes the spirit of the times [77, 78].

3. Conclusion

Fashion is the ultimate interdisciplinary subject, encompassing and informing diverse research areas such as art history, theater (particularly costume design), photography, cultural and gender studies,

design, anthropology, communication, modernity, identity, luxury, trend forecasting, and business/marketing. Its significance extends beyond aesthetics, influencing both social and economic dimensions to such an extent that no domain of contemporary human society remains untouched by its distinctive imprint.

The fashion process plays a pivotal role as a market phenomenon, shaping the fortunes of numerous companies and industries. It is inherently dynamic, giving rise to a series of interdependent symbolic statements over time, expressed by individuals within a social system. Fashion is not merely about design, construction, branding, consumption, or historical tradition; it resides in the intersections of disciplines, making it a rich and compelling subject for scholarly investigation.

This paper has reviewed an array of surveys and articles to explore significant theories explaining the fashion phenomenon. The research methodology employed includes a systematic and analytical review of literature, focusing on cultural theories of fashion, with data analyzed impartially through a statistical approach to the published material.

Additionally, this article has offered an overview of the development of the interdisciplinary field of fashion design. It has clarified the role of clothing in psychological and sociological contexts, presenting a comprehensive framework of theoretical approaches to illustrate how clothing choices affect, reflect, and express individual and collective identities.

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