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Fashion

analysis and adoption

A.W. Koester

Why should you read a publication about fashion? One reason is that understanding fashion saves you money on clothing. Recognizing changes and trends in styles allows you to participate earlier in the life of a fashion cycle. By recognizing and accepting fashion changes earlier, you can make your clothing wear longer, and longer wear means greater economic value. If you can recognize fashionable clothing, purchase it on sale, and keep it looking attractive and wearable several seasons, you'll make your clothing dollar stretch farther. But if you purchase clothing that isn't fashionable, even during sales, you may not get your money's worth.

Studies of clothing use indicate many adults tire of clothing before they wear it out. If you discard clothing while it's still fashionable, you can get some return on your money by consigning or selling it, and this also brings good value for whoever purchases your clothing second-hand. Many stores that deal in used clothing will accept only items that are currently in fashion.

What fashion communicates

The clothing you select and wear sends visual messages to others. Although you can't avoid sending these messages, you may not be aware of what they are. Your clothing makes statements about your gender, age, economic status, and values; often it reveals your culture, religion, social role, attitude, and lifestyle. Although a single garment might not make a statement, your total appearance, including clothing, hair style, accessories, and posture, does.

Clothing also contributes to your feelings about yourself which are then communicated to others. Your selection of clothing influences whether you feel self-confident or insecure, whether you're ready for work or play, and whether you're in touch with the world around you or disconnected from it. Dressing for a particular occasion helps you prepare for your role in that situation. Your selection of clothing can help you move into new roles and positions.

Fashionable clothing selection affects your feelings about your-self and others' impressions of you.

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Fashion: analysis and adoption

People respond to someone based on their perceptions of appropriate or inappropriate clothing. We have certain expectations about the behavior of people dressed in uniforms or in clothing with symbolic meaning, such as the clerical collar. In one study, people wearing fashionable clothes were perceived as sociable and approachable. Acceptable clothing styles resulted in positive interactions, whereas inappropriate clothing led to avoidance, rejection, or criticism. Wearing fashionable clothing makes a difference in how people react to you.

Changes in fashion

New style ideas are continually being communicated and accepted, so fashion is constantly changing.

Fashion is found in many aspects of our lives, from clothing, food, and home furnishings to economics, values, and life styles. When you select one fashion over another, you make a "fashion statement," a message about what is appropriate and acceptable at a given time and location. New style ideas are continually being communicated and accepted, so fashion is constantly changing.

Freedom of choice, methods of communication, and amount of discretionary income influence how quickly fashion changes. In countries without political freedom, choices in clothing are limited and fashion may not change for long periods. In western Europe and the United States, fashion changes so quickly that the clothing, accessories, and hair styles depicted in historical pictures help determine dates.

Basic styles are sometimes called "classic" because the change is less obvious and the style lasts a long time.

A basic clothing style such as a blazer jacket may change very little over time. However, the details of the jacket do change. The collars may be longer or shorter, the lapels wider or narrower, the armholes higher or lower, and the types of pockets different. Even a classic garment may look more or less current as a result of subtle changes in details.

Influences on fashion

The selection of clothing is a reflection of the current situation. To understand fashion and fashion cycles, you need to take a broad look at many aspects of life. At any time, influences on fashion include demographics, economics, culture, governmental restrictions and regulations, technology, and the arts.

No single person or group of people determines what fashion in clothing will be. Designers, manufacturers, mass communicators, retailers, and the public reflect the influences around them through design, production, and selection of clothing. A recent theory on fashion suggests the median age of the population determines who the role models for society will be. This influential age determines whether fashion will originate from the younger (flamboyant) or from the older (conservative) group of people. The median age through the 1970's was 27 years, through the 1980's is 30 years, through the 1990's will be 33 years, and by 2000 it will be 37 years. Since the median age is increasingly older, we anticipate fashion will become generally more conservative.

Fashion is a reflection of the multiple influences on today's life.

Fashion: analysis and adoption

Clothing selected and worn varies with location, situation, and particular group of people. The climate, attitudes, and culture of a geographic area affect local fashion. The accepting or nonaccepting behavior of others within a group will communicate what is accepted fashion and limit unacceptable fashion for that group.

As the time, location, and situation change, fashion changes. When the general economy of the country is depressed, people spend less on new clothing and less on extremes in clothing. Governmental regulations may also slow down the rate of fashion change or limit the selections consumers have available.

Currently many countries interact through trade, travel, and communication. As the result of increased trade, fibers not produced in this country such as silk, linen, and ramie are available for fashionable clothing. However, quotas on the amounts of various fibers that can be imported into the United States are negotiated with other countries every two years.

As an example of cultural and economic influence, the employment of women has made tailored skirted suits a fashionable item of clothing. Women new to professional positions often wear business suits for confidence building, thereby relying on the symbolism of clothing.

Our national concern for health and fitness has made exercise clothing like sweatsuits popular. Their comfort and easy care are suitable for the way people live, so they are widely accepted for exercise activity or for casual wear.

Advanced technology, particularly in space exploration, has produced new consumer products and more protective clothing for high-risk occupations. The Neoprene-coated nylon used in rain-resistant nylon parkas was first developed for the Mercury space suits. Nomex aramid, which was developed as a heat-resistant layer of the Apollo space suits, is used for military helmets, impact-resistant vests, and fire fighters' protective clothing.

The fashion cycle

Our culture admires change and newness. People who display the trait of accepting the newest ideas and fashions quickly are sometimes called fashion innovators. After fashion innovators have worn a particular style long enough for general acceptance, they move to new variations.

Another group of people who quickly accept new ideas about styles are fashion communicators. Usually they are in highly visible positions, which helps disseminate fashion ideas rapidly. Meanwhile mass production of a new style means that a larger segment of the population adopts it.

After a style becomes fashion and has been widely distributed, it no longer looks new and purchases begin to decline. Some people accept the style idea only when it gets to this stage. These people are sometimes described as fashion laggards. The process of introduction, communication, acceptance, and eventual obsolescence is called a fashion cycle.

Fashion styles are introduced, adopted, and discarded in predictable patterns.

Fashion: analysis and adoption

Retailers base their livelihood on making available clothing that will sell to their customers, whom they define by financial situation, age, shopping habits, interests, and lifestyle. Sometimes they describe their customers by their tendency to buy clothing according to its position on a fashion cycle (introduction, acceptance, or obsolescence).

Fashion theories

There are many theories about where fashion changes start.

There are many theories about changes in fashion, including where they start, how they are communicated, and how long a particular fashion cycle will last. One theory is that styles start with the wealthy, are copied by the middle class, then become available to people with less money. This is called the “trickle down” theory. But with today’s rapid communication and mass production, new styles are quickly available in all price ranges. This is the “trickle across” theory.

Another idea is that styles start among groups of people who have little to risk and are therefore free to explore new styles. An example is teenagers who want to show independence by becoming the innovators of a new style and wearing clothing different from that of their parents. Pre-teens and teens also outgrow clothing quickly so their selection may include short-duration or fad styles. This is called the “trickle up” theory.

The “designer” theory suggests that designers start changes in fashion. However, designers may develop new

ideas, but they are not successful unless their styles are accepted, purchased, and worn. A designer may present ideas about changes in styles, but the ideas must be modified and widely adopted before they become fashion. A related idea proposes that new ideas start in New York and Los Angeles, and if they are accepted they will be marketed to the rest of the country. This is the “geographic” theory.

People in highly visible positions, such as movie stars, television personalities, political leaders, and sports figures, spread ideas about fashion. Movies and television send visual fashion messages quickly. Still, to become an accepted fashion, a style must be selected and worn. It may be accepted only by a segment of society; for example, the variety of haircut shapes and colors worn by teenagers. Or it may be a style like jeans, which are accepted by a large number of people.

As the influences on our lives change, our ideas about clothing change. New generations want to try the ideas with which older people are already familiar. This is known as the “cyclical” theory of fashion. People sometimes save clothing hoping that its style will return to fashion, but while a silhouette may return, the fabric, the colors, and other details usually change so the garment isn’t fashionable 15 to 20 years later.

Another theory is that fashion moves from one extreme to another. This is called the “pendulum” theory. If skirts are long, we tire of that length and move to the extreme of very short skirts. In reality, most of us don’t

Fashion: analysis and adoption

accept either extreme, but moving between them gives us a sense of newness and change. Boredom may be one impetus for trying new fashions.

Fashion in groups

Whether you accept or reject fashion depends on those people who are influential to you.

Whether any new style is accepted depends on the social groups to which a person belongs. In some areas and among some social groups new styles and other innovations are quickly accepted. In other settings all new ideas, including clothing styles, are adopted very slowly. Some groups are distinctive because of their resistance to change in all forms, including new clothing styles.

For example, when you're shopping on vacation in Hawaii, a Hawaiian shirt may look attractive. Wearing the flowered shirt there communicates that you fit in with the location. The same shirt may look out of place when you wear it shopping in your home community. The reference group has changed from people on vacation in a tropical setting to people shopping for different reasons in your home community.

Some people, described as non-conformists or isolates, never accept a fashion trend in any stage of the fashion cycle. They may be unaware of the messages of clothing, or they may be very aware and have stronger values than conforming to changes in fashion. People who consciously avoid styles like those worn by others are called anti-fashion. Teenagers often express rebelliousness through wearing clothing that is unacceptable to their parents, but similar to that worn by their friends.

Sometimes the clothing of one segment of society becomes a widespread fashion. Avant garde, creative, and artistic people dress to satisfy their need to communicate their creativity and individuality. Their clothing is accepted by their reference group, but not always by the rest of society. However, some aspects of their styles may be accepted by others.

Analyzing fashion

To anticipate styles coming into fashion requires analytical skills. Many people can see a garment and decide whether they like it; some can say whether it's currently in fashion. Most people are better at analyzing current fashion than forecasting future fashion.

Although you may not care about becoming a fashion leader, anticipating style changes will help you select clothing and accessories that are wearable for a long time. To anticipate coming style changes, look at a variety of fashion magazines. In each one, find the pages written by the editors of the magazine. (Remember that advertisers are trying to sell you a product.) The editors have selected from a variety of styles those they believe represent trends. To catch your attention, both editors and advertisers show pictures of models in unusual postures. Think of this method as the attention-getting headlines of a newspaper.

To determine for yourself what trends are coming, break down the illustrations into small units. This is the process of analyzing, rather than

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Fashion: analysis and adoption

reacting to, the styles shown. In this way you can learn about new styles even though you may never want to wear what is shown in the magazines.

First thumb through the magazines looking just at the colors used for garments. List the name of each color as you come to it. Then write down whether the color is light, medium, or dark, and whether it is intense and bright or soft and grayed. Then look back through the same illustrations, listing information about the fabrics. Include any design or pattern in the fabric, the fiber content, and type of fabric structure if that information is given. You may need to read the description as well as look at the illustrations. If there is no information given, describe whether the fabrics are clingy or stiff, or whether they have a distinctive texture.

Analyzing silhouettes is more difficult. Look again at the fashion articles. Make a list of where the garments fit closely to the body and where they stand away or are held away from the body. Your list might look like this:

- neckline
- shoulders
- sleeves
- chest
- waist
- hips
- legs
- ankles

Write "C" for close fit, "M" for medium fit, and "L" for loose fit for the parts of each garment. When you're finished with several illustrations, you'll find the letters tend to fall into patterns such as numerous "L's" for legs when flared and circular skirts are in fashion.

After looking at the overall silhouette, analyze each area of the garment. For example, make a list of the types of necklines or collars pictured. Understanding style and construction terms such as band, rolled, and flat collars will help you analyze what you are seeing. Style changes include variations in size, shape, and technique. Use the same process for each major garment part such as sleeves, waistlines, and hems. A very thorough analysis may even include garment details such as pockets and button sizes.

Few people wear exactly what is pictured in fashion magazines, but you can learn from the articles and illustrations. Styles are shown in extremes because consumers don't have the visual awareness to notice small changes. Many clothing styles are modifications of those first pictured in fashion magazines.

Shirtwaist dresses are an example of a classic dress that changes slowly. Over time the collar becomes wider or narrower, the sleeves become looser or tighter, and the skirt becomes straighter or fuller. However, the shirtwaist style remains recognizable.

Anticipating fashion

The design and manufacture of clothing begins about two years before it is available to the consumer. Designers, large manufacturers, trade associations, and retailers begin product development by reviewing the recent past, looking at current trends, and studying the influences that affect people's lives. As product development begins, they inform

Fashion change increases the demand for new goods and contributes to the general economy.

Fashion: analysis and adoption

various segments of communicators, retailers, and consumers of coming trends. If the trends are accepted, the ideas are further developed and become widespread fashion. Fashion can be predicted by thorough analysis of influential factors. Factors like the general economy of the nation and of a specific geographic area usually are stronger influences on the general population than current movies or performers are. Movie, music, and television performers have a short-term effect on young people who change their looks and clothing quickly. These short-term influences are called fads. Older people are the most resistant to change and the slowest to accept new fashions. They frequently feel they don't have to keep up with the pace of young or middle-aged people.

Change is ongoing in all aspects of life and is reflected in clothing. Fashion change increases the demand for new goods and contributes to the general economy. Clothing frequently becomes psychologically obsolete before it becomes physically worn out: we tire of clothing before we wear it out.

Think about how you feel about change. In general, how do you accept new ideas? How quickly do you adopt new clothing styles? Can you anticipate what fashion changes will be coming? What does your clothing say about you?

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Fashion: analysis and adoption



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