

Applying the Four Theoretical Perspectives: The Problem of Fashion

“Oh. Two weeks ago I saw Cameron Diaz at Fred Siegel and I talked her out of buying this truly heinous angora sweater. Whoever said orange is the new pink is seriously disturbed.”

-- Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) in *Legally Blond* (2001)

In 1998, one of the main fashion trends among white, middle-class girls between the ages of 11 and 14 was the Britney Spears look: bare midriffs, highlighted hair, wide belts, glitter purses, big wedge shoes, and Skechers “energy” sneakers. However, in 2002, a new pop star, Avril Lavigne, was rising in the pop charts. Nominated for a 2003 Grammy Award in the “Best New Artist” category, the 17-year-old skater-punk from a small town in eastern Ontario affected a shaggy, unkempt look. She sported worn-out T-shirts, 1970s-style plaid Western shirts with snaps, baggy pants, undershirts, ties, backpacks, chain wallets, and, for shoes, Converse Chuck Taylors. As Avril Lavigne’s popularity soared, some young girls switched their style from glam to neo-grunge (Tkacik, 2002).

That switch is just one example of the fashion shifts that occur periodically and with increasing frequency in popular culture. A music or movie star helped by a carefully planned marketing campaign captures the imagination of some people who soon start dressing in the style of the star – until another star catches their fancy and influences yet another style change.

Why do fashion shifts take place? How and why do they affect you? Sociologists have explained fashion cycles in four ways. Each explanation derives from a major current of sociological thought that you will come across time and again in the following chapters.

Functionalism

Functionalism is one of the four main types of explanation in sociology. In their most basic form, all functionalist explanations hold that social phenomena persist if they contribute to social stability – and die off if they don’t. From the functionalist viewpoint, fashion trends come and go because they enable social inequality to persist. If they didn’t have this purpose, we wouldn’t have fashion cycles.

Here is how fashion cycles work according to functionalism: Exclusive fashion houses in Paris, Milan, New York, and London show new styles every season. Some of the new styles catch on among the rich clientele of big-name designers. The main appeal of wearing expensive, new fashions is that wealthy clients can distinguish themselves from people who are less well off. Thus, fashion performs an important social function. By allowing people of different rank to distinguish themselves from one another, it helps to preserve the ordered layering of society into classes. (A **social class** is a position people occupy in a hierarchy that is shaped by economic criteria including wealth and income.)

According to functionalists, the ebb and flow of fashion sped up in the 20th century thanks to technological advances in clothes manufacturing. Inexpensive knockoffs could now reach lower-class markets quickly. Consequently, new styles had to be introduced more often so fashion could continue to perform its function of helping to maintain an orderly class system. Fashion cycles sped up.

Functionalism offered a pretty accurate account of the way fashion trends worked until the 1960s. After that, fashion became more democratic. Paris, Milan, New York, and London are still important fashion centers. However, new fashion trends are increasingly initiated by lower classes, minority racial and ethnic groups, and people who spurn “high” fashion altogether. Avril Lavigne’s hometown of 15,000 people in eastern Ontario is, after all, pretty far from Paris. Today, big-name designers are more likely to be influenced by the inner-city styles of hip-hop than vice-versa. New fashions no longer just trickle down from upper classes and a few high-fashion centers. Upper classes are nearly as likely to adopt lower-class fashion trends that can originate just about anywhere. Functionalism no longer provides a satisfying explanation of fashion cycles.

Conflict Theory

Some sociologists turned to **conflict theory** for an alternative explanation of the fashion world. (A **theory** is a conjecture about the way observed facts are related.) Conflict theory highlights the tensions underlying existing social arrangements and the capacity of those tensions to burst into the open and cause social change.

From this point of view, fashion cycles are a means by which owners and other big players in the clothing, advertising, and entertainment industries make big profits. They introduce new styles frequently because they make more money when they encourage people to buy new clothes often. Doing so has the added advantage of keeping consumers distracted from the many social, economic, and political problems that might otherwise cause them to express dissatisfaction with the existing social order and even rebel against it. Conflict theorists therefore believe that fashion helps to maintain a *precarious* social equilibrium that could be disrupted by the underlying tensions between consumers and big players in fashion-related industries.

Conflict theorists have a point. Fashion *is* a big and profitable business. Owners *do* introduce new styles frequently to make more money. They have, for example, created The Color Marketing Group (known to insiders as the “Color Mafia”), a committee that meets regularly to help change the national palette of color preferences for consumer products. According to one committee member, the Color Mafia makes sure that “the mass media, . . . fashion magazines and catalogs, home shopping shows, and big clothing chains all present the same options” each season (Mundell, 1993).

Yet the Color Mafia and other influential elements of the fashion industry are not all-powerful. Remember what Elle Woods said after she convinced Cameron Diaz not to buy that heinous angora sweater: “Whoever said orange is the new pink is seriously disturbed.” Like many consumers, Elle Woods *rejected* the advice of the fashion industry. And in fact some of the fashion trends initiated by industry owners flop.

Symbolic Interactionism

Fashion flops hint at one of the main problems with the conflict interpretation of fashion cycles: They make it seem as if fashion decisions are dictated entirely from above. Reality is more complicated. Fashion decisions are made partly by consumers.

You can best understand this argument by thinking of clothes as **symbols** or ideas that carry meaning. Clothing allows us to communicate with others by telling them who we are and allowing us to learn who they are. This insight derives from **symbolic interactionism**, a sociological school of thought that examines how various aspects of social life, including fashion, convey meaning and thereby assist or impede communication (Davis, 1992).

A person’s identity or sense of self is always a work in progress. True, we develop a self-conception as we mature. We come to think of ourselves as members of one or more families, occupations, communities, classes, ethnic and racial groups, and countries. We develop patterns of behavior and belief associated with each of these social categories. Nonetheless, social categories change over time, and so do we as we move through them and as we age. As a result, our identities are always in flux. When our identities change, we become insecure or anxious about who we are. Clothes help us express our shifting identities. For example, clothes can convey whether you are “straight,” sexually available, athletic, conservative, and much else, thus telling others how you want them to see you and the kinds of people with whom you want to associate. At some point you may become less conservative, sexually available, and so on. Your clothing style is likely to change accordingly. (Of course, the messages you try to send are subject to misinterpretation.) For its part, the fashion industry feeds on the ambiguities in us, investing much effort in trying to discern which new styles might capture current needs for self-expression.

Feminism

Gender – one’s sense of being masculine or feminine as conventionally defined by western societies – is a central part of everyone’s identity. It is also the main focus of sociological **feminism**. Because clothes are one of the most important means of expressing gender, feminist sociologists have done a lot of interesting work on fashion.

Traditional feminists think fashion is an aspect of **patriarchy**, the system of male domination of women. They note that fashion is mainly a female preoccupation, that it takes a lot of time and money to choose, buy, and clean clothes, and that fashionable clothing is often impractical and uncomfortable, sometimes even unhealthy. They conclude that fashion imprisons women. In addition, its focus on youth, slenderness, and eroticism diminishes women by turning them into sexual objects. When Lady Gaga gets strip searched in the “Prison for Bitches” at the start of her 2010 “Telephone” video, and then enters the prison exercise yard clad in little more than chains, some feminists think she is glorifying rape and female domination. By fastening vanity

plates on her car that identify it as a “Pussy Wagon,” she is arguably reducing women to sexual objects for the pleasure of men.

However, some feminists offer a different interpretation. They see Lady Gaga as a continuation of the girl power movement that first emerged in 1996 with the release of the Spice Girls’ hit single, “Wannabe.” From their point of view, Lady Gaga is all about asserting women’s power. They note that in “Telephone,” Lady Gaga and Beyoncé go so far as to poison the men who treat them as sexual objects, and that at the 2009 MuchMusic Video Awards show, Lady Gaga’s bra shot flames, suggesting that she is not just hot but also powerful and dangerous. More revealingly, in a recent interview Lady Gaga said: “Some women choose to follow men, and some women choose to follow their dreams. If you’re wondering which way to go, remember that your career will never wake up and tell you it doesn’t love you anymore” (Spines, 2010: 54; see also Bauer, 2010; Powers, 2009).

In sum, functionalism helps us understand how fashion cycles operated until the 1960s. Conflict theory helps us see the class tensions underlying the apparently stable social arrangements of the fashion industry. Symbolic interactionism explains how fashion assists communication and the drawing of boundaries between different population categories. Feminism explores the ambiguities of gender identity that underlie the rise of new fashion trends. While each type of sociological explanation clarifies a different aspect of fashion, all four allow us to probe beneath a taken-for-granted part of our world and learn something new and surprising about it. That is the promise of the four main types of sociological explanation.

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