# THE SOCIOLOGY OF FASHION AND REBELLION: 1900-PRESENT

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

By

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# ABSTRACT

The Sociology of Fashion and Rebellion: 1900-Present. (May 2015)


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The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between fashion and rebellion within the social construct, in its historical context as well as with its current and future patterns. To identify how fashion is used for rebellion, we first must recognize how fashion is used as a form of communication and as a representation of self within society. Once this connection has been made, we will demonstrate through historical archives and scholarly text how fashion has been used throughout time as a means of social rebellion against standardized norms, political policies, and social structures. We then will classify and highlight various movements of rebellion in recent history that have used fashion as a medium for their social statements.

# DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my loving parents, Patricia and William Bacsik, who have supported me
and my rebellious lifestyle. I also dedicate this paper to my grandfather, Gene Crisp. May you
rest in peace.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Professor Murguia for supporting me in every way. With your help, I've been able to achieve things I would've never imagined possible.

# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

Fashion surrounds us on a daily basis, and despite being told not to "judge a book by its cover," we have a tendency to base our impressions of people on their appearance and what they wear (Barnard, [1996] 2002). Clothing has the ability to say a lot about a person; it can signify their socioeconomic status, their interests, age, and subculture. We choose to interact with or to ignore certain people simply based on their appearance. However, research on fashion in a sociological context has only begun to study the effect that fashion has on society, as well as the effect it has had historically on society. Some scholars have questioned the concept of fashion as field of intellectual study, claiming that clothing is just clothing, implying that all we wear is used for strictly utilitarian purposes (Barnard, [1996] 2002). Not only is this false, but clothes have impacted many societies throughout time, and have revolutionized the way people think and behave within these societies. Even fewer have taken the time to recognize the social rebellion and social change that has come from fashion, or the fashion that has come from social rebellion.

This is why the topic of fashion and rebellion within society is important to discuss. It is necessary to study this relationship because it often goes unnoticed by the general public (Kawamura, 2004); rebels are generally seen as deviants of society who should be dismissed, when, in reality, these so-called deviants are attempting to make statements for social change (Beausang, 2011).  For example, if it were not for World War I and the demand for females to enter the work force, pants would not be accepted as womenswear, nor would women be as liberated and independent as they are at this time. Keep in mind, this is only one example in history where fashion and rebellion have had an effect on society. In truth,  the effect that fashion

and rebellion have had on society is profound. The use of fashion as a means of rebellion is not a new concept, which is why it is important to identify the patterns throughout the last century to understand fashion related rebellion occurring in our society today, and what may occur in our society and other societies in the future (Lynch, 2007).

# CHAPTER II

# METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

For this study, I have examined the relationship between trends in fashion and social movements from 1900 to the present. I focused my attention on how fashion has been used as a form by which social change has been expressed. For example, concerning the women's movement of the early 1900's, Coco Chanel began designing clothes with loosened silhouettes that were comparable to menswear, as well as, more flexible fabrics such as knitwear, thus allowing more freedom for women in social and work environments.

To do this research, I studied relevant books, magazines, photographs, and other historical sources to gain information on both fashion and social change. In addition to this, in particular I reviewed scholarly literature in search of applicable theories pertaining to sociology and fashion. Although the literature on this subject was limited, some notable sources have been *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* by Fred Davis, *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* by Yuniya Kawamura, and *Fashion As Communication* by Malcolm Barnard.

# CHAPTER III

# RESULTS

## Defining and Understanding Fashion in Society

For one to fully understand the relationship between sociology, fashion, and rebellion, it is important first to define what fashion is and what its significance is in society. Fashion, as defined by Karl Marx (1954; 2002), is a form of 'social hieroglyphs', meaning that a person's clothing can signify many details about their life. Garments can indicate one's level of wealth, educational attainment, employment, social status, interests, origin, etc. This is important because social interactions are often based on appearances, especially when it comes to first impressions. Thus, fashion has become an important aspect of society because it has been used to identify and legitimize inequalities and differences between groups of people throughout time.

## Fashion vs. Anti-Fashion

Having defined fashion and how it relates to society, we must now explain what counts as fashion and what does not. Some people believe that all articles of clothing are considered fashion, which is what I have termed *The Devil Wears Prada* theory. In the 2006 film, *The Devil Wears Prada*, Anne Hathaway's character implies that her blue sweater is not fashion and that she is not attempting to look fashionable by wearing it. However, Meryl Streep's character states that all clothing should be considered 'fashion', and that all clothing has been fashionable at some point.[1]

In contrast, there is also the theory that clothes are not fashion until someone of status claims that an object is indeed 'fashionable'. This theory is what I have labeled the *Mona Lisa Smile* theory, based on a scene from the 2003 film, *Mona Lisa Smile.* In this scene, the professor shows a painting on a screen and proceeds to ask the class whether or not it counts as 'art'. To this, a student replies that it is not art until somebody says it is – somebody being the "right people." In the fashion community, those who believe in this school of thought would only consider certain items to be fashion or 'fashionable' once they've been validated by an influential individual such as Anna Wintour, Karl Lagerfeld, or even Kim Kardashian, sadly.

There is yet another theory favored by notable scholars such as George Simmel and Elizabeth Wilson, which suggests the idea of defining clothing as either fashion or anti-fashion. Fashion, in this perspective, is generally a commodity of western civilizations (Barnard 2002: 12-19). Western civilizations prioritize individuality and social status, so for many people in these societies, it is vital to be up-to-date with the latest trends to stay relevant in one's social group. In addition to this, Wilson (1992) suggests that people in modern societies use clothing as a means to fit in with their social group and validate their membership, but she implies that each person in the group is also simultaneously attempting to be distinguished and unique. A prime example of fashion in modern societies is Marge Simpson of *The Simpsons* TV show; she finds a Chanel suit at an affordable cost, but is forced to continuously alter her beloved suit so that her high-society friends will accept her and not see her as poor or beneath them. She is using the Chanel suit as a social 'cloak' to hide her middle class lifestyle, and as a means of moving up the social ladder. Because status is so important in modern societies, many people go out of their way to look as though they belong in a more desirable social group than where they would naturally be placed.

These theorists also explain the concept of 'anti-fashion', which serves to contrast the previous definition of fashion. Traditionally, anti-fashion is defined as clothing which remains constant in style throughout time, but varies by society (Barnard, 2002). However, a modern understanding of the term identifies apparel that is not part of a common fashion or trend as 'anti-fashion' because it is not what is 'fashionable' at that time. An example of anti-fashion in the traditional setting would be the ceremonial attire worn by the royal family of Great Britain. The outfits themselves have not significantly changed in style for quite some time, which is meant to instill a sense of tradition and the continuity of power.

In comparison, an example of the contemporary definition of anti-fashion would be the extremist punks of the late 1970s. These anti-fashion rebels adorned themselves with what society considered as 'unacceptable' or not fashionable clothing at that time, such as leather, metal spikes, mohawk haircuts, and so on. The purpose of this form of anti-fashion is to serve as a social protest against conformity and social norms, and specifically in this case, a stand against capitalism that made money the central value of society. The late 1970's punks stood for a rambunctious radicalism and assertiveness in society, and did so through fashion, music, and protest.

## The Rise of the Teenager

With the turn of the century in 1900, people in western civilizations were introduced to new advancements in technology through the Industrial Revolution, accompanied by advancements and changes in the social structure. Up until this point, children were put to work in fields and factories by the time they were 6 or 7 years old, and were expected to continue working until

they no longer could perform their duties, or until they died – depending on what came first. However, as the century progressed, an emphasis on youth education came into focus; children were now encouraged to further their education until high school, at least, if not college. With this came a change in the social structure because children were now allowed to remain dependent on their parents for a longer period of time.

By the 1920s, an entirely new classification of people came into focus – the young adult, otherwise known as the 'teenager'. The concept of the teenager was entirely new to people, being that these teens were not quite children, but were not independent adults either. Teenagers had the mindset of adults, but did not yet have to face adult consequences, which is exactly what they wanted. With the 1920's teenager came flappers and the 'flaming youth' (*Teenage*, 2013). Many parents and adults were worried about what their children had become; rather than being the traditional hard working laborers, they were partiers and protestors; they were rebellious. Part of this significant change in their social and economic role was also due to the fact that teenagers weren't ready to grow up; they wanted a transition period between being a child and being an adult, allowing them to have room for fun, freedom, error, and mistakes. Teenagers at this time took advantage of their social position – they were wild. Though local governments attempted to curb the nightlife, these rambunctious teens found alternatives. They began having 'Freak Parties' which is where a new wave of fashion was born. Girls began wearing shorter and more revealing outfits, leaving the restricting layered garments of former decades behind. In addition to this, teens were also taking influence from their favorite Hollywood celebrities, thus launching the start of the celebrity obsession in many western civilizations. However, it was these celebrities that introduced many of the designers' trends into the spotlight; celebrities such as

Valentino, Marlene Deitrich, and Zelda Fitzgerald. Designers such as Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Madeleine Vionnet dominated the fashion scene, bringing movable new designs, fabrics, and techniques into fashion. Chanel was possibly the most influential of the three at this time, being that she was a strong believer in using knit fabrics and often took inspiration from menswear. She was even quoted as saying, "Women must be able to move, to get into a car without bursting their seams! Clothes must have a natural shape." (Stevenson 2012: 93).

As the teenage movement progressed into the 1930's, they swapped out their flapper dresses and finger waves for a more androgynous look. As described in the movie *Teenage* by Matt Wolf, "Girls were like boys, and the boys were like girls. Sometimes you couldn't even tell us apart. We liked it that way." At this time, young women's fashion began to mimic menswear more heavily, again with Coco Chanel taking the lead on this trend. By allowing women to be more free with their movement, they could now perform jobs and tasks that were previously too difficult to do while in the corsets and layers of former decades. This, of course, happened to coincide with the feminist movement of the early 1900's.

## Mid-Century Meltdown

As teenagers set their place in society at the turn of the century, women now demanded more rights, with a desire to be on par with their male counterparts. With menswear inspiring women's wear at this time, women could now go about daily practices at ease (Stevenson 2012). Many enjoyed this new form of freedom and wanted more; if they could dress like a man and be as intelligent as a man, then they should have the same rights and abilities as men. When World

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War II began, many men were sent off to battle, so women were encouraged to take part in the workforce to fill the void left by the men at war. At the time, this was seen as beneficial for both sides of the argument – women were allowed to work and do many things that men were allowed to do, while also contributing towards the war efforts. However, when the war ended, many men returned and expected women to return to their duties as housewife and child caretaker without complaint.

With the end of the war came the end of rations, so designer Christian Dior took advantage of this by creating the classic 'New Look'. The New Look featured a cinched waist, precise tailoring, and enormous skirts which used a vast amount of fabric to create each look (Reed 2012). With this New Look, women were also re-introduced to their position as the dutiful housewife, which set the scene for the late 1940's through the 1950's. This was an era of perfection and conformity – women were expected to be like June Cleaver of *Leave It To Beaver* (1957), and men were to be clean cut and masculine like film star Troy Donahue.

As frustration grew amongst the younger generations of the 1940's and 50's, men and women alike began rebelling against the standardized norms of the time, thus introducing the Teddy Boys, Greasers, and Rockabillies. These young men didn't aspire to be football stars or grey suit corporate ladder-climbers, nor did the young women desire to waste their intellect on being housewives and child caretakers. At this time, women were usually expected to marry right out of high school and begin producing babies soon thereafter, putting their desires for a furthered education or employment to rest all for the sake of their family's social image. Men were expected to work from 9 to 5, be the sole provider for the family, and work their way up the

corporate ladder. However, as demonstrated in the 2008 film *Revolutionary Road*, many men and women were unhappy or were not accepting of this way of life because it was unrealistic. The youth of the 1950's who refused to follow their parents' footsteps lead the transition from the 'perfectionist' lifestyle of the 1950's to the mod and hippie movements of the 1960's.

As rock 'n' roll was introduced, especially with the arrival of The Beatles in America, people wanted freedom to live their life as they pleased, rather than how some guide or social standard expected them to be. Men began growing their hair out, skirts became even shorter, partial and full nudity became acceptable (Reed 2012), and so did sexual freedom thanks to the discovery of a few key drugs: the birth control pill, penicillin, LSD, 'magic' mushrooms, and marijuana (Hanson 2014: 126-157). People began living freely and carelessly, and many chose to leave behind secure lifestyles to follow the Free Love (Hippie) movement by becoming artists, festival-goers, and wartime protestors. Women at this time were particularly pleased due to the availability of the birth control pill as of 1960, which allowed them to have multiple sex partners without much risk of getting pregnant. This was a huge advancement for the feminist movement at that time because women could now partake in sexual activities the way men did – freely, carelessly, and with many people, which is where the term 'Swinging London' came from; it was a sexual revolution for all (Reed 2012). And for those concerned about venereal diseases, there was always Penicillin readily available (Hanson 2014).

## The Drug Revolution

With the introduction of psychedelic drugs, many scholars were the first to partake in testing them out, mainly because drugs like LSD were fairly easy to manufacture at any college

laboratory (Hanson 2014). As scholars began vouching for these drugs, the counter culture crowds were the first to take them up on their claims. Many artists were known for indulging in various psychedelics, such as Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane, The Beatles, and Jimi Hendrix, among many others, which lead to some of the greatest albums, fashion, and artwork of that time period. Many designers at this time began featuring psychedelic patterns on clothes inspired by hallucinogenic 'trips', such as Yves Saint Laurent, Biba, and the design duo of Celia Birtwell and Ossie Clark. With the introduction of various drugs combined with the newly found sexual freedom, the 60's and 70's fashion scene saw a mass experimentation on design and fabric use, taking fashion to new heights that had never been reached before. Women such as Jane Birkin would wear mini mesh dresses with only a pair of underwear on underneath, leaving their breasts entirely exposed. The 60's and 70's were a time for experimentation that managed to take influence from a vast amount of cultural and societal happenings, as well as advancements in technology. However, as the 70's progressed, many people became increasingly dissatisfied with the current social and cultural attitudes, ranging from a dislike of disco to a distrust of the government; this later started what became the Punk movement of the late 70's and early 80's.

## Punk Protestors

As the 70's came to a close, many people began to realize their constant discontent with social, cultural, economic, and political happenings. For some, this era was considered a "Third Awakening" as people desired a shift from the communitarianism of the 60's to individuality, whereas others consider the time to be an era of political awareness. The Punk movement came about for various reasons in various places; economic hardships in parts of the world, such as the UK and Asia, lead to rebellion against the government, with distrusting citizens of the promoting

anarchy in response to the current state of affairs. But what can be considered a political rebellion also served as a social rebellion. Punks of this era were considered deviants of society, with spiked hair, spiked jackets, and rebellious attitudes, all of which demonstrated anti-fashion at its finest (Barnard 2002). However, the Punk movement had an impact on more than just fashion – bands such as the Sex Pistols and The Ramones gave a voice to the movement, while artists such as Jamie Reid, and designers such as Vivienne Westwood gave the movement a look. While the Punk movement only lasted a few years, its impact on fashion, music, art, and philosophy are still present in today's societies.

# CHAPTER IV

# CONCLUSION

Through this study, we have examined the relationship between sociology, fashion, and rebellion, and with this, we have determined that there is sufficient evidence of a relationship between the three variables. Fashion, though not generally considered an area of sociological research, has had significant impacts on society, just as society has had a significant impact on fashion throughout the past century. And if it weren't for rebellion, society and fashion would most likely remain stagnant.

At this point in time, it is difficult to declare what is the current social rebellion that involves fashion, due to the fact that fashions and trends are so readily available in many places that once a counter culture group arises, clothing corporations tend to replicate their style at an affordable cost almost immediately, making them available for the general public within days or weeks of an occurrence. However, it is noticeable that for the past few years the feminist movement has made a comeback, and has been significantly impacting current art, fashion, music, society, culture, and even politics, with important figures such as Petra Collins, Hillary Clinton, Wendy Davis, and Beyonce. It is possible that there are other movements that will characterize this decade in the following years, but as for now, I believe the feminist movement will be the most impactful and defining social, fashion, and rebellious movement of this time period. It is evident that the feminist movement and technological advancements are what characterized many of the rebellious movements discussed in my research, so it is sufficient to suggest that they will continue to have a significant impact on fashion and society.

# NOTES

[1] "You go to your closet and you select... I don't know... that lumpy blue sweater, for instance because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise. It's not lapis. It's actually cerulean. And you're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves Saint Laurent... wasn't it who showed cerulean military jackets? I think we need a jacket here. And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. And then it, uh, filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic Casual Corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room from a pile of stuff." – Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006)

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