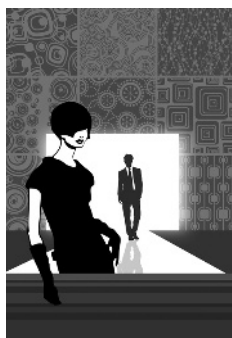


CHAPTER I

WHAT MAKES SOMETHING FASHIONABLE?



What Can Be Fashionable? From Pugs to Poodle Skirts

The word is, Montauk is the new Hamptons this summer. East Hampton is overpopulated, overrun by celebrities, predictable, and just tired. Montauk is largely unscathed and full of surprises. It is the epicenter of all things new and cool. There you will meet the new “It” people: emerging artists, young designers, models, and socialites. You will learn that taupe is the new black, that the trendiest drink is a new-style dirty martini, and that global scenesters are personalities *du jour*. The look is something vintage, something Green, the hottest tune is 1980s electro-kitsch, and the mood is hipster cool. The list goes on and is instantly updated.

Judging by this description, just about anything can be fashionable: people, colors, pets, ideas, artistic styles, places, and moods. Even political ideologies, scientific theories, and mortuary practices come in and out of vogue.¹ Here we will focus on fashion’s most familiar form: clothing. But

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we think that the account we will develop may extend to these other cases. The question we will ask is, what makes something fashionable? To answer this question, we will use a series of thought experiments and real world examples to draw attention to the attitudes and activities that drive trends.

As we will see, fashion is not just a matter of beauty. Even bad taste can be fashionable (see Rei Kawabuko's recent work for Comme Des Garçons if you have doubts). And fashion is not just a matter of trends; a whole population can be unfashionable even if they go in for the same clothes. Nor is it simply a matter of what designers decree: Coco can be loco, Klein can decline, we can pass on Blass. What, then, makes one piece of clothing fashionable and another *faux pas*? Where's the magic? We will argue that trends and trendsetters both matter, along with attitudes, aesthetic affiliations, and contexts. The challenge is showing that each of these variables plays a role without overstating or mischaracterizing their respective contributions.

Do Masses Matter? Robinson Crusoe's Runway

1977 marked one of the most significant events in recent fashion: the launch of Calvin Klein jeans. The new denim code was clean, minimalist, and pure sex. The ad campaigns were provocative; the ultra-slim fit came as a revelation and the status of jeans as blue-collar was forever changed. The brand got an immediate cult following. Those away from the United States at the time discovered denim revolution upon return. Everyone was wearing Calvins. Everyone was talking about Calvins. Everyone craved Calvins. CK jeans were suddenly and overwhelmingly in style.

To learn that Calvin Klein jeans had become fashionable, all one needed to do was to look at the streets. Their huge popularity (over half a million sold in the two weeks following commercials) signaled that they were "in." Our methods have not changed since then. The masses are reliable indicators of what's fashionable at the moment. To find out what's in, we observe the pedestrians and visit street-style blogs. Once we see conformity to the trend by a large group of people, it is a sure sign that the item has come into fashion. Ultra-destroyed jeans, for example, are the prevailing look on the street this season, so we immediately conclude that the item must be in vogue.



The masses, however, do not merely serve as a *barometer* of what is fashionable at the moment. Their role is larger. Consumers of the product are essentially involved in *making* the item fashionable. CK jeans did not become fashionable the moment Calvin Klein expressed his approval of Calvin's first prototype. Their "It" status had changed once their consumption statistics plummeted: everyone started wearing them.

You may disagree with this idea and think that we should keep the two roles of the masses apart. You may think, for example, that Calvin worn by a large group of people does *show* that they are fashionable. But, what *makes* Calvin fashionable are fashion experts – designers and editors. These people are the arbiters of fashion. They cause transformation of the mundane item into the one that's in vogue. The masses are like sheep – mere followers of what is determined for them in the fashion Olympus. Fashionability is always up to fashion experts. We just follow.

Let's test this idea by considering the following hypothetical situation:

Stagnant Sales

Chloe has been an important designer in the last decade. Her collections are praised by fashion critics, sell out in major department stores, and spark rip-offs by mass-retailers. Chloe has recently designed a brilliant collection that even more exclusive designers like Lagerfeld would be proud of. It got favorable reviews and the upscale department store, Neiman Marcus, ordered most of the items. The collection, however, was ignored by the customers due to recession, and was eventually sent off to storage. Are the items in Chloe's collection fashionable?

If the proposal above is right, then the answer should be yes: most fashion insiders would deem Chloe's work "true fashion." But, there is a strong pull in the opposite direction. We want to say that they are *not* fashionable. The reason for that is that Chloe's new designs have *no actual influence* over current fashion. Of course, her collection would have enjoyed success on the market, had there been no recession. But as is, the designs failed to inspire a following. Key looks from her collection never caught on.

No following, no fashionability. To reinforce this idea, let's go back to our real-life example with Calvin Klein jeans. At that time in history, to see that Calvin's were in, you merely had to look at what the majority were wearing. You could very well ignore what was going in prominent



fashion houses or on Paris runways. Had you checked on fashion houses, you would have learned that YSL had introduced peasant dresses and Valentino debuted his new obsession: a Goya red. Curiously, one would see no sign of CK jeans on the runway. Yet, which item was so obviously fashionable at the moment? Calvins!

Fine, you may concede, fashionability is ultimately up to the people wearing the trend. But why think that in order for something to be fashionable, the trend must acquire *massive* conformity? Can't something be fashionable for just one person even if no one else is copying the trend? Can there be individual fashionability? Enter Robinson Crusoe. Consider this twist on Swift's story:

Robinson Crusoe's Runway

Robinson lives on an uninhabited island and wears whatever he can make from the materials at hand. One day Robinson looks at his soiled, nasty clothes and gets tired of his garb. He decides to construct a new leather jacket for the coming winter. Having planned the design, Robinson feels that he is on to something with the jacket. After it's done, he looks at it and decides that it is just the coolest thing ever. Isn't the jacket fashionable for Robinson?

Some may say yes; something can be fashionable for only one person. We think that this intuition is driven by the confusion between being cool and being fashionable. Coolness can be an individual thing. Robinson thinks that his jacket is super-special. It is aesthetically superior to all his clothes and has certainly raised Robinson's style quotient. However, the jacket would *become fashionable* only if many people copied it. To generalize, until an item of clothing is worn by a large group of people, it is just an element of *personal style*, regardless of how forward, cool, and exciting it is. Fashionability requires mass-consumption.

Do Experts Matter? Khaki Glory

One worry about the account so far is that it does not allow us to distinguish popularity from fashionability. To bring this out, let's consider khaki pants, which, until recently, were a major fashion no-no, despite their immense popularity. Khakis, we will see, are truly remarkable.



Fashion-talk has a term “a basic piece.” It refers to the items that constitute the fundamentals of style. Fashion-savvy people will recite to you a little black dress, a simple white button-down shirt, a sharp blazer, and great pants. These are the building blocks of the look. Like blank canvas, they set up your outfit for injection of color, diversion, and style. Here is a shocker: khakis are not on the fashion fundamentals list.

You might think nothing could be more neutral, innocent and solid than a good old pair of Gap khakis. But khakis had been black-listed. They were not even “a nice try.” They were a *faux pas*, causing fashion-insiders to wince. In other words, khakis were to fashion as Taco Bell is to Mexican food – an embarrassment.

That is, until recently. Khakis are having a serious fashion moment now. No longer are they a sad pedestrian obsession. These days, they are chic. They are relevant. They are even meaningful. Slightly rolled-up khakis, paired with an easy shirt, convey “urban cool.” Worn with a leather jacket, they become “rocker chic.” People who embrace beautifully tailored khakis are themselves beautiful, elegant, and yes, very fashionable. In summary, khakis did not gain mere sartorial recognition. In a matter of weeks, they pivoted from nothing to all in fashion: utter chic.

Why the change? It’s not like considerably more people started wearing khakis. Khakis were already popular and didn’t acquire much more circulation. That means that we can’t appeal to difference in their collective consumption in order to explain their new “It” status. Neither can we point to a dramatic transformation of their look. The new khakis are nearly identical to their decades-old counterparts; those a professor would wear to class or children would wear to church.

So what *has* changed? Only that the key players – fashion insiders – have changed their minds. The players are fashion creators and its professional critics: designers, creative directors of the brand, editors, buyers, and critics. And their action? A declaration.

This declaration went through multiple channels. Established designers put khakis on the runway and in ad campaigns. *Vogue* and *Elle* ran khaki-themed editorials. Magazine exposure led to the production of khakis as a luxury item. Crucially, khakis went high-end without the involvement of conservative labels, like Ralph Lauren, known for perfectly executed classics. Rather, they were produced by the most coveted and forward brands like Dsquared2, Martin Margiela, and Comme Des Garçons. Having created a sensation in high fashion circles, khakis trickled down to the masses. Many interpretations followed, and khakis diffused as the hottest new item.



Who altered the status of khakis? Professionals, not the masses. But, didn't our earlier examples show that it was ultimately up to the masses to make something fashionable? This is puzzling. On one hand, when we determine what's fashionable now, we often just check on what the majority is wearing. On the other hand, we routinely rely on fashion magazines and the runway for their verdicts. Does our practice reveal incoherence? Who is fashionability up to: the experts or the masses? We believe that fashionability is up to both. Experts are integrally involved in "fashionizing" of an item by the masses.

Against this contention, one might argue that there are situations in which experts do not matter. Consider cases where a new look appears on street-style blogs before showing up on the runway. In fact, some looks come into style contrary to expert opinion. Here is an example:

Loathsome Leggings

Rachel, whose style Rob always admired, shows up to a meeting in leggings. Eventually, leggings become a staple in her look. Rob is not a fan and desperately wants her to rethink her style. After mining the *New York Times* Style Section, Rob informs Rachel that many fashion authorities loathe leggings: they think that leggings should be banned to fashion hell. She is unfazed. "So what?" She says, "The trend is *major*. All celebrities are wearing leggings, and so is everyone at my work. Look around!" Are leggings truly fashionable?

We think yes; leggings are officially vetoed by the experts but are still in fashion. So, do experts matter for fashionability or not? As a matter of fact, they do. Once we consider how fashion cycle works across cultures, it becomes apparent that the role of fashion authorities is indispensable. Fashion is essentially a leader-follower culture: it is a large social institution that *thrives* on people following the lead. An even stronger view suggests that fashion-merit is a myth, systemically generated by the industry in order to legitimize designers' work. Brilliant designers don't exist. There is only brilliant marketing that successfully generates conformity.²

In summary, fashion may be considered fundamentally subjective and thus be solely a matter of taste, but it is typically the *experts'* taste that instigates a following. Were it not so, fashion editors would be out of jobs and American *Vogue* circulation would not reach 1.2 million. As of now, both have been vital for establishing and popularizing a trend.



We obey the dictates of fashion experts about the majority of trends. But what about trends which are first born on the street or are disapproved by the fashion elite, like the leggings? These, too, acquire their “It” status in virtue of the leader-follower dynamic – only, the leaders in question are not certified professionals, but people with an intuitive sense of style, capable of aesthetic innovation: the trendsetters. We defer to the new authorities: models, celebrities, socialites, or anyone style-savvy in our social group.

Contemporary fashion is just as Kate Moss-driven as it is Anna Wintour-driven. In fact, the power of high-profile fashion personalities is so great that when a handful of them sports a new look, there is already an inclination to say that it’s fashionable. On our analysis, it won’t be fashionable until consumers follow the trend, but since trendsetters can be accurate predictors and causes of the trend, this way of speaking simply anticipates the nearly inevitable outcome.

The upshot is that we accept something as fashionable because people we regard as *experts* declared it to be so. This has been the case with the majority of trends. We embraced the new glory of khakis; the brave even went for cropped men’s trousers and harem shorts (a veritable pants’ liberation movement). But, we generally pull out when fashion gets extreme. Martin Margiela’s coat made entirely of blond wigs, Jean-Paul Gaultier’s crocodile overalls, and Louis Vuitton bunny ears seem beyond us. Extreme trends rule the runway but not the streets.

It would be rash to conclude from this that experts don’t matter for fashionability. The fact is, such styles are a part of a completely different game. They belong to what fashion-insiders call “Fashion with capital-F” (or High Fashion) and so obey different rules. Haute couture (for example, Christian Lacroix) is artistically exquisite and most exclusive. Concept Fashion (for example, Margiela’s wig coat) is fashion that is designed to express a specific idea: it provides a commentary on prior trends, or takes a bold stance on what is currently culturally important. Like Couture, its products are not meant for mass-proliferation. In addition, extreme trends may pop up in what is typically a prêt-a-porter segment. They are often put forth as suggestions: many are exaggerations that are intended to be toned down and reinterpreted, rather than used literally. They will not become popular (at least not in their literal form), nor are they meant to be.

Because capital-F Fashion works differently than mass-fashion, our general lack of deference to experts about extreme trends is appropriate. Experts have a full say in Fashion, but not in mass-fashion. In mass-fashion,



they will tell us to take the trend to the streets; in High Fashion, the command is to worship.

Ironically – if our analysis is right – something can be a Fashion item without being fashionable. Recall the Chloe scenario. On our account, her collection is not fashionable because it failed to pick up a following. Still, many may have a lingering feeling that Chloe’s work deserves to be counted as fashion. In calling it fashion, however, we merely recognize that the collection is a legitimate part of the fashion world, not that it is in style. A fashion item or a trend does not become fashionable solely in virtue of belonging to the industry (for instance, by being a part of High-fashion.) Instead, a trend acquires the requisite status *if* it gets “big” on the streets *because* some fashion guru declared it “the next big thing.” A self-fulfilled prophecy, indeed.

Do Intentions Matter? Accidental Chic

So far we’ve been suggesting that, when it comes to fashion, many people must be wearing a particular style and that style must also have the endorsement of experts. But this analysis is incomplete. People also have to be wearing the same style for the right reasons. Mere convergence is not enough.

Consider the following case:

Runway Relief

The latest, highly coveted Kate Moss Topshop collection is sent as humanitarian aid to a small island that has been hit by a tsunami. The islanders wear the clothes regularly, because their old clothes are in tatters. Are the islanders fashionable?

Our intuition is that the islanders are not fashionable. But notice that they meet the conditions set so far: group conformity and expert endorsement. The problem is, they are not wearing their wardrobes by choice. They are literally “fashion victims.” Likewise, Nazi soldiers were required to wear designer uniforms manufactured by party member Hugo Boss, but it sounds strange to credit the soldiers with being fashionable, because they did not select these uniforms themselves. People are not fashionable if they conform to current trends without the right intentions.



One might think there is an easy fix. Perhaps something can be fashionable only if it is worn by choice. This is true, but even choice is not enough. Consider:

Coincidental Couture

Suppose that punk style is in vogue. Skinny jeans, flannel shirts, and combat boots are on runways and magazine covers. Then, by coincidence, a teenager in rural Arkansas who knows nothing about punk and even less about fashion goes thrift-store shopping. By accident, he picks out clothes that match the exact trends right. Is this young man fashionable?

Again, the answer is no. The accidental punk is *dressed* fashionably (his clothes happen to be right on the trend). But it would be undue praise to say that *he himself* is fashionable. He would deny the charge adamantly. He would be humiliated to discover that his lowbrow personal aesthetic aligns with highbrow fashion houses. He may be frustrated that people expect him to like punk rock, when he'd rather listen to country. To qualify as fashionable, our thrift-store cowboy needs to choose his getup for the right reasons; he must intend to conform.

The idea of conformity raises an immediate worry. Some fashionistas pride themselves on expressing their individuality through fashion. They want to stand out. This suggests that, at the very core of fashion, there is a kind of paradox. Fashion demands conformity, but fashion is also a form of self-expression, which seems to conflict with conformity.³

Fortunately, the paradox is merely apparent. Fashionistas are simultaneously conformists and individualists, because fashion always involves choice. First, the fashionista must decide to be fashionable; not everyone cares about couture. Second, the fashionista needs to decide which trends to follow; she might have a favorite designer or a preference for street wear over formal wear. Third, every day she must choose what to wear, and that often involves mixing elements and selecting something suitable for her mood, personality, and agenda. In these ways, the fashionista is expressing individuality and conforming at the same time. And, finally, she may add a personal touch that departs from current trends. If lucky, she may even help spark an innovation. Progress in fashion requires that innovators do something that isn't yet fashionable, and style mavens who modify trends may lead the way. Invention and convention are not opposing forces, but stages in an ongoing cycle of change.



Do Aesthetics Matter? Form Over Function

We have been suggesting that fashion involves a desire to conform, and that this desire does not preclude individuality. But the conformity criterion faces another problem. Recognizing that an item of clothing is worn by others and forming the desire to conform is not sufficient for regarding it as fashionable. Consider a case:

Gang Green

A local street gang has decided that green will be the gang's signature color. To identify themselves, gang members wear green caps and bandanas. Gang members want to wear what the others are wearing, so they choose to conform by wearing green. Are they fashionable?

Our intuition is that they are not. But why not? It can't be that the group is too small. As we will see in the next section, small groups can have their own fashion. Nor can the problem be that the gang is wearing green as a symbol of group membership. Demarcating group identity can be a major motivation in fashion. The problem seems to be that the gang is not wearing green on account of its aesthetic virtues. Compare the origin of the necktie. Apparently, Croats invented the ancestor of the tie (cravats, which derives from "Croats") when they served as hired soldiers in the seventeenth century; there were no uniforms at the time, so neckwear was used to signal national identity. Then, Louis XIV decided he liked the Croatian look, and adopted his own version, adding some royal flourish. The French masses soon followed suit, so to speak, and a fashion was born. The difference between King and Croat is that Louis chose cravats for aesthetic reasons.

This raises a question. What do fashion-conscious consumers seek when they select an item of clothing for its aesthetic value? A full answer to this question is well beyond the scope of our discussion, but we'll offer a few remarks. In fashion, aesthetic value is not the same as beauty. Ugly things can exemplify good taste if they have other virtues, like being humorous, sexy, ostentatious, distinctive, exquisitely crafted, or relevant. As we are using the term, all of these features are "aesthetic" because they go beyond function, and have something to do with form. Indeed, even when designers boast functionality as a trend, as in these tough economic times, they are really turning functionality into a form, by creating



forms that reflect utility rather than, say gratuitous ornamentation. In the Bauhaus school of art, which helped to usher in modernist architecture, designers preached form over function, but what they really meant is that design elements should not introduce features that overtly exceed functional requirements. The Bauhaus was as aesthetically focused and form-focused as any other movement. Likewise, good fashion design is all about form, even when the aesthetic trend is to make form follow function.

Another important feature of aesthetic value is that it depends on the beholder. That does not mean it is a matter of *personal* preference. For an outfit to be praiseworthy, it's not enough that the wearer likes it. We can like things for purely sentimental reasons or because they are flattering. To wear something for fashion's sake involves regarding it as having aesthetic value that others would recognize. That's one reason why experts are so crucial in fashion. They can arbitrate what counts as good at any given time (recall khakis). Something once regarded as awful becomes awe-inspiring after we see it in a glossy magazine. Experts divide the gaudy and the glamorous – and they can even make the gaudy count as glamorous, as with Louis XIV.

So, when people choose a style for its aesthetic value, they are banking on the fact that it would be *endorsed as good by experts*. They are not simply assuming the style is attractive (it might be intentionally unattractive). They are assuming that the style is a good look, even if it doesn't look good. That is, they are assuming the style could appear on a boutique mannequin, or be selected for a photo shoot. There is no universal formula for what makes something good, because it's the essence of fashion that it values change. But fashion is an aesthetic pursuit, and fashion seekers will work to align their preferences with styles that would be recognized as praiseworthy by aesthetic experts. That doesn't mean a fashionable person is someone who consults an expert before getting dressed each morning, but, when confronted with expert opinions, fashionable people are likely to adapt their taste.

Does Identity Matter? Tribal Colors

On the story we have been telling, something is fashionable only if it's worn for its aesthetic value, and experts play a role in determining which things have value. But we also observed that being an expert is not simply a matter of getting paid to write fashion columns. Someone is an expert



only if consumers defer to her judgment. This brings out a crucial fact about fashion: different groups defer to different experts. Consider the following scenario:

Mod-ist Mistakes

A twenty-something couple is obsessively into the mod subculture. They listen to mod music, hang out at mod-themed clubs, and, above all else, wear mod fashion. He's into narrow-lapelled jackets and skinny ties; she likes her mini-skirts, geometrical patterns, and androgynous hairstyle. These elements come and go in mainstream fashion, but this year mod is out. A style snob sees this couple on the street and scoffs, "That look is so last year." Are the mods unfashionable?

This is a tricky case, because sometimes the word "fashionable" is used to track whatever fashion gurus in top-line fashion magazines are recommending. In this respect, the mods may be woefully out of sync. But they are not making a mistake. They simply don't care about the authors of *GQ* and *Elle*. They defer to Townsend and Twiggy, and, relative to mod ideals, they are bona fide fashion plates.

Thus, what counts as fashionable depends on a consumer's aspirations. That does not mean anything goes. The mod couple could get it wrong. A thick tie would be catastrophic. The point is that "fashionable" is relative. When the term is used without mentioning a specific group, it usually refers to mainstream standards in the local culture. But, when talking about a subculture, we imply a different set of standards. Mods can be accused of making a fashion *faux pas* only when they violate the style standards of their cohort.

This brings us back to a theme touched on earlier. Fashion is crucial for group identity. It can indicate class, musical preference, religion, nationality, political party, or sexual preference. We are all very good at reading fashion codes, and doing so helps us make quick judgments about the people we encounter. If everyone followed the same trends, the use of fashion as social signaling would be greatly diminished. That would be a loss. Fashion is fundamentally tribal. It's a quick way of finding friends and foes, dates and dullards.

Some aspects of the fashion code are relatively enduring. The nouveau riche like conspicuous consumption, with a special emphasis on status symbols and labels. Those with old money are more likely to either dress down or don conservative clothes that look out of date to



style trackers. Urban youth with few resources may go in for something garishly flashy. Bohemians tend toward eclecticism (such as mismatched socks) or wear clothes that indicate membership in a known counter-culture (such as punk or grunge). The working class will signal disinterest in fashion trends by keeping it simple, casual, and consistent over time. Religious and ethnic minorities will seek out innocuous styles that are readily identified with their groups or, if they want to assimilate, they will tend towards inoffensive mainstream trends. These are gross generalizations, of course, but they underscore the role of fashion in identity.

It follows from this that fashion expertise is relative too. Being fashionable depends on willingness to defer to mavens of good taste, but goodness of taste depends on group affiliation. Those who want to be fashionable must first identify the group to whom they want their couture to appeal. Only then can the appropriate experts be identified.

Does Timing Matter? To Everything, There is a Season

We've been suggesting that fashion is group-relative. It is also relative to time. Fashion is that it comes in temporally bounded trends. This might seem to be a merely contingent feature of fashion, but we think it's essential. Consider:

Timeless Trousers

Like many fashion-conscious denim devotees, Jeanette keeps up with the latest blue jean trends. She has pairs that are raw, destructed, engineered, and everything in between. But she also has one pair that seems to remain chic when every other fad fades. These jeans are so perfectly cut and so versatile that they strike Jeanette as absolutely timeless. Could it really be true that this perfect pair is always fashionable?

The answer should be obvious. No pair of jeans could be truly timeless. They have only been in circulation since the late eighteenth century, and in many places they are considered unacceptable attire. A woman in Sudan was recently arrested for wearing a denim skirt deemed too tight. Even Jeanette's "timeless" trousers are probably less enduring than she thinks; in 20 years they might seem hopelessly recidivist – likewise for her perfect



black dress, and her all-occasion flats. Clothes that endure for many seasons, wouldn't survive a single century. Timelessness is a misnomer.

This is no coincidence. We think fashion *must* change or it will cease to serve its purpose. Fashion is used to signal that one is tuned in to trends and willingness to discard old robes before their threads wear thin.⁴ A person cannot be fashionable without flux, and an item of clothing cannot be fashionable without being “in.” The idea of something that is in fashion forever verges on incoherence, because the “in” implies a contrast; something must come in, and then go out. There are societies that wear the same fashion for ages (the Amish, for example), but that very fact makes them decidedly and intentionally unfashionable.

Fashion requires trends, and trends cannot endure too long without undermining the consumer's ability to advertise their awareness of the latest looks. In the contemporary post-industrial information age, trends have much shorter life spans than they did in the past. Major fashion houses introduce five collections annually: two ready-to-wear lines, resort, pre-fall, and High Couture. In addition, they often do capsule collections for “fast-fashion” chains, such as H&M and Uniqlo. Consumers feel compelled to follow such rapid shifts for various reasons: they need to adjust to weather changes; they want to signal that they have disposable income; they want to attract mates by showing concern for appearance, and they want to avoid the ridicule reserved for those who fall behind the times.

There are a number of factors that can influence the specific content of fashion trends. One factor is the economic and political mood of the culture. In conservative times, like the 1980s, we saw preppie trends and dressing for success.⁵ In the freewheeling 1970s, the look was more DIY casual. “Natural looks” were popular during the sexual revolution of the 1960s, as were short skirts, echoing a trend of the roaring 1920s. Body types have also fluctuated with the times.⁶ Just as richer people want to show control by looking thin, and poorer people want to advertise wealth by packing on the pounds, we have seen anatomical preferences, and accompanying fashion shift toward the dangerously skinny in times of economic growth, whereas more curvaceous looks came in after World War II to advertise renewed prosperity after times of hardship. Fashion has also moved in step with the women's movement. Women's suffrage ushered in the sexy, yet androgynous looks of the Jazz Age, and the women's lib movement coincided with Yves Saint Laurent's *Le Smoking*, a tuxedo suit that allowed women to hang up their party dresses and literally wear the pants.



Another economic factor involves the dynamics of class. In our society, the wealthy have higher prestige, so people with less often imitate the looks of the wealthy, leading to fashion spread, but the wealthy want to retain their elite status, so when the high end fashion collection get copied by The Gap, it's time to move on.⁷ Ironically, designers often come up with innovations for the elite by borrowing elements from small subcultures, which are not usually affluent, due to the growing democratization of fashion. Thus, an urban street look from this season might be quoted in an upscale boutique next season, then copied in H&M the following season, like a silent dialog between rich and poor.

Of course, endless novelty would put too much pressure on designers, and consumers who crave innovation may also gravitate toward the tried and true. Studies on aesthetic preference show that familiar things appeal.⁸ This has two implications: innovations cannot depart too radically from what has come before,⁹ and fashion will tend to repeat itself, bringing back styles from past decades. Fashion revival faces one serious constraint, however. If something comes back too soon, the wearer might give the false impression that she is out of date, rather than following the latest trend. Thus, overt revivals often come after a couple of decades when today's trendy young consumers would have been in their diapers. The fashionista who wore flared jeans in the 1990s was not wearing bellbottoms in the 1970s, so there is no mistaking her for a hopeless throwback. Recently, however, trends have been recycling more rapidly. This is a consequence of greater fashion pluralism, which allows people to shift between multiple co-existing styles, thereby avoiding the impression that they are frozen in a bygone era.

In these and other predictable ways fashion trends wax and wane. Each period has its own look, which both reflects the times, and becomes emblematic for it. In the history of fashion, we find the history of changing identity.

Conclusion: What Matters?

We have been addressing the question, "What makes something fashionable?" If we are right, four conditions must be met. First, a look is fashionable only if many people are wearing it. Second, individuals regarded as experts, though not necessarily fashion professionals, must endorse the look. Third, those who wear the look must intend to conform



to the trend. Fourth, they must also regard the look as having aesthetic value, and this may involve deference to the experts. In addition, we argued that fashion is relative to groups; different subcultures have their own looks and their own expert-driven aesthetic standards. And fashion is also relative to times; what it is today will be out tomorrow. More concisely, a style is fashionable if it's a current trend that many people choose to follow because individuals they regard as chic give it the thumbs up. We suspect that this analysis could extend to fashion trends beyond attire (such as pets and pastimes), but we will be content if this helps you figure out whether it's time to shell out for a new pair of jeans.¹⁰

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- 10 We are grateful to the editors for helpful feedback and involving us in this exciting volume.

