# The Evolving Role of Class in Choice of Fashion in Postmodern Society

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**Abstract.** Class plays a diminishing role in the criteria by which people choose fashion in today's society. This means that in most cases, people no longer choose fashion according to their class status, but according to their personal preferences. An essential feature of postmodern society is the deconstruction of symbols and the cultural flow that accompanies this liberation of symbols. This paper analyses the reasons for this characteristic and phenomenon of postmodern society as a way to question the adaptability of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to the times and to propose the idea of the separation of fashion and class. Then, although postmodern society still contains the characteristic of stratifying people according to meaningless symbols, the role of the media cannot be ignored at a time when the internet is prevalent. By analyzing Juris's theory of the aggregation of media, this paper further elaborates that people's fashion choices in today's society tend to be more individualistic.

**Keywords:** Class; Fashion choice; Postmodern society.

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between class and fashion has long been the focus of academics in this field, with numerous studies showing that, in most cases, the same class has similar fashion tastes, and that there is an implicit matching between class and fashion type. In other words, it is common for people to judge a person's social class status by their garments and in turn to judge whether or not they dress appropriately based on their known social class status, or worse, the phenomenon of fashion 'discrimination' has occurred. This link between class and fashion can be seen as a form of identity, positioning people in society through fashion, categorizing into a group and distinguishing oneself from other groups by presenting similar group fashion tastes. In fact, this identity is based on the modern symbols with clear 'signified' and 'signifier', and people can understand what the symbols mean. Furthermore, fashion as a cultural symbol is given class meaning. However, many researchers argue that the current development of fashion culture is more in line with postmodernism. Postmodernism can be understood as fluid, indeterminate and without a uniform standard. As a representative scholar of postmodernism, Baudrillard in his book Symbolic Exchange and Death refers to fashion as the completed form of economy. In other words, fashion is not used to satisfy human consumption needs, people only consume in fashion if their consumption needs have been satisfied. Which means, fashion is useless; that is, it only retains the 'signifier' of symbols losing its 'signified'. In this case, the symbols can be replaced will repeatedly [1]. Because of this interchangeability, fashion gets a symbolic liberation which means anyone is free to choose any type of fashion and the symbols of class are no longer convincing. In addition to this, the study of fashion in a postmodern society cannot ignore the role of the media. Because of the role of mediatization, interpersonal relations are gradually being influenced by individualism. Groups are no longer defined by class in the fashion field, but by individual choices and preferences in a more egoistic way. Therefore, this paper will investigate whether the role of class in post-modern society is slowly diminishing in terms of the types of fashion chosen by people. Firstly, this essay will analyse the shift in the way of choosing fashion style in postmodern society and the reasons for this conversion. The second part will be the impact on the class of the logic of aggregation brought by the rise of the digital media. This paper is a concrete application of postmodernism in the field of fashion, delving into the impact of postmodernism on individual and social development. Since there has been less research in

sociology on fashion, this article will enrich this field to some extent. In addition, this article stands against the use of fashion to judge the class status of individuals and is informative in reducing the phenomenon of class discrimination and class-bound free choice that occurs in society.

## 2. The separation of fashion and class symbols in the context of postmodern society

### 2.1 Bourdieu's cultural capital and class

The phenomenon of cultural mobility in postmodern society has reduced the role of class in fashion choices. As a cultural capital, the acquisition of fashion no longer relies on class relations primarily, and fashion in postmodern society has shifted from top-down class communication to non-directional communication. Cultural capital in general can be divided into three types. The first one is the spiritual dimension, the second is objects with cultural attributes, and the third one is the institutional dimension [2]. For example, in the first form, the national spirit of a country that has been passed down through generations or the ethic of family or nationality can be considered as a form of cultural capital. They are acquired as ideas or values that are learned, adopted and shared. The second type is more realistic and physical, such as historical relics, works of art and classic literature. These are concrete objects that carry cultural heritage and are vehicles for the presentation of culture. People can acquire them through creation, inheritance and purchase. The third type of cultural capital generally arises as a result of institutional rules that refer to society, such as degrees obtained through study, skills certificates obtained through examinations, as well as national policies on the development of cultural categories, activities and projects related to culture issued by organizations to society. The key to this type of cultural capital is the availability of access and capital. Therefore, access to this type of is mainly through procedures and qualifications. Based on the above examples and analysis, the processes of design, production, consumption and deconstruction of fashion can be seen as cultural capital or transformed by cultural capital. In other words, artistic tastes and creations related to design, limited styles related to consumption, luxury brands, cultural co-branding and fashion shows related to deconstruction and the ability to appreciate artworks are all cultural capital that can be acquired through certain means. When fashion becomes a trend due to a person or event, it can also become a symbol of the collective spirit. For example, the colors of Japanese kimonos are mostly light and painted with cherry blossoms, fish, snow, chrysanthemums and the moon, which are strongly symbolic in nature in Asian culture, showing that the Japanese people pursue simplicity and reverence for nature [3]. This example illustrates that different costumes can become a symbol of identity of each nationality and convey the culture of the nation.

Around the 18th and 19th centuries, fashion was updated from the top-down by class. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, cultural appreciation varied depending on one's social class status, and each class had a culture type that belonged to its own class, which was different and had absolutely clear boundaries [4]. This suggests that cultural capital is unevenly distributed between classes, and that the upper limit of cultural capital for each individual depends on your class. It is difficult to access cultural capital that does not belong to one's class. Simmel also states in his account of fashion that in fact, it is a style and a trend arising from the elite firstly. This class is defined by the fashion style, and then the lower classes promote the dissemination of fashion from the top to down in order to imitate the elite. So, the spread of fashion can be seen as a form of imitation [5]. This series of statements is in line with past trends in fashion. Before the 20$^{th}$ century, culture was closely associated with class, with high culture being the symbol of the aristocracy and popular culture being the symbol of the working class. Adams Smith also describes the search for advancement as human nature; the assimilation of higher classes through imitation is identified as a virtue of modern human society to promote economic development [6].

In conclusion, fashion is inherently a cultural capital that the higher classes can easily access and use to demonstrate their economic power and social status, as well as the visibility of their status by leading a certain fashion. When the lower classes have access to this cultural capital, fashion is not to

be fashion in the true sense of the word and becomes a product of imitation. At the same time, the higher classes, having completed this stage of fashionable outward display, start a new fashion styles which continue driving fashion forward.

### 2.2 The phenomenon of cultural mobility has weakened the relationship between fashion and class symbols

However, it has not been the case since the 20th century, cultural mobility impacts the role of class in fashion choices. Bourdieu mentions that there are certain limits to the acquisition of cultural capital, as an individual's origin and family determine the availability of ability and time to access cultural capital [2]. From this argument, it can be analyzed that Bourdieu believes cultural capital is mainly acquired by the accumulation of family and class status, it is already determined from birth which is unchangeable and immobile. But placing this argument in a postmodern society makes it easy to question it. Take the hoodie as an example, a garment that originated and was seen as a symbol of the lower classes and subcultures. With the development of this clothing, nowadays it has been a very common garment in all classes. Some high-luxury brands, such as Balenciaga and Celine, also offer high-quality hoodies to the public. Another example is the famous British designer Vivienne Westwood, who was born into a low-class family. As a child, she had no access to the high cultural capital, but finally became a world-renowned master of design [4]. According to conventional theories of cultural capital, Vivienne, as a child of a working-class family, theoretically does not have the means or the capital to acquire such high culture as art. Even if she accesses it, it will still not be seen as a real mastery of cultural capital or a change in class status. However, it is not the case. Vivienne masters the art of design through various means, including education and social circumstances, and finally gains a high degree of social recognition. The above two examples are referred to as cultural flow, which means that culture can move between classes. In other words, cultural flow in postmodern society means the freedom and the right to choose one's own preferred culture [7]. The above demonstrates that the spread of fashion is not only top-down, but fashion can also originate from the middle and lower classes spreading upwards. It is obvious that fashion choices are moving away from the symbols of class, taking more into account of individual preferences with the diminishing attributes of the class.

The main reason for the cultural mobility In fashion is that fashion in postmodern society retains only the ‘signifier’, and it is the freedom of the ‘signified’ that allows class to play a diminishing role in fashion choices. To demonstrate the limits of Bourdieu’s dichotomy between high culture and popular culture, it is necessary to return to the logic of Bourdieu’s account of the relationship between culture and class. Bourdieu argues that it is the profits generated by the scarcity value of some cultural capital that gives culture its distinctly class character [2]. Hypothetically, if this view is applied in the field of fashion, this will imply that fashion has a value distinction. However, this is not the case. According to Baudrillard's analysis of postmodern society, it can be argued that postmodern society is a society of overproduction. The commodity value of objects is no longer crucial, and in most cases, consumption becomes simply an act of being stimulated rather than satisfying a need. The purchase becomes a purely purposeless act which leads to a loss of value in the commodity [8]. Baudrillard also argued from a semiotic perspective that postmodern society is a ‘hyper-real’ society, where symbols retain only their ‘signifier’ and no longer have the ‘signified’ part [9]. The above appointments show that the most typical feature of postmodern society is the deconstruction of the sign, where the sign is only itself without a concrete meaning. The use value and consumption value of commodities no longer exist, as these value needs have already been satisfied. So the consumption of commodities is a meaningless act. This is the reason that Baudrillard makes the point that it is this emptying of the meaning of the act that gives rise to fashion [8]. Combined with the concept of cultural flow, it is easy to conclude that fashion has no meaning when placed in the context of postmodern society. Therefore, it is not possible to judge the social class of individuals through fashion, nor is there a limit to social class for fashion. Zhuang Li also suggests that Baudrillard believes that the logic of fashion’s development is recursive. Its development is merely a cycle from

the new to the old, and then overturning the old to become the new [9]. This view illustrates the ability of fashion as cultural capital to flow between classes in the absence of a class orientation. The spread of fashion is practically directionless, but is simply the result of people's curiosity for something new, and each new fashion emerges as a result of the masses' innate choice of a new fashion. For example, hippies belonging to the subculture originated from the working class and the indigenous people, yet the youth of the upper class followed the hippies and imitated the dress and behaviour of the hippies belonging to the lower class [10]. In this example, it can be analyzed that the hippie movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, is classified as part of postmodern society. The emulation of the upper classes actually removed the class significance of hippie clothing, as hippies did not sigh for the lower classes, but only a subculture of hippies themselves and the upper classes are able to ignore class and gain subcultural capital through emulation. To sum up further, the line between high culture and popular culture is no longer clear, because with the phenomenon of cultural flow, the class symbols of cultural capital are liberated and cultural capital is flexible. Any class has access to all kinds of cultural capital, so that the class is no longer as important as the criterion that defines high culture and popular culture.

Although the main feature of postmodern society is the liberation of symbols, this does not mean that difference and distinction are absent in postmodern society. In fact, many scholars argue that in postmodern society, it is a society that needs to be differentiated according to symbols that have lost their concrete meaning. Baudrillard also points that one of the manifestations of a consumer society is the differentiation of people through the consumption of symbols. However, this distinction is not based on class, but more on distinct individualism and aesthetic differences. This argument will be described in more detail below.

### 2.3 The aggregation of media in the internet age has increased the motivation of individual choice in Fashion

The separation between class and fashion has been discussed above. However, the link between class and fashion is ultimately reflected in people's thinking. As mentioned above, in the past it was common to choose clothes according to class, and people's past fixed mindsets could influence their judgement of fashion and class. With the emergence of 'celebrity chav', for example, a study shows that public opinion of celebrity dress is still very class-based and that celebrities also choose fashion to fit the image they portray [11]. What can be interpreted in relation to this research is that 'celebrity chav' are those who present an image on the screen that is not in keeping with their class, or who fail to satisfy public expectations leading to criticism and accusations. In further analysis, there is an underlying commonly accepted image of class in people's minds, including the way they dress and behave. But this fixed image is disintegrating in the internet and postmodern society. With the liberation of fashion symbols, there is a shift in people's thoughts in class and fashion. In other words, people have the courage and opportunity to choose their favourite clothes. The main driver of this shift is the aggregation of digital media. Juris proposes the notion of a logic of aggregation of media, where the media can bring together people with different identities on a platform that can also be seen as an unfamiliar socially weak link [12]. This idea implies that in some cases, individuals choose common topics or organization in the media not because of their identity background but through the easy and fast interconnectivity of the internet, which quickly assembles all kinds of groups of people. In these groups, individuals can have personal expression while finding a sense of collective belonging. Take the hoodie as an example, the hoodie has been shown in front of the public from the late 1970s to the present, breaking through the label of the lower classes. The media and celebrities play an important role in driving this development. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, called for people to view hoodies equally and to dispel the stereotype of the hoodies as a symbol of the lower classes in society which elicited a lot of agreement from a wide variety of people on the internet [13]. It is obvious that as a celebrity, Zuckerberg's call-in media not only propagates the idea of reducing the class positioning of hoodie, but also causes his fans and people who have the same idea and value to form a group within the media as a platform to oppose the linking of hoodie to class. In other words,

under the influence of the celebrity effect, people on the internet join the group by expressing their personal expectations. Through this example it can be suggested that due to the rapidity of aggregation and the diverse backgrounds of the people in the same group, the sense of belonging is strengthened. This is because the logic of aggregation in the media is such that people's class is not the first factor to be considered, and when people are less labeled, they are more purely confronted with a common purpose. In other words, the media broadens the identification and support of people from different backgrounds. Therefore, in the media, people are more likely to choose fashion according to their own ideas and interests because they have the support and strength of a group by aggregation rather than being restricted by labels such as class.

It is clear from the above discussion that it is impossible to ignore the media factor in postmodern society. Our everyday life has gradually become mediated. Mediatization means that the media are not present in everyday life as a method or technology but are part of, or even fundamental to everyday life [14]. From this point of view, it is possible to analyse that the study of fashion cannot be dealt with solely in terms of its representation in postmodern society. The differentiation in postmodern society is more individualistic and aesthetic because of the aggregation of media. Differentiation in postmodern society is more a result of the aggregation of common expressions due to self-selection, and thus the existence of differentiated groups is more clearer in society.

## 3. Summary

This article argues for the declining role of class in fashion choice, and questions the limitations of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory through the phenomenon of culture flow in postmodern society, the characteristics of postmodern society and the aggregation of the media. Firstly, the article explains Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and discusses that fashion belongs to the category of cultural capital. Secondly, it explains the theory of cultural capital and discusses its adaptability to the times. It is argued that this theory is more in line with social reality before the postmodern society, but it needs to be questioned now. This is followed by a discussion of the perspective of culture flow and the phenomenon of cross-class cultural mobility, where people have access to various types of cultural capital. It then goes on to explain the de-symbolized and de-valued of fashion, based on Baudrillard's analysis of postmodern society and fashion, further illustrating the separation of culture from class. Finally, the article standing in the perspective of the change of people's thoughts, illustrates that through the logic of media aggregation the media in the Internet era bring people together from different backgrounds. It can expand the sense of collective belonging and identity and facilitate people's motivation to make fashion choices based on their preferences. Overall, this article is an application of sociology to the field of fashion, using a postmodernist framework to explain the separation of fashion from class symbols. However, research in this area is still lacking, and the research in this paper stands only on a single theoretical level in conjunction with social phenomena to explain it, lacking more literature and theoretical support. The increasing effect of fashion in society, even in relation to politics, economics and social development, leaves much room for the need for research in this field.

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