

# The Relationship Between Fashion and Socioeconomic Class

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## Introduction

People in lower socioeconomic classes often make efforts to restore their sense of power by acquiring status-related objects or by engaging in behavior that signifies wealth. It is through opulence, intricacy, and access to labor that the upper class has consistently utilized fashion as a marker of social status and affluence. Fashion has been a way of expression, communication, and social differentiation. It is not something that exists only in magazines or runways or trends. It is in the streets, the slums, the most lively cities, the oldest institutions, and the richest corners.

**Research Question:** Through a historical and modern lens, what is the relationship between fashion and socioeconomic class?

**Thesis Statement:** The relationship between fashion and socioeconomic class is derived from access to wealth, wealth signaling, and the exploitation of workers.

## Background

### French Royalty

During the reign of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the royal court was known for its extravagant spending on clothes, jewelry, and entertainment in the Palace of Versailles. Parties were only for the nobility, whose clothing style featured elaborate designs, rich fabrics, and extravagant decorations such as lace, ribbons, bows, and ruffles. While this was happening, 90% of peasants lived at or below the line of poverty (Censer and Hunt, 2019).

### Age of Industrialization

With the industrialization, urbanization, and colonial expansion of England during the Victorian Period came a large demand for coal. Coal was used for steam engines, iron and steel production, heating, and chemical manufacturing. Coal miners were predominantly from the low economic class, of various ages, and faced long hours in cramped, dark, and poorly ventilated underground conditions. Their clothes were dark, discolored, and had built up coal dust and grime. They wore the same sets of clothing, which contributed to the image of coal miners being dirty. Those who were wealthy wore white, elegant clothing that required extensive care. This demonstrated their ability to avoid labor-intensive work, engage in activities associated with leisure, and distance themselves from the lower classes. Lower classes (Bailey, Hatton, Inwood; 1212).

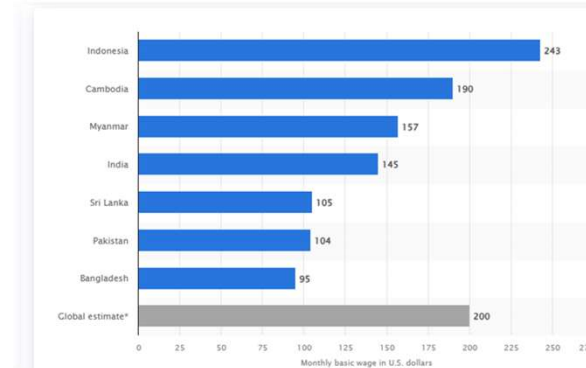
### Fast Fashion

Fast fashion is a fashion business model that focuses on the quick production of inexpensive clothes in large quantities in order to meet rapidly changing consumer trends. Some examples of fast fashion companies include Shein, Zara, H&M, Fashion Nova, Forever 21, and Primark. Fast fashion prioritizes cheap materials, frequent collection releases, disposable, and impulse buying. It relies on global supply chains, with clothing often being manufactured in developing countries, allowing for the exploitation of workers who are paid meager wages, subjected to poor working conditions, and lack legal protections. The fast fashion market is expected to grow from its 2022 value of \$106.42 billion to \$122.98 billion in 2023 (Thomas 4, Holenstein 85).

## Methodology

I began my research by finding articles on Google Scholar and about conscious consumption, the allure of money, and the differences between previous and modern ways of expressing wealth. Once I found articles that spoke about the major themes of my research, I began looking for articles and books that used niche keywords/phrases. Overall, I did my research in the form of literature review.

## Data & Statistics



Graph of the average monthly wage of garment worker in the top fast fashion-making countries in Asia. The average pay is \$200 a month, the lowest \$95, and the most \$243. (Wage of Garment Workers in Asia, 2021)



Miller, Douglas.  
“Zoot Suits.” Getty

Images, 22 June 1948.



Holbein, Hans. “The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England.” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1537.



Collins, Claire; Hannah. “Behind A \$13 Shirt.” Los Angeles Times, 31 Aug. 2017



Bening, Simon.  
“Book of Hours.” The British Library, 1540.

## Findings

- Fashion is an integral part of human history. It's been used to communicate culture, social identity, political resistance, empowerment, and wealth. It is first through dress that groups and individuals give themselves meaning; and attention to fashion has not only allowed the upper class to distinguish themselves from the lower class, it has also reinforced existing hierarchies and power dynamics. Being rich gives the power of influence, resources, opportunity, and network (Sampson, 7). **What draws people to luxury, to aesthetic, and to prestige isn't just silk or pearls or chiffon, but rather the idea of being able to style yourself visually as someone who is societally powerful.** The decisions of the wealthy can shape industries, drive economic growth, and change the world (Cadmus, 70).
- During the Tudor dynasty, Henry VIII famously passed sumptuary laws- rules created to limit the amount of money spent on clothes, furniture, and accessories- to ensure that the lower class could not emulate the fashions of the royal court (Hooper, 433). In the 1940's, zoot suits were a popular style of clothing in African American, Mexican American, and Filipino American youth. The suit's bold and distinctive style set it apart from conventional fashion, signaling a form of class distinction. Its association with working-class and minority communities made it a visible symbol of subcultural identity. However, this visibility also led to tensions and conflicts with mainstream society, particularly with white policemen who viewed zoot suit wearers as challenging the status quo. **The two examples show the power of the purse. The power to influence and control all that comes with wealth. The power to look down on someone not only because of their class but also their race.**
- You cannot talk about wealth without talking about fashion and vice versa. You cannot talk about either of those things though, without talking about quiet luxury. Quiet luxury is a fashion style characterized by minimalism, neutral colors, and a lack of logos. The exclusivity is in the attention to detail, high price, and often limited production that differentiate items from mass-produced alternatives that are available to middle and lower class people (Romagnoli 2020). The middle class is not free from critique when it comes to its role in the fashion industry. **It is the pursuit of profit and the demand for cheap, disposable clothing made by the middle class and then enlarged by the upper class that perpetuates a capitalist system that benefits corporations at the expense of workers' well-being.** Attention to fashion has allowed the upper class to reinforce their positions and distinguish themselves from lower socioeconomic classes by highlighting the privilege and power held by a small elite at the expense of the rest of society (Zdatny, 54). However, it is class struggle that continues the cycle of fashion as a tool of power.

## Conclusion

As we delve into the implications of fashion on social class, it becomes evident that the issues surrounding wealth, wealth signaling, and the exploitation of workers in the fashion industry are inextricably linked to socioeconomic class and power dynamics. Fashion has the capacity to either reinforce existing social inequalities or challenge them. **We should ask ourselves “How much will fashion change when those who have been denied a seat at the table create a table of their own?”**. In the future, I recommend looking at more intersections. Understanding how different aspects of identity intersect to influence fashion can provide insights into the complex dynamics of class representation in fashion. I also recommend research that looks at how capitalism affects fashion and social dynamics.