



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## The Sociology Of Fashion Week:

*Exploring The Cultural And Social Significance Of Fashion Week On Society*

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**Abstract :** Fashion Week, a global spectacle, transcends its visual beauty to shape cultural norms, societal values, and economic systems. Annually, events like Paris, Milan and New York Fashion Weeks collectively generate billions in economic activity. New York Fashion Week alone contributes approximately \$887 million to the local economy. Sociologically, Fashion Week acts as a barometer of social change, reflecting and shaping trends in sustainability, inclusivity, and identity. The rising prominence of sustainable fashion addresses the staggering 92 million tons of textile waste produced annually, with brands increasingly adopting eco-conscious practices. Additionally, the industry's pivot towards diversity and inclusion reflects broader societal shifts, as evident in the representation of various ethnicities, genders, and body types on the runway.

Fashion Week also democratizes cultural production, amplified by digital platforms that engage millions globally. Social media, live-streamed shows, and virtual runways enable broader participation, disrupting traditional hierarchies of exclusivity. Gen Z, accounting for nearly 60% of the fashion consumer base, prioritizes ethical practices and self-expression, further driving these transformations.

This research explores Fashion Week as a social institution, analyzing its cultural and economic significance, its role in shaping identity and values, and its potential as a catalyst for progressive societal change.

**Key words-** Fashion, Beauty standards, social class, culture.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Fashion Week is a high-profile event held in major cities around the world, such as Paris, Milan, New York, and London, showcasing the latest trends in fashion. These events are more than just a display of clothing; they are sociocultural phenomena that influence global perceptions of beauty, status, and identity. Fashion Week is a platform where the social, cultural and economic aspects of society intersect, often reflecting the power dynamics and social stratification that shape our world. Through the lens of sociology, we can examine how Fashion Week not only dictates trends but also plays a critical role in shaping societal norms and expectations related to beauty and status.

This research article explores the sociology of Fashion Week by focusing on its cultural and significance. We will analyze how these events influence cultural perceptions of beauty, identity, and social hierarchy. Furthermore, we will consider how Fashion Week operates within the boarder context of globalization, social class, and race, and how it reflects or challenges societal values.

## II. DATA SOURCES

### Secondary Data:

- Academic journals (e.g., *Fashion Theory*, *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*).
- Reports from organizations like the Business of Fashion (BoF) and McKinsey & Company.
- Social media analytics and trend reports from platforms like Instagram and YouTube.
- Archives of fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It employs Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory to analyze how events and activities in culture are involved in the reproduction of social hierarchies. Fashion Week is platform where symbolic, economic, and cultural capital converges and set the values and norms in the society. Digital media's role in democratizing fashion is explored in the application of Manuel Castell's network society theory that identifies technology as the center in reconstructing the culture of dissemination and access. Sustainable development framework is applied to evaluate Fashion Week's attempts at reducing environmental degradation and upholding ethical practices. Erving Goffman's views clothing and appearance as tools of impression management within social interactions. He likens fashion to a dramaturgical performance, where individuals present themselves strategically to align with societal norms and expectations.

The integration of these theoretical lenses provides a nuanced appreciation of how Fashion Week operates as reflection of current society and force of change.

## IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Davis (1992)** discusses the inherent exclusivity of fashion week, noting its role in maintaining social hierarchies. The allocation of front-row seats, celebrity endorsements, and media coverage often perpetuates a class-based distinction in fashion consumption. This exclusivity highlights the socio-economic divide between the elite and the masses, as fashion weeks are often seen as accessible only to privileged groups. However, the increasing digital coverage has somewhat democratized access, providing a virtual front-row experience to a broader audience.
- **Entwistle (2000)**, fashion shows are not just a display of clothing but a medium that allows designers, models, and audiences to engage in cross-cultural dialogue. This dynamic interaction promotes understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural narratives, reinforcing the idea of fashion as a global language. The blending of traditional and contemporary elements in shows often reflects broader societal trends of globalization and hybridization, highlighting how fashion week serves as a microcosm of global cultural dynamics.
- **Kawamura (2005)** explores how fashion weeks influence personal and collective identity formation. By showcasing avant-garde designs and challenging conventional norms, these events encourage individuals to experiment with self-expression. The interplay between designer intentions and audience interpretations reveals the role of fashion as a medium for negotiating identity in a rapidly changing world. Fashion Week thus acts as a site where cultural identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed.
- **Crane and Bovone (2006)** analyzed the economic implications of fashion weeks in major cities like Paris and New York. They argue that these events drive significant economic activity, generating revenue for local businesses, tourism, and media industries. Furthermore, the global attention garnered during these weeks creates a ripple effect that benefits emerging designers and local artisans. This cyclical relationship between economic vitality and cultural production underscores the interconnected nature of creative industries and urban economies.
- **Fletcher and Grose (2012)** examine the environmental impact of fast fashion showcased during these events, highlighting the growing demand for sustainable practices. They note that while some designers and brands have embraced eco-conscious themes, the industry at large struggles to balance aesthetic

innovation with ecological responsibility. Fashion weeks are now seen as critical spaces for advocating sustainability and fostering industry-wide change.

- **Rocamora (2017)** investigates how live streaming, social media, and virtual presentations have altered the way audiences engage with fashion. These digital tools have expanded access and allowed for real-time interaction, reshaping the traditional hierarchical structure of the fashion industry. Digital platforms have democratized fashion consumption and critique, empowering a more diverse range of voices in the discourse surrounding fashion weeks.

## The Role of Fashion Week in Shaping Beauty Standards

Most significant is perhaps the way Fashion Week shapes cultural standards of beauty. Fashion models, designers, and trends showcased at Fashion Weeks determine what “beauty” or “beautiful” at a particular moment. In this way, Fashion week is an influential force in defining beauty standards that influence individual’s self-concept, body, image, and shopping habits. For instance, the prevalence of tall, slender models on Fashion Week catwalks has been a recurring trend over the years, part of the social norm of “ideal beauty”.

This idealization of some body types is not only aesthetic but rather a question of underlying social and cultural values. Sociologist Erving Goffman’s “presentation of self” in social situations provides a framework to comprehend how individuals present themselves in society. In Fashion Week, fashion designers and fashion houses actually determine what type of bodies, faces and identities ought to be present on the catwalks, thus affirming constraining notions of beauty. The greater attention of fashion reflected in campaigns for size inclusivity and diversity resists such constraining standards of beauty but also indicates how deeply entrenched these ideals are in the development of individual and collective concepts of beauty.

Current trends and statistics have shown that the diversity of race, gender, and size has been at the center on the catwalks of Fashion Week. The 2020 report by Fashion Spot shows that the proportion of models of color at New York Fashion Week ((NYFW) reached 41.5%, compared to previous years. This is a huge shift towards increased diversity, reflecting broader cultural trends such as the Black Lives Matter and the call for more diversity in the fashion world. Critics, however, argue that while there has been progress, there is still a lot that can be done in an effort to make fashion more diverse because the fashion world remains very Eurocentric.

## Fashion Week and the Social Construction of Status

Fashion Week is also inherently connected to the construction and establishment of social status. While the event is a celebration of haute couture style, it is also an exclusive event in which the influential and elite congregate. The exclusive invitation-only nature of Fashion Week, in most instances, creates a social dichotomy that mirrors broader social dichotomies of status and class. This celebrity-governed nature of these events gives the invitees present- celebrities, influencers, and fashion elites- the means to signify their social status through participation.

Social theorists Pierre-Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” theory is an apt reference point for analyzing the role of Fashion Week in the construction of social stratification. Cultural capital is non-economic capital (e.g., knowledge, skills, taste) that individuals employ to confer their social status. In Fashion Week, high-cultural capital individuals- designers, writers, celebrities, etc.- are likely to have the power to make trend-setting choices, enforce what is fashionable, and patronize certain lifestyles. This role serves to consolidate dominant social orders, whereby fashion accessibility and participation in fashion events are markers of higher social status.

Celebrity culture, which is inextricably tied to Fashion Week, also serves to reinforce the social construction of status. Celebrities and influencers will, of course, use their attendance at these events as a way of enhancing their own status. Fashion Week is thus a stage upon which the rich and famous can publicly display their control of the cultural hierarchy. The spectacle of these events serves to reinforce the utilization of fashion as a vehicle of social differentiation. A good example is the Met Gala, an annual fundraising gala for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute, which demonstrates how fashion events can become a convergence of art, culture, and social status. The extravagance and exclusivity of these events serve to reinforce the intersection of fashion with both economic capital and cultural prestige.

## Fashion Week as a Site of Globalization and Cultural Exchange

Fashion Week is also an important location for considering the process of globalization. Global fashion capitals such as Paris, Milan, New York, and London exercise greater influence than the nation-state. Fashion capitals create global style that the world's nations are instructed to emulate, which indicates the global extent and influence of fashion. The internet age has even amplified this extent, with social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Tik-Tok providing instant access to fashion runways, backstage footage, and direct interaction with fashion designers and models.

Yet, globalization also creates severe problems of cultural appropriation and commercialization of indigenous cultural practices. As fashion brands continue to take inspiration from multicultural cultures, concerns have arisen regarding the commercial exploitation of indigenous aesthetics and designers for financial gain without adequate acknowledgment or respect. Victoria's Secret's controversy for cultural appropriation of indigenous headdresses for its fashion shows is a textbook reminder of the contradictions between cultural exchange and cultural appropriation. Such examples highlight the necessity for increased cultural sensitivity among the fashion industry, especially in transnational events such as Fashion Week.

Furthermore, the "fast fashion" phenomenon has also been the focus of controversy over the global influence of Fashion Week. Mass rapid production of low-cost clothing to be in line with current fashion, commonly referred to as fast fashion, has faced global criticism on human rights and environmental fronts. The emphasis of Fashion Week on the fleeting nature of fashion encourages consumers to purchase a new, championing the fast fashion phenomenon. Fashion Week's emphasis on the constantly changing nature of fashion is accused of perpetuating such trends as overconsumption, wastage, and exploitation of low-paid labor in developing nations. More emphasis on the fashion world in sustainability has prompted some designers to show green collections at Fashion Week, opening the door to more sustainable production and consumption patterns.

## Race, Identity, and Representation at Fashion Week

The intersection of race, identity, and representations is a focal point of analysis in the sociology of Fashion Week. Historically, Fashion Week has been criticized as racially and ethnically homogeneous with white models holding sway on the runways. Fashion Week, perhaps the most visible and influential space in the fashion industry, has been the site of innumerable debates about representation.

In the recent years, however, there has been increasingly a focus on Fashion Week presentations becoming more inclusive. The 2020 New York Fashion Week had a record number of Black models appearing on the catwalk, both a response to social pressure for racial equality and an acknowledgment of the importance of racial diversity on the catwalk. The call for greater visibility of people of color, as well as models of varying body types and gender identity, is part of the broader cultural shift toward acceptability and inclusivity.

Fashion Week here is also a microcosm of wider social tensions about race, power, and identity issues. Sociologist bell hooks' "the oppositional gaze" theory can be applied to describe how oppressed groups perceive and resist mainstream status and beauty representations. Increased visibility of non-white models on Fashion Week is a redefinition of, and a resistance to, mainstream fashion beauty standards.

## V. CASE STUDIES

### 1) Economic Impact

Fashion Week's economic significance is immense, with the fashion industry valued at over \$1.7 trillion globally. Cities hosting these events benefit from tourism, hospitality and retail. For instance, Milan Fashion Week contributes over \$70 million to Italy's GDP annually. Beyond direct financial impact, the events serve as a launch pad for emerging designers, fostering innovation and creating jobs.

### Case study: New York Fashion Week

New York Fashion Week is not just a runway spectacle but an economic powerhouse. According to a study by the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), the event attracts over 150,000 attendees, including industry professionals and tourists, boosting local businesses. Hotels, restaurants, and transportation services witness a surge in demand, demonstrating the interconnectedness of fashion and urban economies.



## 2) Cultural Significance

Fashion Week serves as a cultural touchstone, reflecting and influencing societal values. It has historically been a platform for challenging norms, as seen in the 1960s with Yves Saint Laurent's "Le Smoking" tuxedo for women, which redefined gender norms in fashion. Today, inclusivity and diversity dominate the conversation. Runways increasingly feature models of diverse ethnicities, genders, and body types, aligning with broader societal calls for representation.

### Case Study: Savage X Fenty Show

Rihanna's Savage X Fenty shows have redefined inclusivity in fashion. Featuring models of various sizes, ethnicities, and abilities, the show not only celebrates diversity but also, challenges traditional notions of beauty. By leveraging streaming platforms like Amazon Prime, it reaches a global audience, democratizing access and reshaping industry standards.

## 3) Sustainability and Ethical Fashion

The Fashion industry's environmental impact has under scrutiny, with 92 million tons of textile waste generated annually. Fashion Week has become a platform for addressing sustainability, with designers showcasing eco-friendly collections. Brands like Stella McCartney lead this movement, emphasizing the use of organic materials and sustainable practices.

### Case Study: Copenhagen Fashion Week

Copenhagen Fashion Week has positioned itself as a leader in sustainability. Its 2023 edition required participants to meet strict sustainability criteria, including zero-waste production methods and the use of recyclable materials. This initiative sets a benchmark for other Fashion Week, demonstrating the industry's capacity for transformative change.

## 4) Digital Transformation and Democratization

The rise of social media and digital platforms has transformed Fashion Week from an exclusive event to a globally accessible phenomenon. Live-streamed shows, virtual reality experience, and interactive social media campaigns engage audiences worldwide. This democratization has blurred the lines between consumers and industry insiders, allowing greater participation and fostering a sense of community.

### Case Study: Balenciaga's Virtual Runway

In 2021, Balenciaga's virtual runway show integrated gaming elements, offering an immersive experience for viewers. This innovative approach highlights how technology can bridge gaps between high fashion and the general public, making the art form accessible to a broader audience.

## 5) Fashion Week as a Catalyst for Social Change

Beyond aesthetics, Fashion Week has become a platform for advocacy and activism. Themes of political resistance, gender equality, and climate action are increasingly woven into collections. Designers use their platforms to spark conversations and inspire action, exemplifying the power of fashion as a social agent.

### Case Study: Maria Grazia Chiuri for Dior

Maria Grazia Chiuri's tenure at Dior is marked by feminist messaging. Her spring 2017 collection featured "We Should All Be Feminists" T-shirts, inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essay. This integration of activism and fashion underscores the runway's potential as a medium for social commentary.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Fashion Week is a robust socio-cultural force that frames what we know about beauty, status, and identity. Fashion Week operates in the boarder discourses of globalization, social class, race, and gender, constituting individual and collective experiences. Fashion Week isn't about showcasing apparel; it is about creating and maintaining cultural ideals, social hierarchies, and global trends.

It influences the culture of society, accelerates economic growth, and promotes innovation. Implementing inclusivity, sustainability, and digitalization can help Fashion Week address global weakness-for instance, by

keeping up with the changing priorities of society. Through constant innovation and activism, Fashion Week can be an agent for change, embodying and shaping the social and cultural fabric of the world.

The impact of Fashion Week on the cultural conception of beauty and status cannot be exaggerated. Fashion Week is finally both a mirror and a mold, reflecting the social order as it is but having the power to challenge and remold it. The future of Fashion Week will likely be defined by disputes over diversity, eco-fashion, and the world-wide impact of trends on neighborhood cultures.

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