

FASHION AND MEDIA

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Fashion, in all its myriad expressions, was historically conveyed through unmitigated firsthand sight (including glimpses of royalty), touch (peddlers' samples of fabrics and garments), auditory descriptions (word of mouth), and physical imitations or other representations (drawings). But today's world lies far beyond the days of carrying Parisian dolls across the ocean to share the latest looks. Fashion is conveyed primarily through intervening conveyors of meaning—the media. Loosely defined, media include all methods of information dissemination that are not primary or face to face, and in fashion, the most important mass media include print (magazines, newspapers, catalogs); broadcast (electronic instrumentation such as TV, radio, video, film); and the Internet (Web sites, blogs, podcasts, social media, YouTube). With the advent of mobile devices and instantaneous transmission of images, cellphones are a formidable medium, already transforming fashion dissemination, marketing, adoption, and sales.

A thorough examination and exploration of the intimate symbiotic relationship of fashion and media is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the vast power of media exposure. Designers, photographers, trendsetters, and gatekeepers (editors, costume designers for TV/film, celebrities) influence and are influenced by media. The ultimate decision makers, however, are everyday people, whose relationship to fashion and media is mitigated by—indeed, dependent upon—cultural, economic, religious, ethical, political, and social considerations. A study of fashion and media in China and Italy, for instance, would yield different outcomes.

Fashion came before media—at least, as people understand the term “media” today. So, it is important first to attempt a definition of fashion, a word that never ceases to be redefined by fashion scholars, designers, and the public. Its meaning goes back to Latin roots: *facere* —“to make” or “to do.” As language is dynamic and ever changing, the word “fashion” eventually evolved to include such concepts as “shape” and “manner.” Today, most English speakers generally regard fashion as those styles and articles of dress that are popular within specified time frames, accepted and adopted by the masses as socially desirable articles and expressions of individual taste, as well as accompanying jewelry, shoes, and handbags. Fashion scholar [Marilyn DeLong](#) lends deeper analysis in her 2005 article on fashion theories.

Prior to the technological advances that revolutionized communication, any knowledge of fashion beyond what was merely everyday costume or clothing was historically conveyed through face-to-face encounters, from visual observations of others, whether at church or banquet, theater or market. Such learning about fashion was communicated experientially, person to person. Rare glimpses of royalty and wealthy individuals constituted visual access to bespoke garments made by highly skilled dressmakers and tailors, providing common society with a window—and much gossip—regarding heretofore unseen styles, silhouettes, colors, and artisan-created embellishments. Experiencing new textures, textiles, and threads involved direct touch, by being in the company of persons wearing homespun woolen handiwork, for example, or by engaging with traveling peddlers' samples of fabrics and garments. Fashion was also discovered by auditory means, or word of mouth—hearing about and then imagining what said garments must look like, as when someone adventurous returned home to report what others wore in far-off lands. Finally, fashion trends were conveyed and viewed via physical imitations or other representations, including illustrations (from hieroglyphics to drawings to fashion plates) and dolls (miniature representations of clothed people).

Fashion remains a firsthand experience, since people travel, go shopping, work in offices, and dine out, all of which provide exposure to fashion expressions the old-fashioned way. But society is far removed from the days when Parisian dolls were carried across oceans to illustrate the latest styles. Fashion is conveyed through an ever expanding set of intermediaries, or media. The *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the times, is accessible across continents in seconds.

Nonetheless, a large global digital divide—“the gap between the world's most networked economies and the rest of the world,” according to the World Economic Forum—still exists.

Understanding this is critical to comprehending fashion media operations worldwide. Many countries lag far behind.

What Is “Media”?

The word “media” is the plural form of “medium,” from the Latin, meaning “middle” or “middle layer.” Thus, a medium is much like a middleman, a conduit that serves to “lead” or “bring together.” In fashion, each medium functions to hold and deliver information: visual, textual, cultural.

“Media” is loosely used to cover all methods of information dissemination that are not firsthand, same-space primary, or face to face. (A retail store, then, is not considered to be a medium, but ranks as a primary experience for shoppers.) “Mass media” refers to multiple dissemination of messages with multiple recipients, aimed at the larger population or targeted demographic segments. In fashion, the most important mass media today include print media—magazines, newspapers, billboards, posters, catalogs; broadcast—such as TV, radio, video, film/movies; online (computer electronics) media—Web sites, blogs, podcasts, social media, YouTube, and more; mobile devices—cellphones/smartphones, high-tech wristwatches/smartphones, and other wireless devices (mobile computers/tablets) known for their high-speed transmission of images, words, and information.

Of all the media venues available today, computers and mobile devices have secured the most far-ranging, visible presence: they play formidable roles in the fashion industry and in fashion perception, transforming dissemination, marketing, adoption, and sales on an easy-to-access daily basis. For more, see [Leopoldina Fortunati and Manuela Farinos’s “Influence of the Web.”](#)

Here are short definitions of currently predominant media:

- **Web site:** A destination or location on the Internet that serves a number of purposes, including business and industry, government, nonprofit organizations, news, personal interest, and more; it is characterized by having a URL (uniform resource locator) address, and domain name which owners must buy and maintain.
- **Blog:** From “Web-log,” an online journal allowing writers to post text and images.
- **Podcast:** A digital medium for listening, viewing, and/or watching; podcasts serve to make education and entertainment and other subjects “come alive” on screen.
- **Social media:** Web sites that are designed to foster interaction among members; Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter are examples.
- **YouTube:** An online mecca for videos to be uploaded and viewed at no cost.
- **Cellphones:** Handheld, mobile phones that depend on signals transmitted by cellular towers; their internal cameras, audio- and video-recording capabilities, and texting capacity (sending message by typing) led to early transmission of “first-seen” fashion on the runway and on the streets.
- **Smartphones:** More “intelligent” than cellphones, these mobile devices act as mini-computers, having Internet capacity, touchscreen interfaces, and operating systems that allow users to download numerous applications (apps)—from gaming to shopping and banking.
- **Smartwatches:** These mobile devices are strapped to the wrist and serve all the functions of a smartphone; additionally, they can perform certain monitoring functions (such as heart rate) through apps.

The Beginnings of the Fashion–Media Relationship

An intimate, symbiotic relationship between fashion and media has come to exist after decades of evolution, and the influence of each on the other is vast—so vast that the modern mind cannot easily fathom how fashion could exist without media influence and vice versa. Understanding this fashion–media relationship requires going back to the first days of fashion in print, primarily since the mid-1700s, as succinctly noted by fashion scholar [Kate Nelson Best](#): “The fortunes of the fashion industry and the fashion press have been indissolubly linked since the eighteenth century.”

Print media—newspapers, general interest magazines, and, in time, fashion magazines in particular—ranked as the foremost media for fashion up until the advent of near-ubiquitous technology during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In some countries, print media still dominate as primary fashion communication modes. The advent of the steam engine during the Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s propelled print’s role. Newspapers and other printed matter could now be mass-produced more cheaply and quickly than when presses were worked by hand. This produced a tsunami shift in the fashion–media relationship. Although printing office workers feared losing their jobs at first, dreading that they would be replaced completely by machines, they ended up in demand since newspapers and magazines expanded to provide the rapidly modernizing world with all the information people were hungry for—including fashion.

The invention of photography in the late 1820s, and its debut as a commercial medium in 1839, further boosted the fashion–media connection. In “Fashion Photography,” researcher [Nancy Hall-Duncan](#) believes the earliest fashion images can be traced to Parisian fashion houses in the 1850s and 1860s. The ability to capture a person’s visage and transport it anywhere meant that style could be visually transmitted, understood, and adopted by people who lived at great distances from where the original image was recorded. Fashion’s dependence on photography has been broadened exponentially via Instagram, Facebook, and hundreds of other media-sharing venues. Subjects of inquiry include the lengthy history and role of fashion photographers; the nature of photo-aesthetics; the evolution of modeling; and the impact of photography on designers, editors, and the public.

The Evolution of the Fashion Magazine

The successful launches of fashion magazines and their traditions have depended on people—on certain individuals—even more than fashion itself, as analyst [Lenore Benson](#) points out in “Fashion Editors.” Publishing ventures demand that editors display a combination of talent, intelligence, aesthetic awareness, personality, business acumen, and vision. One of the most famous editors, Carmel Snow, was dubbed “the most powerful fashion arbiter in America from the 1930s to the 1950s” by the Women’s Museum of Ireland; as editor in chief at *Harper’s Bazaar*, she is credited with turning “a tired and dowdy magazine into a legitimate and forward-thinking publication that made household names of Andy Warhol, Truman Capote, Lauren Bacall, Cecil Beaton, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Richard Avedon, among others.” Diana Vreeland is another powerhouse of editorial history: a woman trained as a dancer, she had a vision of what a magazine could be, and developed a legendary career as editor in chief of *Vogue*. Today, British-born Anna Wintour is respected for taking the flagging publication of U.S. *Vogue* in the late 1980s and revitalizing it from cover to cover. Typically, since a magazine works months in advance, planning out themes and direction, doing well requires not just a clear vision but the building of a dynamic team of writers, stylists, photographers, advertising sales reps, and others.

Only one writer has ever been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fashion journalism, Robin Givhan. In 2006 her articles in the *Washington Post* were recognized as being “witty, closely observed essays that transform fashion criticism into cultural criticism.” Increasingly, newspapers—once bastions of hard news events—have turned toward human interest stories and lifestyle writing, and fashion coverage is experiencing a surge in both print news and online.

Print Media and Visionary Editors and Writers

Because cultural, political, and religious norms vary from country to country—and oftentimes, from region to region within nations—the transmission of fashion through media can be

affected. Even as fashion flourished within individual countries across the globe, the runways of the “big four”—Paris, Milan, London, and New York—dominated the scene for many decades. Countries like Japan, Belgium, and Australia had to wriggle their way in via exposure on those stages. Media in their home countries alone could not provide enough impetus to lift talented designers into the world light. Media eyes were always trained on the big four.

In 1981, Japan’s innovative designers first drew solid attention from the media when the likes of Rei Kawakubo, of Comme des Garçons, and Yohji Yamamoto broke into the Paris show scene. Japanese designers have continued to draw global attention, and regularly appear in the top ranks globally. Within their homeland, where fashion, art, and appearance have long been appreciated, fashion designers draw full-scale media attention, even devotion. Tokyo’s own fashion weeks are held in March and October each year.

Belgium attracted the London media—and global press—in the late 1980s, thanks to an avant-garde group of designers, the Antwerp Six, who made their mark on British soil. In a retrospective piece by fashion industry writer [Imran Amed](#), founder of the Business of Fashion Web site, he describes how “[Dries] Van Noten and fellow members of the so-called Antwerp Six (including Ann Demeulemeester and Dirk Bikkembergs) first took the international fashion scene by storm when they rented a truck and set up shop at London Fashion Week.” After that event, they “developed international cult followings amongst the fashion faithful. Not only did their London appearance put Belgium on the fashion map, it also positioned the Antwerp Academy, as it is known colloquially, as one of the world’s top fashion schools.” Belgium was thereafter regarded as a go-to place for fashion, upending its outdated and stodgy image.

In a third case, an isolated Australia finally started gaining media attention through Collette Dinnigan’s acceptance at Paris in 1995. It was a seminal moment, which eventually led to the first Australian Fashion Show in Sydney. An in-depth essay by fashion scholar [Robyn Healy](#), “Global Positioning of Australian Fashion,” explains, “Over the years Australia has found it difficult to establish a presence in the fashion centers of Europe and the United States. Yet when Sydney fashion designer Collette Dinnigan staged a full-scale parade in the 1995 official Paris ready-to-wear calendar, it changed forever the perception of Australian fashion as being somewhat out of touch. This defining moment sparked debate and extensive media coverage about a new wave of emerging designers and was crucial in the development of the local industry.”

The Runway as Springboard to Media Attention from the World

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Fashion in Television and the Movies

When movies (by the 1910s) and television (early 1950s) became popular, these two highly visual forms of media were primarily devoted to informing and amusing an audience, and telling a story. TV sets brought the larger world inside homes; the movie theater, by contrast, was a destination outside the home to which people flocked for entertainment. However, TV programming was not directly focused on fashion expression or the fashion world, nor were movies and filmmaking, which featured dramatic productions on celluloid. Nonetheless, since anyone appearing on TV or in the movies was readily visible on camera, fashionably appropriate and/or attractive costuming was immediately important to the appeal of shows and their ratings (for TV) and their reviews (film). In retrospect, the impact of these venues on fashion dissemination cannot be overstated. Glamour came to be defined—even epitomized—by actors and actresses on film. In "Film and Fashion in Focus: Silent Icons of the 1920s," [Hemline Quarterly's](#) blogger asserts, "Film played an integral role in defining the ideal style for the twenties woman."

Although early television and film tended to promote fashion from where the studios were centered (for example, New York), eventually the styles that were popular by region in various countries now had a chance to go national. Exposure to varying dress styles, new designs, and people (actors, musicians, dancers, public figures) led to audience admiration and fashion adoption, a phenomenon that shows no signs of slowing.

This happens in the East as well as the West. Modern China and its relationship with fashion and media is a case in point. Fashion scholar [Juanjuan Wu](#) writes that, following the Cultural Revolution in China, during the 1980s the primary fashion influence on Chinese people came from Japanese sitcoms: "It was the spread of television and film that had the most visible impact on the dissemination of new fashions—and especially youth fashion—in the early years of the reform era ... As television established itself as a popular medium in China and foreign and domestic films found new audiences on the mainland, new fashions found new avenues and entryways to the mainland."

In this century, as fashion continues to take center stage on television and in movies, some aspects of presentation persist while others gain new traction. These include product placement, award shows, reality TV, and fashion-insider-themed movies. In product placement, the fashion industry subsidizes the display of particular clothes, shoes, and accessories on set. The proliferation of red carpet (at the Oscars) and other award shows are watched as much for the fashion as the personalities wearing them. Fashion-focused reality TV shows took a big leap forward with the growing popularity of such influential programs as *Project Runway*, in which fashion designers vie against each other; *Top Model*; and numerous spin-offs featuring bridal wear. Movies such as *Funny Face* (Audrey Hepburn, 1957), *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Sex and the City*, and the cynical *Zoolander*, plus documentaries like *Ultrasuede: In Search of Halston* and *Diana Vreeland: The Eye Has to Travel*, occupy a niche of their own with the theme of fashion insider.

Commercial Web sites and Fashion Dissemination

The mid-1990s up through the early twenty-first century marked major business breakthroughs in advertising exposure for the apparel industry as the retail market began selling fashion online. The Internet became a natural extension of brick-and-mortar stores, from Bloomingdale's and Macy's to down-home L. L. Bean, to the ateliers of glamorous couture designers including Ralph Rucci, Dolce and Gabbana, and countless others.

The democracy afforded by the early World Wide Web also opened the door for fashion-related enterprises that did not even have an atelier or store location. Anyone with a little bit of cash could register a domain name and start posting photographs and text and contact information about their products. It was an exciting time at the beginning, but many start-ups failed: in the rush to create an online presence, entrepreneurs failed to recognize that even though the Web site was an accessible form of media, it could not thrive without traffic, without an advertising and promotions budget to steer individuals to its portals. This proved to be a learning curve in many industries, not just fashion.

The Web sites that survived those early days rediscovered the value of traditional publicity moves, bringing journalists to their doorstep through press releases or special events, thereby getting their names into print or mentioned on the radio or television. Once they established their connections with the press, many businesses took off. Results were quick in the case of Chris Lindland, owner and founder of Cordaround pants, which are characterized by a horizontal wale. Determined to launch as a manufacturer, with no actual walk-in store, Lindland relied on his amusing copywriting to pique the interest of editors at the likes of *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Vanity Fair*. Sales bounced in, and Lindland's Web site developed a following. Using "real people" as models, he continued to connect with customers who wanted to be entertained intellectually and dress smartly, yet stand out from the crowd. Eventually, Cordarounds.com morphed into a new online identity: Betabrand. Fashion-and-technology journalist [Lorraine Sanders](#) writes that Lindland "now boasts a team of 50, an expansive retail outpost in San Francisco's Mission district, and a rapid-fire production cycle. Betabrand releases 20 to 30 new products each month, relying on user-submitted designs and preorders to stay dynamic."

The lessons are that through the Internet, fashion can "catch on" without a runway, expensive ads, or an actual store; building a brick-and-mortar store can become an outcome of successful marketing; a brand name can change and evolve; initial fashion statements can survive and spawn still more creative fashions; and an entrepreneur with writing talent and a quirky sense of humor can talk his way into the graces of media gatekeepers. Combining new technology with standard PR approaches that worked in the past appears to be a recipe for success.

Change is the name of the game in online fashion commerce. On eBay, the daily auction site, fashion is well represented from modern to vintage, with new postings around the clock. Media convergence, where multiple venues all link together to explain, display, brand, and sell fashion is commonplace. An example is the Web site for Paul Fredrick Menswear, which combines online advertising presence, e-mail blasts, preferred customer offers, Twitter feed, Facebook page, and special events.

How Is Research Conducted on Fashion and Media?

More and more scholars are researching fashion and media. Popular culture-related research is burgeoning in such fields as psychology, sociology, education, and literature (both fiction and nonfiction). The full range of fashion-in-media expression has come under the microscope in order to better understand human behavior, the effects of peer pressure with regard to dress, the impact of media on body image and health, gender studies, and more. Scholar [Rebecca Arnold](#)'s "Heroin Chic" looks at the media hoopla created when then-president, Bill Clinton, challenged the fashion media's idolization of stick-thin, "emaciated" models, and the industry's

acceptance—even promotion—of the drug-addiction lifestyle. More recently, Indiana researchers [Wohlwend and Medina](#) looked at the educative effects and messages regarding “identity revision” via reality TV, focusing on America’s popular *What Not to Wear*.

Fashion and media is also studied by political scientists, communication theorists and journalism scholars, and business and economics researchers. Current research on marketing, advertising, and demographics has even led to new approaches to selecting models, with plus-sized models and models with disabilities being featured. Finally, the fashion and media link is revealed through the lenses of art, aesthetics, design, and creativity.

What Are the Important Works to Read and Why?

The topic of media in relation to fashion is so vast that each scholar’s research must seek to focus on a specific issue or segment of media to maximize understanding. Primarily, sources are localized in books and journal articles: print publications, online publications, photography, television, film, the Internet, and mass communication.

[Marian Wolbers](#)’s *Uncovering Fashion: Fashion Communications across the Media* details the foundations of fashion dissemination through media. Presented in sections that explain connections between manufacturing, business, design, and the gamut of print and online representations of fashion, this book is a basic introduction to fashion communications. [Sandra Stansbery Buckland](#)’s “Writing About Fashions” discusses fashion reporting, explaining the history, motives, and styles of fashion writing, to help students understand the power of the written word. [Lenore Benson](#)’s “Fashion Editors” focuses on individuals as “tastemakers,” which appeals to students considering careers in fashion media, especially magazines. *Fashion as Photograph*, edited by [Eugénie Shinkle](#), elucidates visual and cultural studies with relation to fashion photography as a media form. See also peer-reviewed journals within each discipline.

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