

DOING RESEARCH IN FASHION AND DRESS

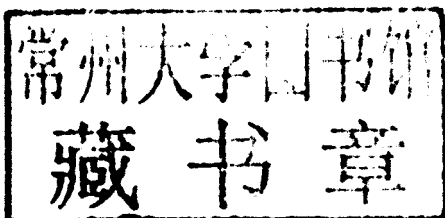
AN INTRODUCTION TO
QUALITATIVE METHODS

YUNIYA KAWAMURA



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Qualitative Methods



Yuniya Kawamura

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To My Family

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Yuniya Kawamura
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INTRODUCTION

Objectives

- To trace the history of fashion/dress studies.
- To distinguish fashion/dress–related debates, theories, and empirical studies.
- To learn when and how scholars, social scientists in particular, became interested in fashion/dress studies.
- To recognize the importance of defining terminologies and using culturally neutral terms.
- To examine ways to make fashion/dress studies a legitimate academic discipline.
- To explore an interdisciplinary approach to fashion/dress studies.
- To understand the overall contents of this book.

I write this book in the hope of making fashion/dress studies an established academic discipline as many fashion/dress scholars, including myself, have always insisted. It is common knowledge among scholars and research professionals (Kawamura 2005; Lipovetsky 1994; McRobbie 1998; Niessen and Brydon 1998; Palmer 1997; Ribeiro 1998; Taylor 2004) that fashion/dress¹ as a research topic in academia is often considered not serious enough and is treated as a marginal area of research, and thus, it does not deserve any intellectual considerations.

One of the reasons why fashion/dress is not taken as seriously as the scholars would like it to be is that there are no clearly articulated theoretical framework and methodological strategies to study fashion/dress. Nor do we recognize various methodological tools and options to investigate fashion/dress, especially when it is treated as an abstract concept rather than raw materials of clothing. We must make an attempt to make fashion/dress studies an established discipline that can stand on its own right and make it into an area of study that is similar to gender studies, cultural studies, or the media studies that transcends all disciplinary boundaries and includes interdisciplinary approaches that are appropriate for one's research goal.

Different writers had been interested in fashion and dress as early as the thirteenth century ever since the emergence of a fashion phenomenon in Europe, but the study

of fashion/dress as an intellectual theme and a social scientific study that demands empiricism and objectivity is of recent origin. Before it became a legitimate research topic for scholars, social scientists in particular, it was the topic frequently discussed among philosophers and moralists who did not provide any empirical data or factual evidence. Still today, methods of research in fashion/dress studies have not yet been thoroughly explored in social science disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology, among others. There is hardly any literature specifically devoted to qualitative research methods in fashion/dress, except Lou Taylor's two informative books, *Establishing Dress History* (2004) and *The Study of Dress History* (2002), focusing on object-based research in the history of fashion and dress. More recently, Flynn and Foster's book entitled *Research Methods for the Fashion Industry* (2009) was published primarily for fashion industry professionals and practitioners. Many scholars as well as students are reluctant to pick fashion/dress as their research topic because of the lack of information or literature on methodological strategies, and this book attempts to fill that void; by doing so, I hope to give fashion/dress studies the value and respect it deserves in the world of academia in addition to providing practical procedures and processes of research. We see a growing number of textbooks and literature on qualitative research methods in social sciences in general, but few are written particularly for academic fashion/dress studies.

For us to conduct research, we need to do it empirically, scholarly, and scientifically. This book is not meant for practitioners in fashion business, but it could be used by anyone who wants to study fashion/dress empirically and objectively using qualitative research methods. The methods I elaborate in this book are by no means exhaustive but can be treated as the primary qualitative methodological tools found in fashion/dress studies. Some researchers only believe that research is considered a research when the methodology is quantitative and not qualitative, but as indicated in subsequent chapters in this book, there are descriptive data that can be retrieved only by qualitative strategies.

Therefore, this book provides students with a guided introduction to qualitative research methods, and the aim is to do this through a mix of theoretical and practical perspectives, offering contextual material on fashion/dress-related studies and also how-to accounts of best practice. It offers step-by-step instructions on how to go about applying particular methods in practice and suggestions on what can be neglected or not neglected in the research process as well as the strengths and the weaknesses of each method. In order for students to understand what it takes to research fashion/dress, we need to refer to significant fashion- and dress-related studies in which the authors indicate their methods. I have intentionally selected the studies as examples in which the researchers' methodologies are explained clearly and in detail as well as the ones that focus on Western and non-Western fashion and dress.

THE HISTORY OF FASHION/DRESS STUDIES

Individuals, rich or poor, young or old, men or women, have always been interested in fashion or how people dressed at one point in time. Even before the emergence of social sciences, writers picked fashion/dress as a topic in various publications, such as books, newspapers, journals, and so forth. I trace the historical development of interests in fashion and fashion/dress studies to address the contributions of diverse areas of knowledge and to examine how the questions that it has addressed have shifted from simple commentaries, descriptive essays, and anecdotes on fashion/dress to empirical scientific research.

The history of fashion/dress studies can be classified into three stages and time periods: (1) interests in and debates about fashion/dress as discussion topics, (2) scholarly writings on fashion/dress discourse and theories, and (3) empirical fashion/dress studies in social sciences with the indication of specific methodological approaches.

INTERESTS IN AND DEBATES ABOUT FASHION/DRESS AS A DISCUSSION TOPIC

While many fashion researchers believe that fashion as a topic is a recent one, it has been of long interest to many classical writers and novelists. According to Johnson, Torntore, and Eicher (2003: 1), the study of fashion and dress has been and still is widely conducted by individuals reflecting many disciplines, and they argue that interest in fashion is not a recent one.² They take us back to 1575 when Michel de Montaigne, one of the earliest writers of dress, questions why human begins to wear clothes in the first place. Interest in fashion/dress obviously parallels with the fashion phenomenon that first began in Italy and then moved to France (Laver 1995 [1969]; Lipovetsky 1994; Perrot 1994; Steele 1988). Numerous accounts on fashion/dress are found in the historical archives and literature.

For example, Charles de Secondat Montesquieu (1689–1755), a French social critic and a political thinker, in *Persian Letters* (1973 [1721]), writes about the rapid changes in fashion in Paris (Letter No. 99): “A woman who leaves Paris to spend six months in the country comes back looking antiquated as if she had been away for thirty years. A son will fail to recognize a portrait of his mother because the dress in which she had been painted seems so alien.” In 1831, Thomas Carlyle, an English philosopher, explains the functions of clothing/fashion and says that the first purpose of clothes was not for warmth or modesty but adornment, which is believed to be a universal practice.

While some writers did not appreciate fashion and condemned it, many French novelists and philosophers discussed fashion in their writings. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1780), an advocate of simple living and an opponent of luxury and fashion, in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1997 [1750]), writes that fashion destroyed

virtue and masked vice, and fashion has a negative impact on people's morals. On the other hand, French writers and poets, such as Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) and Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), were in support of fashion and wrote about it favorably (Kawamura 2004). Whether the writers thought fashion was moral or immoral, frivolous or not frivolous, it is important to note that they still paid much attention to the phenomenon of fashion. However, these writings do not offer any theoretical framework or implications, and we only see that there were fashion phenomena and interests in as well as a commotion over fashion.

ACADEMIC INTERESTS IN FASHION/DRESS DISCOURSE AND THEORIES

Scholars' interests in fashion/dress as a legitimate research topic began to emerge as fashion changes were taking place more and more rapidly during and after the Industrial Revolution in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The social structure of the Western world underwent a great transformation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The population increased, productivity soared, and a money economy developed that resulted in the expansion of commerce, improved technology, and the possibility of social mobility. The invention of the sewing machine made it possible to manufacture, in large quantities at cheaper prices, fashionable clothes that used to be handmade and were, therefore, time-consuming and expensive. As fashion became increasingly democratized and widespread throughout Europe, it attracted a great deal of attention from the masses, and at the same time, it changed people's views as well as scholars' perspectives on fashion/dress. Dress history publications, such as those by Quicherat (1877) and Racinet (1888), began to appear in France.

When social and behavioral sciences were becoming established as a discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, one of the first questions that interested anthropologists and psychologists was "Why do people wear clothes?" Many theoretical explanations were developed to address this basic question. For instance, Hiler (1930: 1–12) raised the following theories: the economic theory, the theory of possession, the theory of sex attraction, totemistic theories, and the theory of amulets to explain the origin of clothing. Others (Brenninkmeyer 1963: 14–47; Kaiser 1998: 15–17) may have used different terms, such as the modesty/immodesty theory, adornment/decoration theory, and protection theory, but they overlap with Hiler's in their contents in explaining the origin of fashion, not clothing.

Some of the scholars toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century laid the solid foundation of classical theories of fashion.³ For Simmel (1957 [1904]) and Veblen (1957 [1899]), fashion is used to differentiate oneself from others; it includes a group that wears a similar style and excludes others who do not dress like the group. Class inclusion and exclusion are the opposite sides of the same coin. Sumner (1940 [1906]) and Toennies (1961 [1909]) looked

at a fashion phenomenon as the decline in social customs. Social customs dictate and determine how we are supposed to dress in which there is little room for fashion creativity and aesthetic expression. In contrast, as social customs begin to weaken, fashion begins to prosper, and people begin to desire social distinction. That is the beginning of fashion. Tarde (1903) looks at a cycle of fashion as innovation, imitation, and opposition. When something is innovated, it is imitated in order for it to be disseminated, and then once it is imitated, a new thing is again innovated. It is in a constant cycle. Several classical scholars' take on fashion is primarily based on the trickle-down theory of fashion, that is, imitation (Simmel 1957 [1904]; Sumner 1940 [1906]; Tarde 1903; Toennies 1961 [1909]; Veblen 1957 [1899]). One thing that is clearly stated is that their focus is not dress or clothing but fashion. They treat fashion synonymously with the concept of imitation. It takes two to imitate or imitation to occur: the imitator and the imitated. There is a social relationship between the two. The emphasis among the scholars may differ, but they all agree that fashion is a social process of imitation.

Furthermore, these studies are not empirical, but the classical theorists made an important contribution to the studies of fashion/dress, which is always used as a departing point of discussion.⁴ Fashion/dress researchers began to slowly move away from object-based research in which the focus was solely on tangible clothing items (Taylor 2004). These classical scholars theorized and conceptualized the notion of fashion, and they explored the sociological significance and meaning of fashion in their unique perspectives. It helps us understand what fashion meant toward the end of the nineteenth century. Then we can begin to compare the contemporary understanding of fashion with the classical interpretation of fashion. Based on their theories, we can examine how fashion changes and evolves, and that may help us conduct various empirical studies and construct a new theory or theories of fashion to explicate today's fashion.

EMPIRICAL FASHION/DRESS STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

While the classical studies of fashion were often theoretical and discourse-oriented, fashion/dress studies in the twentieth century became increasingly empirical. There is a shift from theoretical assumptions to empirical studies with various methodological inquiries. Many scholars agree that Western societies went through a transition in the past several decades, and people's patterns of consumption changed visibly. Consumers' tastes and preferences were becoming increasingly diverse, and so is fashion. It used to be rather easy to find fashion's source and define it. But as the new structure of society began to form and with the advent of technology, fashion information spread from various locations through multiple media sources at an amazingly fast pace not only vertically but also horizontally. Fashion can no

longer be explained merely by the concept of imitation or the trickle-down theory as indicated earlier.

According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1973: 26–7), social scientists have begun to take interest in dress and fashion only recently. In the late 1920s and the 1930s, there was an upsurge of interest in publications on the psychological, social, and cultural implications of dress, and this interest no doubt was associated with general sharp breaks with tradition at that time, symbolized so well in the dress of women (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1973: 29–30). Therefore, since the majority of social science research is empirical, fashion research also became empirical requiring the researchers to have solid, scientific methodological strategies. Without methods, there is no empiricism, and without empiricism, there is no social scientific research on fashion/dress.

In 1919, Kroeber measured the illustrations of women's dress in fashion plates that were idealized depictions of women's clothing styles. This is one of the rare and earlier studies of fashion/dress using a quantitative method. In 1922, Radcliffe-Brown conducted a fieldwork study of the Andaman Islanders near the Bay of Bengal in India and explored the relationship between people and ornament/amulets that are used to dress and decorate human bodies. Personal ornament serves two functions, desires for protection and for display. In 1924, Bogardus examined the meaning of a fad and published an article in the *Journal of Applied Sociology*; his study was based on ten-year research. In 1930, Hiler published his work, which was based on one thousand collected references to clothing and ornament from numerous disciplines.

In the late 1930s, Young conducted a statistical analysis of fashion trends (1937), and she found that there are fixed and predictable patterns. She reviewed historical evidence in fashion plates and magazines. According to Young (1937), there are three defined recurring cycles in skirt silhouettes every thirty-eight to forty years. Thus, fashion trends are repeated. Harni takes a case-study approach in his empirical research and explores fetishism, transvestism, and tattooing (1932).

Fashion/dress scholars in the 1940s and 1950s began to look at the social and psychological aspects of clothing. In the 1960s, studies in fashion/dress became more sophisticated and deeply empirical (Horn 1968; Ryan 1966). About fifty years after the first psychological interest in clothing emerged, in 1965, Rosencranz looked at numerous motives related to clothing that were often disguised and were complex even for a single situation (Kaiser 1998: 23). Psychologists and social psychologists began to consider the potential of clothing as a variable to be manipulated in experiments, and in the 1960s, a distinction between “hippies” and “straight” attire prompted an interest as perceived by other people. Theories dealing with how people form impressions about other people were developed under the rubric of a cognitive perspective, focusing on how people simplify their perceptions and develop judgments about other people on the basis of certain cues (Kaiser 1998: 24).

Blumer is one of the earliest scholars who rejected the imitation theory or the class differentiation model of fashion proposed by the classical theorists of fashion, such as Simmel, Veblen, Spencer, and Tarde among others. Blumer conducted an ethnographical study in Paris (1969a), and he came to the conclusion that the imitation theory may be valid in explaining fashion in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth century but not contemporary fashion. He interviewed designers, buyers, and other fashion professionals working in Paris fashion and argued that fashion no longer comes from the top and trickles down to the masses. Fashion is a collective activity and is a collective taste. The job of a designer is to accurately predict what the collective taste is going to be the next season. Many contemporary writers who followed Blumer, such as Davis (1992) and Crane (2000), also negate the imitation theory of fashion.

Contemporary fashion/dress studies needs to be extremely empirical while articulating clearly which methodologies are used and how the research is conducted. Furthermore, they should not be distracted by fashion magazines or fashion-related information on the Internet, which lack objectivity, the very essence of social sciences. Fashion and fashion information have become easily accessible to almost anyone, and therefore, data that can be used in fashion/dress research must be collected carefully and with much caution.

THE USE OF TERMINOLOGIES

As we review and analyze various empirical studies on fashion/dress, each with specific research methodologies, we need to be aware of the definitions of these terms, such as fashion, dress, clothes, costume, and so forth. Different writers use different definitions of the variables relating to the topic being reviewed. The differences may need to be taken into consideration in a research process of the literature review, which is described in Chapter 2, "Research Process." In studying fashion/dress, many researchers often use "fashion," "dress," and "clothes/clothing" interchangeably while others make an attempt to separate these concepts clearly. It is important to clarify the definitions and how they are used because writers and researchers have different meanings of words.

Kaiser gives clear definitions of the terms that are often used in fashion/dress studies, such as adornment, apparel, appearance, clothing, costume, dress, fashion, style, and wearable art (1998: 4–5). It is also true, as Kaiser convincingly points out, that each discipline with its own approach and perspective to fashion and dress may have its own definition of each term, and that needs to be clarified in the beginning of research (Kaiser 1998: 3) because some may be culturally specific or gender-specific. While it is difficult to maintain the neutral standpoint in creating a definition, having the awareness is the key to conducting an objective, bias-free research.

First, we need to examine whether the writer is talking about fashion as a distinct concept that stands out from other relevant concepts, such as dress, apparel, costume, or garb, or he is treating it as a synonym of these words loosely tied to fashion. Some scholars may even choose not to use the term “fashion,” realizing that it is the term that has specific meanings. Second, it must be made clear to the readers that the term “dress” does not mean a dress worn only by women as used in our everyday language. As Kaiser explains:

Distinctions need to be clarified between everyday usage of clothing-related terms and conceptual usage of the same words, as we attempt to study clothing and human behavior. At times, confusion may be created by the connotations words have for us in everyday life as contrasted with their conceptual definitions. Furthermore, for example, the word dress may conjure an image of a female’s article of clothing, whereas clothing scholars use the term to refer to a more generic idea. (Kaiser 1998: 3–4)

For those who study dress from an academic point of view, dress can include body modifications, such as scarification and tattooing as well as sartorial covering (Johnson, Torntore, and Eicher 2003: 1).

FASHION

According to Baudrillard (1972), “fashion” is one of the most inexplicable phenomena. Edward Sapir (1931: 139) also explains that the meaning of the term “fashion” may be clarified by pointing out how it differs in connotation from a number of other terms whose meaning it approaches.

When a word appears in a dictionary, it is plausible evidence that the word is used widely in the society. Etymologists and historical linguists say that it was probably about the year 1300 that a sense of style, fashion, or manner of dress was first recorded. *The Dictionnaire de la mode au XXe siècle* (Remaury 1996) indicates more specifically that the French word for fashion “mode,” which meant the collective manner of dressing, first appeared in 1482. Clearly, there was a fashion phenomenon at that time. The word “mode” originally comes from the Latin word *modus*, which means manner in English or *manière* in French. By the end of the fifteenth century, fashion had the meaning of a current usage, or a conventional usage in dress or lifestyle especially as observed in upper circles of society. The English word “fashion” comes originally from the Latin word *facio* or *factio*, which means making or doing (Barnard 1996; Brenninkmeyer 1963: 2). According to Brenninkmeyer (1963: 2), the predominant social notion of fashion arose early in the sixteenth century via the sense of a special manner of making clothes.

There are conflicting views as to when fashion was born. Heller explains:

Scholars, particularly in art and costume history, have argued and accepted that fashion was not really born before around 1350. Those who are familiar with the Old French literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries may find that astonishing, since very concise descriptions of fashionable clothing abound in that corpus. (Heller 2007: 1)

The examples of fashion in noble male characters in thirteenth-century literature are numerous, and men were at the forefront of consumption and display through the Middle Ages (Heller 2007: 4).

Fashion exists in many areas of life, not only in the way we dress, but also in many other areas such as food, home furnishings, and even our ways of thinking. Most often, however, dress becomes the focus when fashion arises as a topic of discussion. Fashion often represents clothing-fashion, that is, the most trendy, up-to-date clothing that the majority of the people in society adopts and follows. Fashion does encompass more than clothing, but the studies that I refer to in this book mostly talk about clothing-fashion and other items related to clothing such as accessories and adornment.

The term “fashion” is an elusive term, and thus it is not easy to define. Many treat it as clothing-fashion and use the terms “clothing” and “fashion” interchangeably as if they are synonyms. But those who feel passionate about fashion and those who wish to pursue careers in the fashion industry would argue that the term “fashion” stands out. If someone says “You are wearing fashion today,” the statement carries a specific implication and message. It is different from “You are wearing clothes today.” The reactions and responses to these comments are different. Therefore, it is quite apparent that the social meaning and interpretation of the word “fashion” is exclusive and socially meaningful.

While there are studies that pinpoint the word “fashion” and explore how that word and phenomenon came about, there are others that are simply talking about dress or clothes and occasionally use the term “fashion.” The studies in this book used as examples include both types, that is, fashion and dress, and therefore, I use them side by side. While understanding the exact meaning and definition of “fashion” is important as part of an intellectual discussion/debate and the word itself fascinates us, it is not the goal of this book to investigate them.

CULTURALLY NEUTRAL TERMS: AVOIDING EUROCENTRISM/ETHNOCENTRISM

Words carry implications and connotations that may already be imbued with ethnocentrism and biases, and in order to avoid ethnocentrism and prejudices, scholars suggest using terms such as body supplements and body modifications, instead of