An Anthropological Approach to Fashion Studies

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Cultural Anthropology

The study of human behavior, cultural practices, and connections between local and global
North American Anthropology

- Biological (Evolutionary)
- Linguistic (Communication)
- Archaeology (Ancient cultures)
- Socio-cultural (Contemporary cultures)
Cultural Relativism

Beliefs about beauty, style, and other values are culturally specific.
Anthropological Research Methods

Ethnography
Research Methods: Mixing ethnography with other approaches

- Ethnography / Participant Observation
- Questionnaires / Survey
- Archival and museums-based research
- Interviews
- Video documentation and production
Relevance of an Anthropological Approach to Fashion Studies

- Reveals social, cultural and emotional motivations
- Consumer behavior: understanding why people desire certain styles, materials
- Understanding the process of fashion change and adoption of new styles
Fitness to Fashion: Transformation of style through yoga practice

How does regular yoga practice affect how people feel within and about their bodies, and ultimately, how they choose to adorn their bodies?
Research Methods

• Ethnography: 9 weeks living at the Bikram teacher training in Los Angeles, April – June in 2013 and again in 2014

• Survey using quantitative and qualitative measures

• 85 research participants, mostly women between the ages of 18-65 (average age of 41)
Preliminary findings:

- Regular yoga practice improves feelings of comfort and confidence within the body.
- Nearly all research participants agreed that over time, their wardrobe changed because they felt a deeper, more profound connection to their body.
Participation in fitness culture transforms fashion within and outside of the yoga studio.

“I am feeling more confident so I wear clothing that I didn't feel good enough about myself to wear before.”
Case Study: ORRA Active
Menswear: Shifting masculinities and new relationships to fashion

Ethnography  National survey
Ethnography at the Burning Man Project

Ethnography of an ephemeral community where men are pushing boundaries of masculine style.
Burning Man: A transformative space where men could experiment with fashion in ways they felt unable to in everyday life.
Research collaboration and ethnography in conversation with other methods

- Discourse analysis of media publications
- Open-ended interviews
- Analysis of dress regulations
National Survey: 1,952 adult men in the United States

- Demographics
- Open and closed-ended questions
- Attitudinal statements
- Evaluation of visual imagery
Factor Analysis: An interpretive, statistical method to identify patterns and intercorrelations

- Three factors emerged from the data:
  - Men interested in fashion/appearance
  - Men who wished to be unmarked
  - Men willing to take risks with appearance

- Factors were not mutually exclusive

- Factor scores varied based on age, sexuality, marital status and ethnicity
Sample Distribution by Factor

Factor One: Interested in fashion

Factor Two: Unmarked Appearance

Factor Three: Risk-Taking
Factor relationships: Men who scored high on Factors 1, 2 & 3

High score on Factor Two: Desire to be unmarked

High score on factor three: Fashion risk-taker

High score on Factor One: Fashion interested
Demographic Variations in Factor One (Interested in fashion): Age
When and how does interest in fashion begin?

At what point does clothing the body become an act of fashioning the body?
Two-year ethnography of a group of 20 “tween” girls
Children begin to actively participate in fashion (as a social-economic-material process) during the transition from childhood into adulthood.
Brand loyalty and “collective selection” remained important, despite the having design tools for entirely unique individual expression.
Cornell Costume and Textile Collection

• Over 10,000 textile and apparel objects
• Garments date as far back as late 18th century, textiles dating to 2nd century AD
• Collection is ethnographic in nature; we have everything from haute couture to work wear and everyday dress
Current Exhibition Planning

150 Years of Cornell Student Fashion

Delta Gamma Sorority, 1895

Delta Gamma Sorority, 1945

Delta Gamma Sorority, 2012
Thank you

Questions?

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