

## **‘Fashion is serious business.’ Discuss.**

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When one thinks about high heels today, it is immediately associated with impracticality, with the stereotype of pretty women strutting about the streets shopping and splurging. It gives an overall sense of superficiality and the need to upkeep desirable appearances associated with frivolity. Yet, this fashion staple, costing up to thousands per pair as the Louboutin shoes are well-known for, had its roots as male footwear, serving the King the practical function of added height for easier horseback riding. It even went on to become a ubiquitous form of footwear, and was hence a genuine, practical necessity for earlier civilisations. Fashion in today's world, especially in the more affluent societies, has been glorified and elevated, quite literally, to catwalks, with fashion weeks in the prestigious cities of London, Paris and Milan. It is thus associated with hefty price tags and models valued for their physical attractiveness, associated with superficial and shallow values. Yet, the fact that it has been such an important tenet of civilisations from the earliest days to the present shows that it is indeed of value to mankind, and that beyond its pretty and well-marketed packaging it is what has shaped, and is shaped, by society — and hence deserving of the attention and praise it gets.

Fashion is an important medium through which one expresses one's individuality. Beyond high-end brands as a means for people to flaunt their wealth, fashion has become more than just for everyday, practical wear, and is instead a statement. Given the expansion of the fashion industry, a person's chosen fashion sense has become yet another manifestation of the individual freedom to choose, and in that way present oneself to others around. The rise of streetwear has been especially prominent in recent years, capitalising on the unique styles of dressing, stripped-down to the ubiquity of the streets, hence, dislodging it from the inaccessible, untouchable perfection and glamour of catwalks. Individuals are now open to explore different and unique style of wearing clothes, especially in unconventional ways — bright prints are worn together as a bold statement rather than for practicality and social acceptance. These bold expressions of the self have become widely celebrated, lauded for their refreshing and personal touch, especially in the light of the recent rise of streetwear models. Though streetwear brands do retain their hefty price tag, such as the renowned streetwear brand Vetements, it goes to show the rise in value in individual expression and how much more accepting society is of this way of dressing. Even in the ordinary household, most of whom cannot afford the artistically-designed statement pieces of such streetwear brands, a culture of 'thrifting' has emerged as well, in which teenagers and young adults alike, stray away from the fluorescent-lit outlets of fast fashion retail outlets and instead, to stores selling donated clothing and second-hand items. It is here that they pick up pieces that are, perhaps, out of fashion or from a different generation, and hence, a more unique style of dress — a means of differentiating themselves from the norm and allowing themselves to explore their comforts and individuality. As evidenced from the confident, laid-back, almost-nonchalant poses of streetwear models on Instagram, it is as if fashion symbolises the defiance of the individual against a homogenising society, a means of displaying individual pride and hence identity, stepping outside the established confines of society. The mundane and practical act of dressing up has now become a medium for expression and embodiment of self.

Fashion has also served as a reflection of society's values. With it being a profit-making industry catering to the mainstream, its appeal is also built on its relatability to consumers - and this is achieved through embodying societal values and reflecting their views. As evidenced from the evolution of fashion from the early days to the present, the fashion of each distinct era has its own distinct scope and character. It

being largely commercialised, especially through the advent and prominence of the entertainment industry, has hence shaped, and is shaped, by society. The 1920's, otherwise known as the Jazz Age for the rise in prominence of Jazz music, was characterised by flapper dresses, a looser-fitted style of clothing for women to accompany the more laid-back, entertainment-oriented lifestyle of that time period. Other than being adapted for the more practical function of ease of movement, especially for dancing in parties during the time, it was also a reflection of society's more liberated views on women, who had broken out of the stiff corsets of rigid beauty ideals of the Elizabethan era prior. Women of this age could be more promiscuous than prudent, and this cultural shift in attitudes is reflected in the dresses they donned. A fast-forward to the 1980's, when pop and disco encouraged lifestyles of dancing and enjoyment, the colourful and flamboyant fashion of the time reflected a society which placed stronger emphasis on entertainment and relaxation after the earlier years of hardship and suffering. The extravagant styles of dress were also reminiscent of the rising consumerism it embodied, along with what society prioritised and valued. Colourful displays and a focus on appearance were the norm, and fashion only reflected it. Beyond just its aesthetic value, fashion has indeed been shaped by societal values, and plays a key role in documenting the evolution of humanity and civilisation for future understanding.

Yet, especially with the rise in fast-fashion, fashion can also be a fad, encouraging superficiality and the mere impracticality of keeping up appearances. Plastic, see-through clothing items are hung up on racks in the hundreds of H&M outlet available worldwide, reflective of trends more than for any deeper meaning or value added to society. The fast-fashion industry capitalises on the volatility of trends, simply modelling after highly-revered designs on catwalks, or for the pure sake of entertainment — as evidenced in Forever 21's printed tee-shirts screaming "Boy Tears" to cater to the superficiality of Internet humour and the tween demographic. Fast-fashion firms capitalise on the passing of trends for the sake of profit, and the rest of the world mindlessly buys into such a culture to cater to the chase of popular culture. In a bid to flaunt wealth, teens also seek out pricey name-brands, with the likes of Gucci and Off-White, not for the sake of aesthetic value or individual expression, but rather only as a medium to gain prestige and standing in society. However, fast-fashion, being a popularly commercialised industry, has also sparked controversy, known for desensitising certain beliefs and even cultures of people's personal history — subsumed into the mindless vortex of a consumerist mainstream culture. Fast-fashion popularised traditional African headgear as part of the Coachella and music-festival trend, appropriating African tribal culture and simply branding it as an "exotic look", profiteering and exploiting a well-nurtured and highly-valued culture and tradition. More recently in 2018, a Caucasian girl, Keziah Daum, donned a traditional Chinese cheongsam as her prom dress, sparking outcries of appropriation and desensitisation, as embodied in the claim of "my culture is not your prom dress". This constant battle of appreciation against appropriation that plagues popular fashion today hence reflects the fragility and amount of pride one takes in the way they dress — fashion and items of clothing are not appreciated only for aesthetic reasons, but a facet of personal and collective identity that people fight hard to protect and preserve. In fact, a more positive example is in Beyonce's Formation music video, in which the dancers are featured in traditional Black hairstyles and headgear, as well as ethnic costumes, as an extravagant and bold celebration of Black culture and its untainted beauty, especially against the backdrop of the white-washed entertainment industry. Fashion is a source of pride and preservation of unique identities, a medium through which cultural communities band together, and though some tenets of it are superficial, it refuses to yield simply to popular culture. As much as it is commercialised and sold for profit, manufacturers in fashion industries must take into account the sensitivities of fashion to specific groups in humanity, and its rich value as an indispensable facet of identity.

Fashion is celebrated and glorified — A-list fashion models earn their wages in the millions, extravagant catwalks are built around fountains in Rome for Fashion Week, a simple nude pump can cost hundreds, even thousands if associated with Louboutin — and with that, the common conception of it representing a lack of depth, mindless consumerism and greedy commercialization. Yet, beyond these appearances, fashion is indeed worthy of such celebration, for it serves as a medium for individual expression, for embodying society's projected values and ideals, and hence shaping one's sense of self in relation to a collective identity. Though fashion has become more accessible and occasionally cheapened, the real value of fashion still refuses to be discounted, and continues to be championed for its diversity and vibrancy. As one looks into one's wardrobe, and pulls out something to dress themselves in, they too are wearing the fabric of generations before them, ideals that have shaped mankind, and deciding just how they wish to be identified as by the rest of the world — with the personal integrity of an individual.

**Comments:**

*There is sufficient knowledge on the subject of fashion , as seen iby the wide range of examples and arguments that indicate its significance. The choice of examples in the 3rd point is interesting and up-to-date. Nonetheless, there is still an overlap with the previous paragraphs' point that fashion is a representation/expression of culture. You should give greater consideration to why fashion is deemed pointless/inconsequential. Language use is ambitious and the introduction is thoughtfully crafted. However, there are many lengthy and confusing sentences. Vary your sentence length and structures.*