

# Fashion Experience of the Urban Indian Consumers

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## Abstract

This paper is from a larger research undertaken to study the fashion phenomenon in urban India and elaborates the fashion experience in urban India where the fashion consumers use fashion practices to negotiate meanings and create identity. Through my study of fashion practices of the young urban Indian consumer, I look at how she appropriates fashion for her own use. My research explores fashion through fashion everyday practices of my respondents as against fashion as a form of performance seen on catwalks or an activity of the elites. The research documents fashion and clothing as a lived reality for these fashion consumers. The research uses empirical data that I have collected using in-depth interviews from respondents in Delhi.

The ubiquity and everydayness of the consumption can be seen as the consumers' story, embedding symbolic value in consumer choices. The study of consumption as material culture broadens its scope into forms of cultural conversations between society and self. Rising globalization and the corresponding homogeneity has brought greater emphasis on consumer experiences, which become ways of reasserting local identities, with consumption as embodied experience.

**Keywords:** *fashion experience, fashion consumer, everyday practices, fashion consumption, urban India*

## 1. Introduction

This paper is part of a larger research that analyses fashion as an everyday phenomenon in urban India. In this paper I have presented my analysis of the narratives of lived experiences of fashion among urban Indian consumers who share an interest in their appearances and thus in fashion and clothing. The main body of research is an exploratory study that attempts to study aspects of fashion production, consumption and reproduction as contributors to identity creation and expression amongst the urban Indian consumers and as a popular cultural form. Fashion as a form of representation of societal values is a very worthy area of academic inquiry. From a

sociological perspective, it offers an insight into the way values are fashioned within popular culture, in particular the methods by which identity gets constructed. The main study is an attempt at understanding fashion as a form of cultural production taking into account how it gets produced and consumed and is then further reproduced by the fashion consumers. The research also studies the ways by which the consumption of fashion influences lifestyle and identity in urban India.

This part of the study being presented here looks at fashion as a lived experience of the urban consumer, making fashion an embodied experience. In the next section I provide a contextual review for the research followed by the methodology and methods used in the study. After this is the section on findings and analysis and the last section discusses the findings contextually and I present my conclusion.

## 2. Contextual Review

Fashion has been used as a noun to describe it as a phenomenon and as a verb to present it as a process. When used as a noun it is synonymous with the terms *way* or *demeanor* or *manner*. When used as a verb, it is shown as an activity of doing or making. But the usage of the term Fashion is more a noun than a verb. Researchers and fashion professionals use interchangeably, fashion with its synonyms of clothing dress, adorn, and style. All these terms can be used as a verb typifying an activity and as a noun, denoting to the object involved in that activity.

Though the terms *Dress*, *Clothing* and *Fashion* can be used synonymously, yet in fashion theory they cannot be interchanged in their usage. Clothing is made from textile and is worn on the body, eg: trouser or shirt. Dress includes – all items worn on the body including clothing and accessories; anything carried next to the body by an individual viz. bags, etc. and body modifications. Fashion is thus a form of dress or an article of clothing that has become or will become popular. It is also a social process (Rielly, 2014).

Fashion consumption literally is the consumption of fashion within the larger universe of consumption, and is primarily associated with clothing by most consumers. Classical sociologists like Simmel, Veblen and Blumer have provided the earliest understandings and theories of fashion. Contemporary theorists Crane, Craik, Entwistle, and others further built on these through empirical research, but fashion retains its mysteriousness through its associations with materiality and immateriality in equal measure.

My research situates the fashion phenomenon in the material as a system and the social through its essential materiality. It perceives fashion as “*trendy clothing fashion that a majority of society adopt and follow*” (Sadkowska et al, 2016; Kawamura, 2011). This develops importance while interpreting and analyzing the narratives of my respondents. This brings focus on the fashion consumer who can be classified by age as teens and young adults and by social class as being elite or wealthy, middle class, and in other ways by gender, ethnicity, race etc.

Fashion is increasingly becoming the form of expression through which people are creating culture and cultural life. This is happening at an individual and at a societal level and thus becoming a consumption practice that goes beyond individual expression. As an act of production and consumption it can be seen within the frames of economics, social structure and ideologies thus documenting the inherent richness and complexity of taste in the fashion consumption practices. It is fast becoming a key ‘cultural industry’ alongside music, galleries museums etc., and the industry seeks to market clothing as ‘*Urban*’ instead of ‘*Metropolitan*’ (Gilbert, 2000).

The concept of a globalized fashion has gained acceptance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with fashion reaching out to a broader consumer base. Cities as both fashion sites and as objects of fashion are finding a new lease of life. Fashion cultures have aspects that promote the production of active and differentiated urban spaces on the one hand and homogenization of space with the rise of malls and e-commerce on the other. These spaces of consumption constitute the “*new infrastructure of the consumer world that provide a plethora of objects for the consumer to choose from providing them with a sense of control*” (Kaur, 2016).

Fashion in India is a coming together of contrasting clothing styles, different from its indigenous styles. The western fashion forms can be seen as a symbol of adopting new identities and a departure from the old. Western clothing became a part of India through its colonial past since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, initially adopted by the upper classes the middle classes and

later by the lower classes and the poorer sections. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the dissemination of western clothing in the traditional mode of trickle down trend, offset by the readapting of the indigenous styles of clothing for use by the upper classes and middle classes. The Indian designers accustomed to Western styles have viewed the indigenous styles “*through foreign eyes*”, and not from the perspective of someone who shares the same culture.

There is a marked rise in consumer culture and consumption practices as is being seen in contemporary India. Fashion and clothing consumption seems to be a major opportunity for self-expression especially among the youth. Indians can be seen as being highly fashion conscious; buying merchandise that corresponds to contemporary styles. This does not imply rejection of the traditional, but a more sought after positioning by the average Indian as a cosmopolitan in the field of modernity (Mathur, 2010).

There are many studies on western consumers focusing on the role of consumption meanings in the process of negotiation and appropriation within the larger system of social identity formation and popular culture especially for fashion and clothing. Such studies do not engage the non-western consumers, Indian consumers being one such, particularly with regards fashion and clothing. It’s in response to this gap that my research analyses the lived experiences of fashion among urban Indians who consume fashion and clothing.

Though India saw liberalization in the 1990s, it’s in the last decade that there has been an explosion of fashion consciousness on the Indian horizon. While the relationship of the Indian consumer with fashion isn’t a modern one, its moorings are traceable into historicity. India’s textile industry is as old as the known history of the subcontinent and the engagement of Indians with external appearance is not just a modern practice. Despite a long association with textiles, fashion in India in its current avatar is a young phenomenon and can be seen as an offshoot of the liberalization of the 1990s.

The period from 2000 onwards though has been prolific in terms of fashion and clothing in India, with the entry and proliferation of international and domestic fashion brands, the growth of indigenous designers and design houses, the arrival of Luxe and the accessibility to cheaper mass fashion products. With a growing younger population and increasing urbanization, the engagement with fashion has been on the increase. As this study will reveal, some contemporary Indian women can be very conscious about their appearance and have a very distinctive attitude towards appearance especially with regard to their clothing and wardrobes and capturing these

changing perceptions is very important and requires various research approaches.

### 3. Methodology

I have made an attempt to analyse the experiences of the respondents with a qualitative approach using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA has its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings in Phenomenology as the name suggests due to its focus on lived experiences and in hermeneutics for recognizing the active and interpretive role of the researcher (Sadkowska et al, 2016). It “*seeks to explore the links between what people say within interviews, and the way they think of their own experiences*” (Sadkowska et al 2016). In this paper I try to analyze urban Indian fashion consumer participants recounting their experience of identity creation using fashion and clothing and presenting it in relation to the concepts of Self and Others.

I have collected the data for my study using in-depth semi-structured interviews and my respondents are urban Indian consumers in the age group of 18-45 years, and are residents of Delhi NCR. Each interview ranged between 40-60 minutes in duration, and these were recorded and then transcribed. All participants were first introduced to the objective of the study and the interview planned. It was also explained to each that it would be more of a conversation and the purpose of the research was to understand their personal experiences with fashion. The interview was conducted in a discussion format, involving topics that were open-ended and included how they defined fashion, their relationship with fashion over time, discussions on specific fashion objects with personal meanings for them, and their experiences with fashion and fashion objects and how it contributed to their relationship with fashion.

As the interviews were semi-structured, the format varied between the participants and diverse prompts were employed to probe participant responses that were interesting and unexpected and to elaborate specific areas to prevent miscommunication and misunderstanding. The respondents were interviewed in neutral settings of cafes and spaces where they felt comfortable and could respond with ease. Prompts were also used to incite participants to elaborate interesting parts that came up during the discussions and to clear ambiguities.

My purpose was to investigate the fashion experiences of urban Indian consumers, particularly clothing as an appropriated object with symbolic value and its role in identity formation. All the participants were identified judiciously and a purposive sample was put together using snowball method. All participants defined themselves as urban and identified themselves to be consumers of fashion with an interest in personal appearance and in fashion. The representative group of 11 participants

was varied in terms of age and occupation, and ranged from 23-40 years and were working professionals who had the shared experience of urban living and the impact of those experiences their fashion choices.

### 4. Findings & Analysis

Data that was collected through interviews has been analyzed using IPA. The main concern here was with the individual's lived experience, specifically with meaning making and how the individual makes sense of these meanings. In the analysis I have used IPA guidelines of “*reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, looking for patterns across cases*” (Sadkowska et al, 2016). The data was initially coded and based on this initial coding sets of themes were identified, which were then grouped as major or superordinate themes with sub-themes under each theme.

Three superordinate themes evolved with each having specific sub-themes. **Fashion Involved** was the first of the three superordinate themes that emerged. It explains the practices used by respondents for understanding fashion and how they use this understanding to develop their own fashion style and sense and thus actively engaging with fashion. The three sub-themes included here are *In Fashion*; *Obtaining Fashion Information*; and *Consuming Fashion*. A second superordinate theme identified is **Fashion Personification**. This relates to how the respondents construct their fashion identity and how they define it over time. Under this superordinate are included the sub-themes of *Fashion Self*; *Fashion Other*; and *Fashioning*. The third superordinate theme that has been identified is **Fashion Presentation**, which relates to the respondents' use of fashion as a form of *performance* in specific social / professional settings through the medium of clothing and fashion. The sub-themes included under this are *Enactment*; *Reward*; *Spaces and Events*; and *Creating looks*.

In this paper I focus on the second theme of **Fashion Personification**, which through a set of sub-themes relates to the respondents' sense of self and identity construction and helps them construct their image using fashion. Three sub-themes *Fashion Self*, *Fashion Other* and *Fashioning* tell as to how the respondents use fashion and clothing in forming a personal and social identity. The analysis showed how the sub-themes emerged among the participants with the sub-themes of *Fashion Self* and *Fashioning* existing for all participants and the sub-theme *Fashion Other* existing in only 6 of the 9 interviewed.

The analysis has brought forth all recurring aspects thus outlining the ways in which the participants were inclined to create their fashion identities and define their fashion image. The respondents tended to consider they were an authority in fashion. While on the one hand they thought they didn't follow trends blindly, they also considered certain looks and styles as bizarre and undesirable. Through their recounting of their fashion experiences these respondents came across as being fashion aware. The approach through which they created and negotiated their identities also impacted their fashion experiences.

One method used as a means to create a distinction between *Self and Others* was that of rejecting or avoiding of fashion trends. As one of the respondents narrated: *"everyone wants to be seen in the latest styles and move with current trends and this is the motivation to dress differently using the same clothing"*.

This brought styling and personalizing of fashion and clothing into focus as a mode used by them to stand out within the peer group. This personalization was done by accessorization through the use of jewellery as stated by another respondent: *"So that has nothing to do with fashion and trends. I have been investing in Silver Jewellery. Today Afghan Jewellery has come in trend. People are carrying that. But I have been wearing that since I was 20"*.

Another practice mentioned was putting the clothing pieces in different and distinctive ways focusing on the sub-theme of *Fashioning* like this respondent said: *"So even though I am wearing a coordinate, which almost everyone is, it won't look alike. I would still try to find a way or try to style it in a manner when I look really look different from the others, whether it is a pop of neon or color blocking or whatever, add sequins to it or some such thing, but I will definitely make sure it stands out"*.

The attitude running across responses was the need to go beyond social limitations and a desire to break free of constraints arising from social expectations and prevalent social norms. While in one case this was more a negotiation between the older and the younger self-image. This was expressed by a respondent stating: *"with age and with professional growth I have to look more formal as against the bindaas look sported by me in my earlier college days, but I would like to stand out as I have always been a fashion leader."* This showed her to be not desirous of blending or sporting a particular type of clothing.

In another case it was more a counter to predetermined norms of how women should look and dress in social spaces, specifically within the context

of the *Indian Woman* – a rebellion against stereotyping using fashion and clothing. At the same time there was the critique of dressing in ways that attracted negative and unnecessary attention. This was more to do with how the respondents were non-supportive of certain fashion practices as seen in *Others* that they find undesirable. As a respondent echoed the words of other participants, *"blindly following trends without consideration to body type and what would look good or wearing a dress that would look odd shows lack of flair and style"*. The main aspect of this account was her identification of herself as a person of style and who used fashion to augment that style.

## 5. Discussions & Conclusions

My findings throw light on the significant role played by fashion and clothing in the way the respondent creates and defines her identity. My study elaborates as to how fashion consumption is experienced by the consumer as an embodied process at an individual level.

Fashion has been a very commonly used medium for identity formation by individuals in their everyday lives. Its popularity lies in it being an instrument that uses visual methods for expression. Its relevance in an urban context comes into play due to this visibility where *"individuals have only moments to make impressions"* (Entwistle, 2000; Narasimhan, 2015) thus *"providing a highly visual and relatively instantaneous means of asserting ones' identity"* (Bennett, 2005; Narasimhan, 2015).

Dress has been found to be useful as a mode for conforming and subverting aspects of identity, gender, age, race, ethnicity and most often class (Bennett, 2005). It thus brings to the fore a proclivity for experimenting with clothing and fashion. This has caused fashion to become a tool for expressing individuality, making fashion to be thought of as one of the more prominent practices of conspicuous consumption in contemporary society. Yet fashion is also a mode for expressing *"collective identity, less constrained by the experience of gender, class and race and articulated by lifestyle preferences"* (Narasimhan, 2015).

One of the most discernible uses of dress by the respondents is of creating a personal image that individualizes them and differentiates them from others within their own social circle, at the same time it also paradoxically connects them to these others in that circle. Thus their construction of self-identity and their defining of *'Who am I'* is linked to what they imagine to be others' perception of them as stated by one of the respondents: *"We totally wear what others like to see on us"*. This is further accentuated with the negotiations made by each

respondent individually, making this image creation both a dynamic and an iterative process.

From the interviews it comes across that personal views of fashion behavior and negotiated fashion meanings are causative factors in crafting self-identity. Further, this identity is expressed both through the aspect of positive affirmation and through rejection of what each respondent thinks to be acceptable. As one respondent stated: *'I don't wear hot pants and it's something that I'll never be able to wear as I'm conscious about how revealing a dress is'*, while another respondent said *'I feel good in clothes that exude a sense of earthiness'*.

From the narratives of the respondents it comes to fore that they as individuals derive pleasure from fashion. This seems to emanate from both the visual factor and the wearability factor of fashion and clothing in their everyday experience. By *doing fashion* they realize a *"pluralisation of self, which is differentially expressed and experienced in context"* (Narasimhan, 2015). The fashion phenomenon has become a narrative stratagem for the consumer participant to project her personal story and present her past, present and future.

The participants stated that they appropriated aspects of fashion that they approved to project *Self* and they critiqued those features that they negated or that they disliked in various ways. As stated by one respondent: *"So fashion according to me should aid the way you carry out yourself and not degrade you"*. Each participant also talked of how they tried to fashion a unique style rather than being just mindless fashion followers. Such elucidations by the participants showed a contextualization in their fashion behavior, and as to how they perceive *dominant fashions* and how they negotiate with their perceptions of *dominant fashions* with their self-image, their tastes and their individual likes and dislikes.

These understandings of fashion and fashion behavior coming from respondents, who are fashion consumers, highlight the modern, the social progress and social mobility as seen by them and how as individuals they see themselves as the one in charge.

From the narratives it seems that the predilections of the urban Indian consumer lean towards modernist values, and make them construe their fashion behavior to be personal to them without following any of the trends to be in vogue. The practice of fashion in urban India by the middle class can be said to include attaching meanings to their own fashion practices as well as assigning meanings and motivations to the fashion practices of others.

In the Indian context, with the rapid urbanization that has happened over the past decade and a half, fashion has discovered fertile ground in India's urban hubs. These urban spaces with their cover of anonymity provide fashion the perfect setting for an everyday performance. Further, liberalization brought with it the consumption culture that offered Indians new occasions and prospects as consumers. Today urban India has created a distinct fashion quotient, different from its western counterparts yet equally trendy and smart.

This study is a section of the larger study that seeks to examine fashion in the everyday life of the urban Indian middle class. It is an endeavor to understand fashion as part of the cultural industry and as a lived reality in the diverse and contested space of everyday life. The study attempts to analyse the dynamism of a fashion consumer's everyday life and her the various ways she uses fashion in identity formation which emerge through the superordinate themes and the sub-themes. Through this paper I present a small glimpse on the significance of fashion in the life of the urban Indian consumer.

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