

WORLD FASHION

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Orcid: 0009-0003-7949-8621

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-3903

Abstract

The Fashion Lexigraphy focuses on the main debates and nuances behind the historically developed and 'western'-oriented concept of 'world fashion'. Within the increasing field of global fashion history, the examination of international approaches is often limited to the contemporary idea of global dress. Instead of diversity, world fashion emphasized a dominant style in global attire. The coexistence of the key terms global fashion and world fashion necessitates a precise differentiation of terminology, which is critically undertaken in this Lexigraphy from a primarily historical perspective. The twentieth century saw various movements led by figures from fashion industries in Europe and the United States, advocating for local production and design while challenging Paris's status as the preeminent fashion capital. The drive for export expansion and the pursuit of hegemony – both within national contexts and across international borders – in the economically successful fashion industry remains highly relevant today, making the concept of 'world fashion' a crucial aspect of global (fashion) history.

Keywords: *World fashion; Global fashion; Predominance; Colonialism; Fashion centers.*

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s definition of 'world fashion', most people in the world today wear a simplified and very low-cost version of 'western' clothing, often a T-shirt with pants or a skirt, manufactured on a mass scale (Steele & Major, 2025). This definition implies to a 'western' person the informal terms mainstream or casual fashion, whose homogeneous aesthetic standards transcend regional characteristics. The literal meaning of the attributive noun world encompasses a global scope, yet the designs' origins in 'western' metropolises dismantle this connotation and reveal the underlying hierarchies in the fashion world. The concept of world fashion materializes the impacts of a Eurocentric and US-based fashion industry, highlighting the visible

effects of colonialism and capitalism. Ongoing debates and dissension about the nuances of terms such as ethnic/folk/tribal/peasant/traditional/national dress or costume (Baizerman et al., 1993) also raise questions about the subtle differences between international concepts. While global fashion, or global dress, is considered an interchange, circulation, and mixing of styles (Maynard, 2004; Ling et. al., 2019; Lorusso, 2019), and thus multidimensional, world fashion, as this lexigraphy highlights, embodies the roots of a dominating dressing culture and is thus one-dimensional. Kristin Knox's assertion that "world fashion is a global dialogue" (2011, p. 11) illustrates a lack of distinction between the terms 'world fashion' and 'global fashion'.

A comprehensive understanding of transnational fashion concepts requires attention to their historical formation, as their meaning has shifted considerably over time. It is essential to differentiate historical ‘Westernization’-driven mechanisms – which I would rather describe as a monologue – from contemporary developments since the early 2000s, foregrounding local fashions and serving as a “backswing against Eurocentrism” (Knox, 2011, p. 8). In the early twentieth century, ‘world fashion’ largely referred to the global predominance of Western styles – produced in leading fashion centers such as Paris and disseminated worldwide – reflecting the structural leadership of these centers and their designers within the fashion system. By highlighting the central role of the production sector in shaping world fashion, this lexicography traces its development to today’s global fashion, in which the cross-cultural practices of consumers have become increasingly central.

In order to reconstruct the nuances of ‘world fashion’ and to capture its usage in the general press and broader public discourse from the late 19th century onwards, a systematic full-text search was conducted via archive.org, drawing on its extensive digitized holdings of historical newspapers, books and other print media. For the analysis, only the exact contiguous string was considered (excluding ‘world’ and ‘fashion’ separated by punctuation), and other semantically distinct combinations – such as the frequent 19th-century phrase ‘old-world fashion’ denoting traditional or European styles – were excluded from this first pass. This procedure yielded a first occurrence of the phrase ‘world fashion’ in 1888 (referring to the handkerchief popularized by Empress Joséphine at the French court), an early hyphenated form in the 1910 eleventh edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and indicates that the term gained wider currency only after the First World War, as suggested, for example, by a 1919 article in *Vogue* referring to the “history of world-fashion” (To the wholesale dressbuyer, 1919, p. 7). Additionally, a query in the Google Books Ngram Viewer indicates that the term began to appear in English-language print culture in the early twentieth century and increased modestly in frequency after the mid-century, particularly in journalistic and popular discussions of international fashion. Yet despite this circulation in anglophone media discourse, the term has rarely been systematically theorized within academic fashion studies.

STATE OF RESEARCH

In academic literature, the term world fashion has been significantly shaped by the anthropologist and dress scholar Joanne B. Eicher, who first defined it with Barbara Sumberg in *Dress and Ethnicity* (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995). Their understanding became the dominant academic reference point (Griffiths 2000; Akou, 2011; Kamneva-Wortmann, 2023), and they were even mistakenly regarded as the originators of the term (Maynard, 2004; Akou, 2007). Eicher and Sumberg (1995) referred to world fashion as ordinary dress, contrasting it with two other fashion concepts: high fashion or *haute couture*, and ethnic dress.

Considering transnational design and consumer practices, such a separation seems rather artificial. The historical perspective adopted in this article also highlights moments when non-Western garments – such as the kimono, kaftan, or Poncho – were taken up by Western designers or consumers and framed as part of mainstream or world fashion (Knox, 2011). All of these garments expanded their previously regional and ethnically defined context, crossed national borders where they were often incorporated linguistically into haute couture designs and materially adapted.

That might be the reason why Eicher in *The Visible Self* (2000) states “the arbitrary separation of fashionable dress from ethnic dress and traditional dress from contemporary dress as an obstacle to understanding the role of culture in dress in the globalizing worlds” (p. 48).

In her book, world fashion was used to describe the quickly shifting styles of world dress like blue jeans, business suits and Birkenstock sandals (p. 248). Ultimately, the implementation of the term in Eicher’s *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion* (2010) requires a brief clarification, as the title was influenced by two external factors (Eicher, 2016): First, the encyclopedia was conceived following the suggestion of a colleague involved in a geographically organized encyclopedia on *World Music* (Nettl et al., 1998).

Second, originally conceived as *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Adornment*, the title was changed at the publisher’s request to *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*. In this process, the term adornment – understood by the author as already encompassed within the broader concept of ‘dress’ – was replaced by fashion in order to highlight the growing scholarly and public interest in that term. This genesis of the title explains why

the encyclopedia lacks further examination of the conceptual history and political dimension of 'world fashion' as a fixed term.

Based on literature and primary sources, the semantic significance of world fashion can be found both in the immaterial concept – reflecting global stylistic convergence and the designers' ambition to become global players – and in the material phenomenon, evidenced by garments that evolve from local origins to gain international circulation.

QUESTIONS OF PREDOMINANCE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The mention of T-shirts and mass production in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, cited at the beginning, implies the concept of a unitary sartorial style as a phenomenon of the twenty-first century fast-fashion industry. However, the 1910 issue of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentioned world fashion as part of the article about Costume.

A paragraph entitled National and Class Costume describes the disappearance of folk costumes in various regions, outlining the following reasons:

Improved communication and industrial enterprise have combined with the prestige of European civilization to commend the European type of costume to peoples for whom it is eminently unsuited. Even the peoples of the East, whose costume has remained unchanged for untold centuries, and for whom the type has been (as in India) often determined by religious considerations, are showing an increasing tendency to yield to the world-fashion.

(Philipps, 1910-1911, p. 246)

This historical perspective exposes the term's political connotations in the context of colonial history and the strong binary opposition between costume and (world) fashion, between static tradition and dynamic change. With the forced (not "commended") expansion of European dress in almost every part of the earth, world fashion during the colonial era emerged as a visible manifestation of cultural superiority. While the description of world fashion in 1910 emphasizes the expelling and costume-replacing power, the 2025 article in *Britannica* describes a parallel operation of the global fashion industry and those industries specialized to national, regional, ethnic, or religious markets. Comparing how terms are understood in different periods and how they mirror power structures is, therefore, eye-opening. During the early twentieth century the question was less about

the garments that could be defined as world fashion and more about who dictated this designation.

The phrase 'world fashion center' indicated which city or country currently dominated the fashion market (Beward & Gilbert, 2006). This led to a general understanding of world fashion as a trend emanating from and controlled by one specific place, imposed on the rest of the world through massive exports. In academic literature, the term 'world fashion' is frequently associated with Paris and described using phrases such as "dominate" or "commanding force" (MacKenzie, 2010, p. 65; 86), indicating that specific fashion centers were implicitly understood as central to the concept. While 'world fashion center' and 'world fashion' are not identical terms, designers and the places they represent can occupy positions within the global fashion hierarchy, similar to rankings in global capitalism. Although contemporary scholarship dismantled the Eurocentric idea that fashion originates solely in the 'West' (Adamson et al., 2011; Welters & Lillethun, 2018), the perspectives of historical witnesses, as reflected in the period press, are crucial for understanding how this Eurocentric view emerged in the first place. In 'western' societies, there was a strong narrative of dependency upon Paris for its models and upon France for its fabrics, along with a growing dissatisfaction with the decline of local production. In the 1910s and 1920s the influence of Paris-made world fashion on the American and European fabric and apparel industries was at its zenith. These fashions were adopted in many colonial regions overseas, reflecting the structures of imperial power by forcefully shaping local dress practices, primarily justified by social Darwinism (Baizerman et al., 1993).

DISTANCING FROM PARIS

The global connections facilitated by trade networks and fashion magazines coexisted with deliberate disconnections from world fashions, aimed at preserving local dress and strengthening domestic production. Especially in the context of Germany's nationalism from the mid-19th century onwards, there was a deep desire for independence from the fashions of neighboring countries. Repeatedly recurring German-French conflicts since the eighteenth century led to a veritable battle against French fashion dominance, resulting in counterproposals for a never-realized German national costume (Schneider, 2002). Around

1900, seizing the scepter of *Weltmode* (which, as a German term, has been in use since the late nineteenth century) became a matter of economic interest. A German pamphlet written by Norbert Stern in 1915 entitled *Die Weltpolitik der Weltmode* (*The World Politics of World Fashion*) gained international attention.

Here, the author utilizes fashion as a tool of nationalistic propaganda. He claims that dominance in fashion is intrinsically linked to military power, and *Weltmode* emerges from those countries that have achieved global and cultural prestige. Echoing this political approach, American designer Ethel Traphagen (1929) called French Fashion a „many-headed beast“ that was „trying to exercise a more complete tyranny than any monarch the world has ever known“ (p. E5). Like many artisans in Europe, Traphagen publicly expressed her tireless advocacy for her own nation's designs through contributions in magazines (Zachary, 2013). Debates who wields fashion's scepter and the global economic power that comes with it were being conducted more fiercely than ever during wartime, both World Wars I and II. With the German occupation of Paris in June 1940, the French fashion industry was cut off and struggled to preserve its infrastructure. During World War II, several international newspapers reported that Paris had lost its title of world fashion, and America's new leadership role became a topic of discussion. For example, an Australian paper in September 1940 noted that “New York's claim to be the present centre of fashion is substantiated by the fact that we get very little in the way of dress from any other centre nowadays.” (*The Australian Woman's Mirror*, 1940). In the same year, *Sikeston Standard* writes as part of its fashion news: “...proudly the American woman dresses the part of her new role of world fashion leadership.” (*America dresses up for fall*, 1940). In response, publicist Eleanor Lambert founded initiatives like *Press Week* (1943) to promote U.S. designers, marking the beginning of a perceived American leadership in fashion. The further the war progressed, the more patriotic appeals were made: Virginia Pope, fashion editor of *The New York Times*, praised American design and urged the press not to permit Paris to overshadow America; disloyalty to American artists would force them back to their old role as copyists (*Miss Pope Urges Press to Back U.S. Fashion*, 1944). The war served as a catalyst for developing and

recognizing new talents as it compelled all nations to rely more on local production. Different cities were competing for the fashion title, among them especially New York, London (for men's fashion), and, according to Germany's plans, Vienna and Berlin. Even previously overlooked South American countries, and with that, a wider exchange of fashion ideas came into focus. In 1942, fashion journalist Joy R. Parry asked if “the Señoritas” in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile would soon “dictate World Fashion” because of their craftsmen, good taste, artistic ability, and able designers (p. 36). In the pursuit of new fashion centers, there was little room for the idea that a creative monopoly confined to a certain geographical location would merely replicate the issues of world fashion, reflecting asymmetrical power relations and perpetuating colonial logics.

THE ROLE OF DESIGNERS AND CONSUMERS

Creating exportable world fashion always meant addressing a broad target group by taking inspiration from and adapting to a diverse range of cultures. The recognition, authorship, and credit for this engagement were ultimately retained within ‘western’ epistemic and institutional frameworks. The concept of the American design movement, on which Ethel Traphagen built her fashion school in the 1920s, inserted multicultural artifacts, collected in places like Nairobi, and aligned them with American consumers. The incorporation of garments like *Kimonos* and *Kaftans* in ‘western’ couture during the twentieth century has always been closely associated with an enthusiasm for simple silhouettes and exoticism (Knox, 2011). However, it is only in recent years that these connections have begun to be examined through the lens of cultural appropriation. It is important to note that world fashion already encompasses a form of cross-cultural dressing similar to that of global fashion; however, this practice was not realized by consumers but rather strategically pursued by the fashion industry and designers. From the 1950s, instead of a whole nation, single people were named “leaders of world fashion”, among them royals such as Queen Elizabeth and her children, or designers such as Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent and Giorgio Armani. World fashion conveys the ultimate ambition of fashion design: global dissemination and reaching consumers across geographically distant markets.

Many localized and specialized studies of dress show highly variable combinations of western and 'traditional' clothing referring to global fashion, especially in diasporic cultures.

Examining consumers' practices, the original idea of world fashion appears outdated, as fashion no longer signifies either local or cosmopolitan identities. Recognizing the global reach of non-'western' fashion systems, Heather Akou, for example, argues for two competing „world fashion systems“, one based in Europe and the United States, and one based in the Middle East (Akou, 2007). Building on existing theoretical frameworks like Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), Margaret Maynard, in her book *Dress and Globalization* (2004), argued against any notion of uniformity in clothes and the US as a monolithic controller of values and commodities, pointing to a "multiplicity of cosmopolitanisms" (p. 6).

While the existence of world fashion in the 21st century as ubiquity of certain garments like jeans, T-shirts and sneakers is not called into question—albeit not explicitly designated as such—its impact and dissemination are.

OUTLOOK

From an economic perspective, China, as the world's leading exporter of clothing, is currently dominating the global fashion market. Moreover, the former 'Americanization' has turned into a social media-driven form of world fashion characterized by mass-produced basic patterns and secondhand markets. At the same time, we experience an ambivalence between conformity and individualization in design, as exemplified by smaller labels that attempt to compete on the global stage. The growing visibility of local craftsmanship and indigenous textile traditions testifies to the shift from world fashion to global fashion; however, they are still struggling with issues of preservation and independence from the established infrastructure. Understanding the powerful narratives surrounding world fashion is essential for grasping the complex realities and coexistence of diverse dressing practices influenced by hegemonic claims. The term world fashion primarily refers to the historical struggle for supremacy within the fashion industry. Since the associated narratives are shaped by those vying for that leadership, further research would benefit from a multilingual approach that explores the presence and circulation of the term in non-'western' languages.

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