Linguistic Evolution in Fashion Discourse: A Diachronic Case Study of Significant Fashion Terms from the 19th To The 21st Century

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Abstract: This article examines the linguistic and cultural evolution of key fashion terms—such as "corset," "suit," "streetwear," and digital-era neologisms like "drip" and "core aesthetics." By tracing their etymology, sociopolitical context, and semantic transformation, the study highlights how fashion terminology functions as a mirror of identity, ideology, and technological change. Supplementary terms including "le smoking," "athleisure," "grunge," "genderless fashion," and "Y2K" are also analyzed to explore the intersection of subculture, media, and linguistic branding.

Keywords: Fashion terminology, discourse analysis, linguistic shift, fashion history, cultural identity, semiotics, 19th–21st century fashion, digital fashion language.

Introduction: Language plays a crucial role in fashion not only as a tool of description but also as a means of constructing identity, communicating ideology, and reflecting societal change. Beyond mere nomenclature, fashion terminology serves as a site of ideological contestation, aesthetic value, and cultural narrative. The lexicon of fashion is a dynamic system shaped by historical events, subcultural movements, technological developments, and cultural revolutions. As linguistic

expressions evolve, they reflect broader social realignments—including shifting perceptions of gender, power, authenticity, and resistance. This study explores the diachronic evolution of select fashion terms, emphasizing how shifts in language reveal underlying transformations in cultural discourse, power structures, and visual semiotics. Through the analysis of historically significant and digitally emergent terms, the study aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the intersection of language, style, and cultural identity in a globalized and mediatized world.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative case study approach, analyzing the evolution of select fashion terms across three centuries. Case study methodology is particularly suited to this inquiry due to its emphasis on contextual depth and interpretive insight. The selected terms—ranging from historically rooted garments like the "corset" to contemporary digital expressions like "drip" and "core"—are examined through triangulated data sources that include historical texts, fashion journalism, social media discourse, and academic literature.

The research methodology draws on etymological dictionaries and fashion glossaries to establish lexical origins and trace semantic change. Foundational theories from fashion scholars such as Roland Barthes (1983), Joanne Entwistle (2000), and Valerie Steele (2001) provide a semiotic and sociocultural framework. The work of Dick Hebdige (1979) and J.B. Paoletti (2012) is instrumental in understanding subcultural style and gendered language respectively. Additionally, media studies sources—particularly those addressing the impact of Instagram, TikTok, and other digital platforms—support the examination of newer terms and aesthetic microtrends. Rather than attempting a comprehensive lexical survey, the article employs purposive sampling, selecting fashion terms that exemplify significant cultural and linguistic shifts. The analysis is diachronic and comparative, allowing for both historical context and cross-term reflection. Emphasis is placed on identifying semantic shifts such as generalization, pejoration, metaphorization, and reclamation, as well as examining the cultural, technological, and political forces driving these linguistic changes.

Ultimately, the methodology is interpretive and interdisciplinary, engaging linguistics, cultural studies, and fashion theory to explore the evolving relationship between language, clothing, and identity across time.

CASE STUDIES OF FASHION TERMS

Table 1. Summary of Fashion Terms and Their Semantic Evolution

Term / Concept	Period	Original Context	Contemporary Usage / Semantic Shift
Corset	19th century	Female discipline, modesty	Empowerment, fashion statement
Suit	19th–20th c.	Masculine professionalism	Gender-neutral, self-expression
Streetwear	1990s–present	Subcultural (skate, hip-hop)	Global luxury trend
Le Smoking	1966	Feminized tuxedo, androgyny	Iconic empowerment symbol
Athleisure	2000s–present	Athletic/leisure hybrid	Lifestyle wear across social settings

Term / Concept	Period	Original Context	Contemporary Usage / Semantic Shift
Grunge / Punk	1970s–1990s	Music-rooted rebellion	Marketed anti-fashion aesthetic
Mini / Maxi	1960s–2000s	Feminist symbolism (freedom vs. modesty)	Trend cycles, political commentary
Genderless Fashion	2010s–present	Marginal concept	Inclusive, non-binary design philosophy
Y2K	Late 1990s–2020s	Youth-centric tech nostalgia	Gen Z digital revival
Drip / Core	2010s–present	AAVE slang, aesthetic labeling	Online vernacular for niche identities

3.1 Corset – A Victorian garment once synonymous with discipline and femininity, the corset has transformed into a modern emblem of empowerment and retro fashion. Initially designed to mold the female figure, it came under feminist scrutiny for symbolizing patriarchal control. In the 21st century, its revival reflects aesthetic nostalgia and self-styled femininity.

3.2 Suit – From 19th-century male uniformity to 21st-century gender-neutral styling, the suit exemplifies how a term can evolve from conformity to self-expression. The emergence of the "power suit" in the 1980s marked a linguistic and symbolic shift as women entered corporate spaces. Today, relaxed tailoring and inclusive sizing further diversify the suit's terminology.

3.3 Streetwear – Rooted in skate and hip-hop culture, "streetwear" emerged as a subcultural term in the 1990s. It has since entered luxury fashion through collaborations and hype culture. Modern usage includes "drop," "OG," "cop," and "collab," reflecting the commercial gamification of style.

3.4 Le Smoking – Yves Saint Laurent's 1966 tuxedo for women challenged gender norms and introduced a new language of feminine power. The term "Le Smoking" now denotes any tailored women's suit, embodying androgyny, seduction, and elegance.

3.5 Athleisure – A neologism reflecting blurred lines between athletic and casual wear, "athleisure" captures the rise of lifestyle dressing. Popularized by brands like Lululemon and Nike, the term reflects shifts in work-life balance, body culture, and consumer expectations.

3.6 Grunge and Punk – These music-rooted styles produced rich terminologies of rebellion: "DIY fashion," "distressed," "anti-fashion," and "normcore." Though initially anti-establishment, these terms have been co-opted into mainstream branding.

3.7 Mini/Maxi Hemlines – The "mini skirt" symbolized sexual freedom in the 1960s, while the "maxi dress" invoked romantic or modest aesthetics. Both terms engage with body politics and continue to reflect changing gender ideologies.

3.8 Genderless Fashion – Terms such as "non-binary style," "ungendered clothing," and "fluid silhouettes" signify a cultural departure from binary fashion. The discourse reflects expanding recognition of LGBTQ+ identities and inclusive representation.

3.9 Y2K Fashion – Coined in retrospect, "Y2K" designates late-1990s/early-2000s fashion characterized by metallic fabrics, crop tops, and nostalgic futurism. Reappropriated by Gen Z, it is sustained through terms like "bubblegum pop style" and "cybercore."

3.10 Drip and Core – "Drip" from AAVE gained widespread use to describe flashy style, while the suffix "-core" created new micro-aesthetic categories (e.g., "cottagecore," "goblincore"). These online-native terms reflect meme culture, performativity, and identity signaling.

DISCUSSION

These linguistic shifts reflect more than changes in fashion—they reveal social negotiations around gender, class, authenticity, and media. The evolution of fashion terminology serves as a lens through which we can interpret deeper cultural dynamics, including the politicization of identity and the commodification of subculture.

Terms such as "corset" and "power suit" illustrate how garments once imbued with control and conformity have been linguistically recontextualized to symbolize empowerment and rebellion. This reflects not only shifts in fashion but broader ideological transformations in gender politics and professional identity. Meanwhile, the terminology surrounding "streetwear" and "drip" exposes the dialectic between cultural appropriation and innovation, raising critical questions about linguistic ownership, especially when terms rooted in marginalized communities are commercialized by global brands.

The discussion also extends to the mechanics of linguistic spread and standardization. Social media platforms—particularly TikTok and Instagram—play a central role in accelerating the adoption of new fashion terms. Hashtags, short-form video content, and algorithmic visibility shape the way micro-aesthetics like "cottagecore" or "balletcore" are labeled, disseminated, and linguistically stabilized. These terms evolve into what could be called 'aesthetic signifiers'—compact, emotionally loaded linguistic codes that signify alignment with specific values, moods, or subcultures. Moreover, the increasing use of inclusive fashion terminology such as "gender-neutral," "adaptive clothing," and "plus-size visibility" signals a progressive shift in how language is employed to represent marginalized identities. These developments not only enrich the lexicon but also promote a more equitable and reflective discourse within the fashion industry.

Ultimately, the evolution of fashion terminology underscores language's dual function: it serves both as a mirror of social realities and as an agent of cultural change. Understanding how these terms shift, circulate, and settle into popular usage provides critical insight into the values, tensions, and aspirations of contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

Fashion terminology is a living archive of social transformation, offering insight into the shifting ideologies, aesthetic sensibilities, and communicative practices of different historical moments. As the case studies illustrate, fashion words do not simply describe garments—they narrate cultural histories, signify resistance or conformity, and project future identities. The transformation of terms like "corset" from discipline to empowerment, or "drip" from subcultural slang to mainstream label, underscores how fashion language is embedded in broader discourses of gender, race, class, and technology.

Importantly, this study highlights that fashion terminology is neither static nor trivial. It carries with it the weight of cultural memory, the urgency of political change, and the vibrancy of expressive possibility. In an era of digital acceleration and aesthetic pluralism, the speed at which terms emerge, evolve, and sometimes vanish reveals the dynamic relationship between communication and style. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram not only reflect trends but generate new forms of fashion expression that hinge on accessible and emotionally resonant vocabulary.

Ultimately, understanding the linguistic evolution of fashion terms enriches our grasp of fashion as a semiotic and sociocultural system. It provides critical tools for decoding how language mediates identity, visibility, and belonging in an increasingly globalized and visually driven world. Continued research at the intersection of linguistics, fashion studies, and digital media will be vital for tracking how language continues to shape, and be shaped by, the fashion cultures of tomorrow.

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