

What Does the Classic Style of Clothing Actually Mean to Consumers?

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Abstract *This study seeks to understand the consumer meanings of wearing classic styles. A qualitative research method was adopted, and 16 participants in the United States were interviewed and asked to define a classic fashion or style and why they wear one. Grounded theory was used for the research. The findings revealed three themes: (1) A classic style represents conservatism in style; (2) Style pragmatism refers to the positive attributes of wearing a classic style; and (3) consumers expect to continue to wear that classic style in the future. Those who are fashion-forward also expect to wear classic clothing in the future as they grow older. For people who do not follow fashion, classic is also a safe choice. The implications of these findings are discussed.*

Key words *Classic Clothing, Traditional Style, Basic, Style, Conservative Fashion*

Introduction

Originated from the Latin word *classicus*, which means “relating to the (highest) classes of the Roman people,” the term classic refers to something “of the first or highest quality, class, or rank” or something “serving as a standard, model, or guide” (Random House, 2017). In literature and art, classic means “pertaining to Greek and Roman antiquity” (Random House, 2017). These definitions reference a high quality or standard and extend to meaning something that is “basic or fundamental” and is “of enduring interest, quality, or style” (Random House, 2017). Because the definitions of classic reflects the highest quality and outstanding of something, a classic is believed to be able to withstand the test of the time.

As a style of clothing, classic has nothing to do with Greek or Roman antiquity or one specific time period, although it does related to the past. The classic style of clothing refers to a style of clothing that is unchanging and has had ongoing enduring appeal, such as the little black dress (LBD), button-down shirt, or blazer (Stone, 2012). In terms of non-apparel items, pumps, loafers, or clutch purse, and the pearl necklace are examples of classic styles (Stone, 2012). Classic style is “any wearing apparel in such simple good taste and so becoming that it continues in style in spite of changing fashions” (Picken, 1999, p. 63). In other words, the classic style is timeless, as opposed to the modern changing

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nature of fashion.

According to fashion magazines or fashion blogs, a classic woman's wardrobe might consist of a little black dress, black dress pants, a trench coat, a white shirt, a dark blazer, and black pumps. A man's classic wardrobe might include a dark suit, a trench coat, and black oxfords. However, classic items listed in fashion magazines or fashion blogs as such can today also include jeans, khaki pants, a plaid shirt, A-line skirt, motorcycle jacket, cardigan, loafers, heeled sandals, and ballet flats. In the fashion world, classic is interpreted as being the original form of a style. For example, a classic cardigan is a v-neck sweater that buttons up in the front. Indeed, classic styles are often found to be defined as the basics and essentials in the styles sections of magazines (Kwon, 2013).

Other than having been inherited from the past, the classic style has no stylistic or precise design features. For this reason, classic can often be confused with vintage or retro style. Despite the prevalent use of the term, little research effort has yet been made to examine what consumers really believe a classic style is and why they buy and wear that style. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to understand the meaning of classic style based on the lived experience of consumers who wear it and thus provide a sociocultural interpretation of consumers' beliefs about what a classic style is and how it is defined and viewed today.

Literature Review

Previous studies on classic style have discussed its design. In addition to items (e.g., LBD, blazer, suit, trench coat, and knit twin set), classic colors, materials, and patterns are also described (Kim, 2012). Classic colors are dark shades, such as black, brown, wine, and dark green and neutral colors like beige. Natural fibers (e.g., cotton, wool, or silk) are considered classic, and classic patterns can include the glen check, houndstooth, tartan, plaid, and stripes (Cho, 2005; Kim, 2012; J. M. Lee, 2008).

Previous studies have discussed the aesthetic values of the classic style. Functionalism of modern design is seen as the core value of the classic look (Kang, 1990; J. M. Lee, 2008). The functional aspect of classic is found in women's adoption of men's clothing details, such as the tailored collar and the trench coat. Abandoning brilliant color and adornment, men modernized clothing before women did at the end of the 18th century (Bourke, 1996). Men's clothing thus, centered on function and the dark suit. Chanel's adoption of such modern design details, including black for everyday clothes, jersey cardigan, the men's suit, and the simplicity of design, represented the functionalism of classic (Kang, 1990). In addition to functionalism, the beauty of naturalism, elegance, sensuality, and retro became the aesthetic values of the classic look (J. M. Lee, 2008).

Consumers also have a range of ideas about what defines a classic look. One study specified that images of classic look *retro*, *mannish*, *elegant*, and *contemporary* (K. R. Lee, Park, & Kwon, 2009). Another study distinguished between *classical*, *basic*, and *American* classic (Sang, Yoo, Park, & Lee, 2015). The image of retro or classical classic in those studies related to classic style being an inherited style, while the image of basic and contemporary classic in the previous studies referred to classic style

as unchanging and timeless.

The image of mannish classic for woman's clothes is connected with the functional aspects of classic design. In contrast, the image of elegant classic is presented as being more feminine in the previous studies. Similarly, *traditional*, *basic*, and *antique* emerged in a study that analyzed adjectives that described classic style. In addition, a classic look is often associated with being attractive, but also comfortable at the same time.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to understand the consumer meaning for wearing clothes that are a classic style based on the lived experience of those consumers. Previous discussions on the aesthetic values of classic style are based on the interpretations of researchers. Although some of these previous studies surveyed consumer responses to examine the images or perceptions of the classic look, all the visual stimuli of that classic look were selected and controlled by the researchers or professionals in the apparel and fashion industry. In addition, those studies selected their classic looks from high fashion designer collections. The participants in those studies had to be based on their thoughts and perceptions on classic styles already defined by others, and the range of the designs were limited to high fashion, instead of what the participants actually bought and wore.

This current study, however, analyzes consumers' personal experiences of classic look in a more naturalistic setting. The significance of this study is that its findings will reveal what consumers actually consider a classic style of clothing to be. The findings are expected to have profound implications for understanding precisely why consumers continue to purchase and wear classic styles.

Method

A qualitative research method was selected because of the inductive nature of the research question. To collect the data, in-depth interviews were conducted. Participants were recruited using chain-referral sampling of 16 participants from the middle and upper-middle class recruited from 3 small cities in the United States. All participants had an undergraduate degree or some graduate education, and 3 were males, and 13 were females. As females are generally more comfortable talking about appearance, style, or fashion, they were more likely to be referred and then participate in the study. The information on the participants is provided in Table 1 below.

Semi-structured interviews lasting about an hour were conducted at the participants' offices or residences, wherever they were comfortable. The interviews lasted about an hour. The questions explored their thoughts on wearing classic styles themselves and what they thought about others who wore that style. The interviews were semi-structured. Several general questions were prepared as a guide, and then the participants were encouraged to tell their stories and express their thoughts in their own words. They were asked how they defined a classic style in clothing, if they liked wearing it and why, and if they expected to wear the same style in the future. In addition, the interviewees were asked to describe the people who wear classic clothing. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed verbatim for closer analysis.

Table 1.
Profile of research participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Occupation
P1	female	39	Asian or Pacific Islander	Graduate degree	College professor
P2	female	29	Caucasian	Graduate degree	Governmental analyst
P3	female	37	Caucasian	Bachelor degree	Government buyer
P4	female	29	Caucasian	Graduate degree	Postdoctoral researcher
P5	female	24	Caucasian	Bachelor degree	Engineer
P6	female	24	Caucasian	Graduate degree	Publisher
P7	female	·	·	·	·
P8	female	20~29	·	Bachelor degree	Graduate student
P9	female	40	Caucasian	Graduate degree	Business owner
P10	female	62	·	·	·
P11	female	23	Caucasian	Bachelor degree	Graduate student
P12	female	25	Asian or Pacific Islander	Bachelor degree	Graduate student
P13	female	22	Biracial	Bachelor degree	Graduate student
P14	male	23	Asian or Pacific Islander	Bachelor degree	Graduate student
P15	male	·	·	Bachelor degree	Administrative worker
P16	male	·	·	·	·

· Information unavailable

Grounded theory was selected for the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). The data were analyzed using the constant comparison method and open, axial, and selective coding. Preliminary concepts were identified through open coding of the transcript. After open coding, concepts were identified and then related to each other. Core concepts were extracted, and relationships between the concepts emerged. Axial coding involves inductive and deductive thinking. A preliminary structure of the codes was created, using conceptual categories, such as conservative, professional, or basic.

Given this preliminary structure of codes, the researcher returned to the transcript and deductively applied the codes to the data. Through applying this process, the researcher was able to check the context of the major concepts and the interactions and relationships of the codes. The categories of the codes were then revised. The iterative process of axial coding was accompanied using selective coding. The themes of the study finally emerged by determining the core category and relating all other categories to that category. On the basis of these relationships between the codes and categories, a coding guide was developed. As a last step, the transcripts were read through using the coding guide and minor revisions in the coding guide were made.

Findings

The data suggested that classic is a timeless and beloved style. Classic is also the opposite of trendiness. Three overarching themes emerged. The first theme was that wearing classic styles is a conservative way of styling. The second theme was that wearing classic styles is a pragmatic way of managing one's appearance. Finally, the classic style is considered to be a future style for most people. Taken together, these three themes uncovered the temporality of the classic style. The theme of style conservatism reflects the retrospective mood that consumers hold toward classic dressing. The theme of style pragmatism reflects the present practical value of wearing classic styles. Lastly, the future style theme reflects consumers' belief in the future of classic as their style.

Style conservatism

The conservative nature of classic was the foremost theme found. Participants stated that a classic style holds steady the value of traditional design and is not a trend. The characteristics of style conservatism are also delineated by three sub-themes, namely, traditional design, accomplished look, and moderate design.

Traditional design

Participants stated that classic is traditional in that classics are handed down from the past. They also viewed classic as conservative in that classics are preserved forms of many more old-fashioned styles.

Well, to me *classic means timeless*, and it often includes elements of design or style that might be considered *traditional or that lived through time* [emphasis added]. (P10, female)

For men, shirts and suits, and ties have become a classic item, for them, because they have been there for hundreds of years. They have not really gone out of style. They change style obviously a little, and colors change and other things like that, but I think suits will always be classic and button-up shirts and things like that. So once an item becomes a classic, *it has fought its battle and it's going to stay there for a long time* [emphasis added], or once society deems it a classic. ... I would consider classic as something everyone owns. They buy [classic] because they know it's for a certain occasion or because they know it'll never go out of style, like a little black dress doesn't. Well, some styles of the little black dress will go out [of style], but the generic, simple, like Jackie O style black dress, you can always wear. (P11, female)

The participants agreed that classic styles have stood the test of the time. There are two kinds of classic style. One is retro. When participants provided examples of classic, they dated the style back to a certain time. When a popular style disappears, and then it comes back, consumers think the style has

passed the test of the time. Such styles are trendy and retro.

The other kind of classic style is the basic form of an item. As P11 mentioned, the little black dress is a classic, and LBD is the term given to a black daytime dress. The premise of a classic here is that a simple design or a style remains true to its original design. For example, *a classic suit or pair of jeans* refers to its original design. The actual design details can be fluid, because what consumers think as the basic fit of jeans changes. This kind of classic is grounded in the fact, however, that a suit or jeans are fundamental components of the contemporary wardrobe.

Looking accomplished

Most of the participants associated classic clothing with formal or business attire. Most classic items included a suit, dress shirt, dress pants, LBD, and a trench coat. Participant also described outfits for formal occasions. Considering that casual wear has a much shorter history than formal wear does, a classic that has endured is less likely to be casual. Classics, thus, related to the image of being formal, professional, or accomplished.

I'd say, for instance, *dark colored suits and light colored shirts, and ... black leather shoes* [emphasis added]. I think that's always gonna be a fairly classic look. I see different parts of the world adopting that as well and it [the classic look] is being kind of a uniform, literally a uniform to wear as *a symbol of social achievement*. ... It's [sic] [A dark suit is] what people wear in positions of authority or higher stature, so it conveys *a sense of accomplishment or a sense of knowing social norms*. So wearing classic means that you're interested in *participating in a successful place in society* [emphasis added]. (P16, male)

The image of professionals and social success is associated with a conservative style. A man in a classic style looks successful, and he would be inclined to preserve the established system of society. Some participants associated the formal and classic look with a high price and high-fashion designer brands, such as Dior, Hermès, Gucci, or Chanel. Some participants also connected the classic look with maturity. Unlike casual wear, classic was believed to be suitable for an adult who is now mature and successful enough to dress in a classic style for work or formal occasions.

Although the casual items mentioned were just a few, casual styles such as khaki pants and jeans or American brand names like J.Crew or Eddie Bauer were also called classic. Those styles have a fairly long history and a steady presence in the apparel market. Those brands also are long-lived and have produced basic and conservative casual styles. Americans have a strong propensity toward dressing casually. Casual attire occupies a considerable part of the American public self. For this reason, conservative casual clothing is called an American classic, which also includes the Ivy League or preppy look (Sang et al., 2015).

Moderate design

Another interesting aspect of conservatism is that classic design involves moderate design, which includes simple design, a moderate amount of ease, and neutral color. Moderate designs do not stand out and do not have too many details. Classic design colors are dark, less saturated, and often black and white. Fit and exposure of skin also contribute to producing a moderate design.

[Jackie Onassis] dressed in a classic style... she wore sheath dresses; they were always well-tailored, conservative ...; she wore some bright colors, but they *weren't extreme, either extremely tight, or extremely short, or extremely low-cut* [emphasis added]. (P10, female)

For these participants, classic clothing has a moderate amount of room which the garment allows and covers the body properly. This aspect of style conservatism relates to social norms and modesty. Tight and revealing clothes are not conservative and are considered unprofessional. Wearing a moderate design of classic indicates one is properly staying in compliance with conservative social norms.

Style pragmatism

Style pragmatism refers to the practical values that classic style provides. Participants appreciated the classic style from the perspective of wardrobe management. Participants also had a total picture of their wardrobe, and they understood the composition of styles and the benefits of each style.

My wardrobe has three [types of clothes]. One is like classic, but it's more sophisticated and looks like a business suit. Then I have really casual dresses for really comfortable. Then I have some small amount of more fashionable items. So I have a different assortment. I think the classic items are more pricey [*sic*]. Because I think they will last longer, so I am willing to pay more for a classic style business suit or something like that. (P5, female)

Classic clothing definitely has the advantage of giving consumers more practical value because of the longevity of this product cycle. The following details reflect the practical value of classic clothing.

Good and efficient investment

Participants tended to spend more on classic clothes in the belief that they never go out of style. There is no need to replace them with something that is trendier. Thus, they were willing to pay more for classic styles.

Then there are things that are more classic that you are willing to spent a couple hundred dollars for because you feel confident that it's *classic enough that it would be good for three four five seasons* ...; so you are *willing to pay more* for it [emphasis added]. (P9, female)

I guess because I'm really *looking for an investment* in the clothing, and I *don't want to constantly have to buy things*, so if I buy something more conservative it's just more apt to stay in style, I think, and it's more classic looking. (P3, female)

Some participants talked about the items that they had worn for a long time and expressed satisfaction with the investment.

Style for anyone, anywhere, anytime with any design

Participants also explained the usefulness of classic. An important virtue of classic is that it does not make a person stand out. People either love or hate those who stand out. The moderate classic design is believed to be a style that is acceptable to everyone.

I think *classic always works*. I mean if a person is trying to find their own style, then they need to explore a lot of different types of either garments, or colors, or putting different pieces of clothing together, but *you can never go wrong with classic*. And to a certain extent, *classic is safe* in that it has a history, and it has a history of acceptance... I think there are some sort of... this is going to sound weird, *intangible proof to classic*, which makes it appealing to a wide swath of humanity. I'm not sure I can really express it any better than that. There's some aspect of it that is appealing and *they're appealing across generations and across cultures, across geographical boundaries, across languages* [emphasis added]. (P10, female)

This belief in approval offers great comfort and confidence to consumers when they are making wardrobe choices. Consumers are likely to attribute the enduring appeal of classic to the idea of its aesthetic value, which they believed is inherent in classic.

Because classic style can *be accepted by most of the people, everyone will probably agree that it's visually pleasing*. And it also lasts longer, so people don't need to think about how to change their wardrobe dramatically every time. And I think classic needs to be agreed on by most of the people. So when you prefer classic style, then *you are almost automatically accepted by the most people* instead of just high fashion [emphasis added]. (P15, male)

Wearing a classic outfit can also confer a sense of belonging. When many styles fight for the consumer's attention and money, the risk of making wrong choices increases. Classic clothing is always considered appropriate. A classic outfit is never conspicuous, so it is a safe way to be able to fit into society easily.

A classic item can also be multi-purpose. Classic business attire is appropriate for many formal occasions. Except for the most formal occasions, dressing-up with classics is appropriate for most business settings.

Probably because it never goes out of style, and *it's always relevant*, it's always those pieces that no matter *where you have to go in life, like a job interview, or like a formal occasion*, they're *always going to be in style* and you can look back at pictures of yourself and think, "what was I wearing?!" So I think that's really why I like it. There's something about it that's just [that] there's pieces you can always rely on and you can get a lot of money value out of them too [emphasis added]. (P12, female)

The participants believe that classic style will still look good for a long time after you buy it. Several participants described the classic style as versatile. For example, a basic blazer can be dressed up with a nice pair of dress pants, whereas it can also be dressed down with distressed jeans. As a single classic item goes with many other pieces, a consumer will get more use out of a classic style, which increases its practical value.

A future style for both young and old

Most participants anticipate that they would wear classic styles more in future. There was a nuance for the reason why they thought so. Those who had classic as their taste showed a passion for wearing classic styles in the future. However, some participants in their twenties stated that they did not wear classic styles as much, but they anticipated wearing more classic styles in future. They expected to need more professional and mature attire and also to be able to afford classic clothes more in the future, as they would become more involved in social activities. The participants agreed that people wear classic clothes more as they get older. Here is a quote of a participant now in her twenties.

Maybe because I'm still too young for classic style. ... I think when a woman goes into their 30's is the time for beginning the classic style. Before that, dressing more younger and comfortable, casual may be the case. ... It's about age and the personal experience. Now I don't have quite the luxury of dressing myself up, so maybe *later I will choose that style, just dress appropriate, as my age grows older* [emphasis added]. (P8, female)

Participants who claimed to have little interest in fashion trends stated that they continued to wear classic styles. For them, purchasing and wearing classic clothing reduced the uncertainty of adopting a new style. Classic clothing is an easy way to convey a mature and well-groomed image. The data suggested that those who do not currently enjoy wearing classic clothes seemed to be prospective consumers of classic styles in the futures.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined why consumers wear classic clothing using the qualitative research method. In addition to the general notion of classic as being timeless style, the findings determined that classic is a conservative, pragmatic, and a style for the future for most people. A classic style represents con-

servatism in style. Wearing classic clothes shows a commitment to traditional design. The traditional look is associated with formality, maturity, and accomplishment. The moderate design makes the classic a conservative style, as it is not tight fitting or revealing. The simplicity of the classic design does not draw undue attention. All of the features of moderate design also conform to social norms and reflect the traditional ideas about appearance.

Style pragmatism represents the positive attributes of wearing classic styles. Classic clothes do not go out of style and are appropriate for many occasions. Purchasing classic style is, therefore, a wise investment. The findings also indicate that the longevity of a classic style signifies social approval. Classic clothes are likely to be good for anyone and accepted by everyone.

Lastly, classic is a future style regardless of anyone's current interest in classic styles. Young and fashion-forward people associate the classic style with professionalism and maturity and expect to wear classic clothing in the future even though they do not currently wear the style a lot. For people who do not follow changing fashion, classic is a safe choice, and they expect to continue wearing classic styles into the future.

Classic style is sometimes confused with retro. For example, the hourglass silhouette dress is often associated with the 1940s and 1950s. This style is considered a retro trend because it revives the 1940s look and is classic at the same time. Retro is fundamentally trendy, however, because retro makes a fresh appearance in mass fashion long after it disappeared. However, an hourglass silhouette in a 1940s style is considered classic because it conserves and remembers the aesthetics of traditional femininity. For this reason, it is difficult to define a classic style. For the question about the changeability of classic, the participants' answers in this study were inconsistent, which in a certain way ironically also reflects the true nature of classic.

Dressing in a classic style carries with it a consumer use value. The data suggested that wearing classic clothes makes a consumer a main agent of clothing practices. Wearing classic clothes is a deliberate action in pursuit of a conservative image and pragmatic values. Whereas the person who wears the basics is not necessarily considered well-dressed, a person who is perceived to be wearing a classic style is considered stylish and well put together.

The present study has practical implications for marketers. Marketers need to understand and properly apply the values of conservatism and pragmatism found in classic style in their marketing. Whereas basic design is a technical term from the perspective of production, consumers' use values for classic are much better when designing a marketing plan. A classic style as a prospective style is another finding of this study that has practical marketing implications. Young consumers are potential consumers of classic style. It should also be noted that middle-aged or older consumers are very familiar with classic style, and there is indeed a generational difference in the perception of classic. Marketing campaigns should, therefore, consider the different ways in which consumers understand the classic style of clothing.

The findings of this study should be cautiously applied because of the small size and the narrow demographic range of the study sample. The study was conducted in the United States. Future research needs to be conducted in Western Europe where people more formally dress or in Asian countries where

an indigenous dress culture had been acculturated to reflect Western clothing practices. Further study, however, is still necessary to refine the concepts of classic clothing held by different consumer groups in different societies.

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