

# American Fashion: Constructing Masculinity in Hollywood 1920-1965

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This research paper focuses on Hollywood and its relationship to the construction of masculinity. However, Hollywood is an extremely broad subject. As in, there are various factors within Hollywood that has led to the re-definition of masculinity. For example, the plot lines starting from the New Hollywood Era which appealed to the emotions of the audience may have been the most significant factor which contributed to defining masculinity. Or it could have been the implementation of color in the films. Maybe it could have been the fashion styles which the stars actors and actresses exhibited on the screen. Taking these factors in to account, I attempted to address the change in the definition of masculinity during the span of 1925-1960.

This paper begins by discussing the source of fashion, specifically delving in the formation of the male fashion market. Fashion is constantly around our everyday lives, but how it came to be is quite a mystery due to its rather complex growth. Though the term fashion brings up images of runway models and a generally female-dominated world, it has come to be a way for men to assert masculinity. By delving into the origins of fashion, its proliferation through film, and its historic male fashion icons, I would like to depict the endless malleability of the male fashion world.

Fashion in the United States started in a non-national sense, because it was brought over through colonization. Similar to its European counterpart, clothing was tailored by craftsmen, making fashion limited to the noble and aristocratic class. A change was brought after the Industrial Revolution and weakening of the European countries after World War II: development of technology, and the rise of the United States as a global

economic power. The automation of labor made clothing affordable to the growing wallets of the general population.

Though originally seen as a direct identity facet, fashion soon became a way to express identity: How one feels and acts became a part of the way people dress. For males, a key component of expression was the depiction of masculinity. There are countless of ways to depict the confidence and self-control and the ideal media outlet to advertise the fashion industry was Hollywood.

The growth of Hollywood and its films being accessible to many made an explosive impact to the development of fashion in the United States. By using stars as models to increase interest in a style, the fashion world planned to increase its profits. Though the female fashion developed well, early male Hollywood stars were unable to influence male viewers, due to overly simple plots making it hard to relate to characters on film. With the development of complex plots reflecting the economic background at the time, Hollywood's films were finally able to reach out to the new market of male fashion. Along with that, iconic figures were used to develop a niche style that ended up becoming dominant for decades.

The use of highly relatable and admirable male actors on the silver screen helped develop the "rebel style" which made the first imprint on male fashion and created a new path of fashion that is not exclusively female-dominated. Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Steve McQueen are such male stars. Chronologically, each star left a mark on fashion that made the simple jeans and t-shirt, the "rebel style" into what it is today. Marlon Brando is the progenitor, James Dean and Steve McQueen mixed a certain element to further propagate the popularity of the style. All of the actors had one thing in common; how they dressed matched their personalities on and off the stage, making the "rebel style" acquirable by many. The "rebel style" also introduced the possibility of asserting masculinity through clothing.

Furthermore, the significance of the "rebel style" is that it is arguably the first male fashion style to be popularized to such a degree that it disseminated on a global level. The Film *Rebel without a Cause* starring James Dean influenced the American younger generation so heavily that blue jeans were banned from some high schools at the time, although that only popularized the style even more. In the realm of male fashion, this type of phenomenon has never occurred. By focusing on the "rebel style", how and why it was such a stylistic success leads to a better understanding of how the synchronization of Hollywood and fashion affects the definition of masculinity.

During the 20th century when the influence of World War II led to a drastic reorganization in class, redistribution in wealth, and drastic change in social structure, it is important to denote how these aspects affected gender role. In a time period in which females have been gaining much more power and overall becoming a greater presence, gender roles have become reversed. The traditional understanding of men being the bread winner asserting control and dominance is starting to become rejected. From a historical standpoint, this type of change deserves recognition and discussion since it is unprecedented.

Overall, this paper focuses on the general concept of how certain male fashion trends catch on taking in to account of the socio-historical background, and how that leads to the redefinition of masculinity. This paper begins with a general explanation of fashion and Hollywood, touches upon the related socio-historical background of the era, and how the combined effects of these factors led to the formation of current society. Ultimately, this paper attempts to understand one of the factors that are highly influential to the constantly changing definition of masculinity: the relationship of Hollywood and male fashion.