

Evolution of Culture and Clothes: A Study on the Select Novels of Sophie Kinsella’s “The Shopaholic Series”

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: October

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Joshina Rozario, and R Selvarani, Ranjini. “Evolution of Culture and Clothes: A Study on the Select Novels of Sophie Kinsella’s ‘The Shopaholic Series.’” *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2025, pp. 91–95.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS1-Oct.9859>

Joshina Rozario

Research Scholar, Government Arts College, Coimbatore

Dr. R. Ranjini Selvarani

Assistant Professor in English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore

Abstract

*Chick Literature, or “Chick Lit,” represents a distinctive literary form that explores the lives, aspirations, and struggles of contemporary women. This study focuses on Sophie Kinsella’s *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* and *Shopaholic Abroad*, examining how fashion and consumerism intersect with identity formation in postfeminist contexts. Using theories of fashion, consumer culture, and gender, this paper investigates the protagonist Rebecca Bloomwood’s relationship with shopping and how her obsession with clothes reflects broader social critiques on consumerism and femininity. Employing qualitative close reading, this paper connects Kinsella’s narratives with postfeminist discourse, exploring how Becky’s compulsive shopping simultaneously empowers and traps her. The study contributes to Chick Lit scholarship by linking fashion, identity, and consumption as evolving symbols of selfhood in the 21st century.*

Keywords: Chick Lit, Fashion, Consumerism, Gender Studies, Postfeminism, Identity

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedented technological, cultural, and lifestyle transformations. These shifts have redefined identity, status, and gender roles, particularly for women in consumer-driven societies. Within this landscape, Chick Literature—fiction written by and for women that focuses on modern female experiences—has emerged as a key cultural form reflecting the tension between empowerment and commodification.

This paper examines Sophie Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* novels through the lens of fashion and consumerism as symbolic extensions of identity. The aim of this study is to analyze how clothing functions not merely as material possession but as a language of cultural belonging, aspiration, and self-definition. It further explores how Becky Bloomwood’s obsession with fashion mirrors larger questions of female agency within capitalist patriarchy.

Literature Review

Several scholars have examined Chick Lit as a postfeminist narrative that blends humor, self-reflexivity, and critique of consumer culture. According to Imelda Whelehan (2005), Chick Lit represents “the contradictions of postfeminist femininity—where empowerment is equated

with consumption.” Similarly, Angela McRobbie’s *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) highlights how consumer culture has rebranded traditional femininity as a site of choice and self-expression. Rosalind Gill (2007) expands on this by analyzing postfeminist sensibility as a cultural logic that redefines independence through lifestyle and appearance.

In relation to Chick Lit, scholars like Stephanie Harzewski (2011) and Suzanne Ferriss & Mallory Young (2006) have explored how consumerism shapes female subjectivity. Their works argue that novels like **Shopaholic** both critique and reinforce capitalist ideologies by presenting shopping as a coping mechanism and a marker of success. Furthermore, Elizabeth Wilson’s *Adorned in Dreams* (2003) and Joanne Entwistle’s *The Fashioned Body* (2000) provide theoretical insights into how fashion mediates identity and social belonging.

Within this critical frame, *The Shopaholic Series* can be read as a commentary on the late-capitalist condition, where self-worth is measured through possessions. Becky’s character embodies the paradox of empowerment and entrapment—her love for fashion reflects a desire for control yet perpetuates dependency on consumer culture.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative close-reading approach supported by theoretical analysis. It draws on postfeminist and fashion theories to interpret the protagonist’s psychology and cultural positioning. Key frameworks include McRobbie’s theory of post feminism, Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) on conspicuous consumption, and fashion models such as the Modesty, Adornment, and Projection Theories.

Discussion

Clothing functions as both a metaphor and medium in Kinsella’s novels. Becky Bloomwood’s relationship with clothes transcends vanity; it symbolizes her negotiation with identity and social validation.

To start off with explaining the area of shopping, it is also important to know why there is such hype in shopping clothes. It is not only Rebecca who is doing so, but there is one Rebecca in every woman, who secretly loves shopping. Clothing or clothes is generally defined as an item that is worn to cover the body. In the course of time, clothes itself has found different varieties of names which include, garments, fabrics, outfits, regalia, attire, livery and so on.

In recent times people have developed a liking in presenting themselves in the best way they could. Although there is a saying, beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, still people regard and take utmost care in dressing up themselves and today people have started dressing up for occasions which again involves different clothing and attire for different ambience. For example the official workplace outfit is generally a suit and for weddings it is some designer outfit.

Clothing in fact has become a non-verbal medium of communication to let others know of the cultural identity or the origin of the country in a historical time frame. Clothes these days have also taken a step forward as symbols for social interactions. People consider it as status identity by pushing themselves to love the concept of brand culture.

Clothes in general can be classified into two classes. The first one is the fixed, where they are sustainably permanent and they do not allow or adapt to any fashion changes. Moreover the fixed class pertains to a particular locality for the matter. The second class is the modish. Modish, as the name hints, predominates in the western countries and is easily adaptable to fashion changes not only in a particular place but rather has the change in all parts of the world.

Examining clothes in a broader perspective, the *Theory of Clothing*, gives an actual insight into the development of clothes. The first of the four concepts in the theory is *The Modesty Theory*. The word modest comes from the Latin word ‘modestus’ which means keeping within measure. In this theory clothing is generally used to conceal the genital organs to protect oneself from a sense of shame, embarrassment or any sexual emotions.

The second concept of theory is the Immodesty Theory. There is a well-known proverb, ‘Dress is a powerful sexual tool’ and with regard to this, this theory is also called the Sexual Attraction Theory. As days passed people started wearing clothes in order to expose their physical appearance and to enhance their body shapes with an ultimate aim of attracting the opposite sex. This kind of clothing portrayed the person who wore that particular clothing as an object of sexual interest.

The Adornment Theory is the third concept of the four theories which bring out the individuality and the creativity of the designer. This theory refers to the embellishments of dresses and other forms of appearances so as to display a sense of attraction and aesthetic expression amongst the public. People started adapting to this culture in order to expose their financial status.

The last one is The Protection Theory. This theory is a technological shift from what people had used in the earlier days corresponding to that of the modesty theory. In the protection theory, the clothes that are brought under this category are those which saves or protects humans from animals, external elements, climatic changes and so on. To name a few clothes that belong to this concept are, bullet proof jackets, space suits, thermal wear, firefighting suits and the list goes on.

Having mentioned the Theories of Clothing, it is quite evident that the novels, *The Secret Dreamworld of Shopaholic* and *Shopaholic Abroad*, have the last two concepts of theories, The Adornment Theory and The Projection Theory are associated with them. The protagonist, Becky, has different clothes to wear for different occasions and she has shopped them accordingly without any regrets and hesitations.

The Adornment Theory manifests in her aesthetic expression, where fashion becomes an art of self-presentation. Yet, the Projection Theory suggests that her clothing choices shield insecurities and anxieties about inadequacy in a competitive world.

Through McRobbie’s lens, Becky’s behavior exemplifies postfeminist contradictions—her independence as a journalist coexists with dependence on consumer culture for emotional fulfillment. The novels expose the psychological pull of advertisements and the capitalist allure of self-improvement through materialism. The trickle-down effect in fashion theory illustrates how elite trends infiltrate middle-class aspirations, shaping Becky’s consumer desires.

Having an independent life or to live it to the fullest with a limited income is quite a risk factor but it involves a daring attitude to achieve the same. Rebecca Bloomwood can be considered a person to have an independent life as well as a person who is living life to the fullest. Taking the behavioural psychological perspective into consideration, Becky has developed a fantasy to have expensive clothes and to have a rich lifestyle. In fact the various brands and their advertisements along with the materialistic run, Becky decides to go for it and give it all her try.

As far as the novels are concerned, it is quite evident that the protagonist of the novels exhibits these characteristic traits in her. With regard to the response to stimuli or the behaviour that she exhibits is a reaction on what she has observed and learnt from her ambience. The twenty-first century is quite a hectic place to live in despite the many developments.

The fashion industry as such has reformed itself and has witnessed a majestic change. People have started following the brand culture, to be more precise, they have started to praise the brand culture. The competition between the brands, be it clothing, bags, footwear, spectacles, shades, cosmetics and makeup, whatever may it be, brand plays a major role. These owners of the brand particularly to envy the fellow companies target the public and make them victims of their needs.

It is the same victimization that happens in the case of Rebecca Bloomwood as well. Being a journalist, she is supposed to have a decent outfit rather than a formal one on a daily basis to work. But with all the brands around her, she chooses the ones that are expensive and beyond her affordability. This happens because she gets to see her other colleagues and friends dressed in the best outfit each day and she too wishes to put herself in the same position and hence she gets victimized. Her response to materialistic love puts her in debt.

This situation of behavioural psychology could be well justified with the Trickle Effects in the theories of fashion. Basically, there are three effects in the theories of fashion; the trickle-down effect, trickle-across and trickle-up effect. Trickle-down effect is where any sort of fashion idea is first adopted and used by the higher strata of people and once after it has become quite used it comes into use in the lower strata of people. For trickle-down effect it is where one particular fashion notion is adapted universally in all economic strata of lives and trickle-up effect is where any idea of styling or dressing starts in the lower class people and then adapted by the high class.

In the novels taken for study, the Trickle-own effect is predominantly found to be in use. Becky is portrayed as an ardent lover of brands where she yearns to get things that are worn by celebrities and that which has a higher impact on the common people. She loves to be addressed with the brands she wears as in, “People will refer to me as the Girl in the Denny and George scarf” (TSDS 22). This reaction of Becky is because of the fashion competition that exists in the contemporary time.

Another situation where Becky is seen to be dominated by the trickle-down effect is when she compares herself to the other celebrities in the media. The way Becky had chosen her clothes and other accessories, the way she carried herself in front of the elite class have made her fantasize in the world of celebrities.

I just stared at myself, mesmerized. Entranced by what I could look like; by the person I could be. There was no question. I had to have it. I had to. As I signed the credit card slip ... I wasn't me any more. I was Grace Kelly. I was Gwyneth Paltrow. I was glittering somebody else who can actually sign a credit card slip for thousands of dollars while smiling and laughing at the assistant, as though this were a nothing- purchase. (SA 232)

Through McRobbie's lens, Becky's behavior exemplifies postfeminist contradictions—her independence as a journalist coexists with dependence on consumer culture for emotional fulfillment. The novels expose the psychological pull of advertisements and the capitalist allure of self-improvement through materialism. The trickle-down effect in fashion theory illustrates how elite trends infiltrate middle-class aspirations, shaping Becky's consumer desires.

The Shopaholic novels also align with Jean Baudrillard's notion of the “consumer society,” where consumption replaces genuine need with symbolic desire. Becky's shopping habit reflects what Baudrillard calls “the seduction of signs”—the belief that purchasing signifies success. Thus, her debt becomes not a financial failure but a symptom of cultural conditioning.

Theoretical Depth and Interpretation

The intersection of Chick Lit and postfeminism reveals how gendered consumerism becomes a form of soft power. Becky's compulsion to buy clothes is not only personal but ideological—it reasserts neoliberal ideals of self-making and autonomy. However, her struggles question whether agency within consumer capitalism is genuine or illusory.

Angela McRobbie's postfeminist framework interprets Becky's obsession as both resistance and conformity. She resists traditional domestic roles yet conforms to consumer-driven femininity. From a Marxist-feminist standpoint, her identity is commodified, echoing Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of mass culture as a capitalist mechanism of control.

Conclusion

Fashion in The Shopaholic Series operates as both liberation and limitation. Kinsella's novels illustrate how culture evolves through consumer symbols—clothes become metaphors for ambition, insecurity, and belonging. Becky's narrative encapsulates the dilemma of modern womanhood, torn between empowerment and entrapment in a branded world. Through theoretical engagement, this paper concludes that the evolution of culture and clothes is inseparable from the evolution of identity itself, reflecting the shifting balance between individuality, materialism, and gendered expectations.

References

1. Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. **Dialectic of Enlightenment**. Stanford UP, 2002.
2. Baudrillard, Jean. **The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures**. Sage, 1998.
3. Entwistle, Joanne. **The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory**. Polity, 2000.
4. Ferriss, Suzanne, and Mallory Young, eds. **Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction**. Routledge, 2006.
5. Gill, Rosalind. **Gender and the Media**. Polity, 2007.
6. Harzewski, Stephanie. **Chick Lit and Postfeminism**. University of Virginia Press, 2011.
7. Kinsella, Sophie. **The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic**. Black Swan, 2000.
8. ———. **Shopaholic Abroad**. Transworld Publishers, 2001.
9. McRobbie, Angela. **The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change**. Sage, 2009.
10. Veblen, Thorstein. **The Theory of the Leisure Class**. Macmillan, 1899.
11. Wilson, Elizabeth. **Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity**. Rutgers UP, 2003.
12. Whelehan, Imelda. **The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City**. Palgrave, 2005.