LIFESTYLES

*Lifestyle* is the term that is given for a mode of living adopted by an individual, a group, a nation or a commonwealth of nations. Lifestyles depend on—and in turn co-create—the characteristics of a civilization or a culture within a given space and time. A lifestyle takes shape within the specific interweaving of economic, political, cultural and religious frameworks, patterns and discourses. Under the conditions of globalization, it is also greatly influenced by demography and technology. In recent research, the notion of lifestyle is not limited to the synchronic (i.e., space-centered) notion of “way of life,” but it also includes the diachronic (i.e., time-centered) mechanisms of how a “good life” is conceived on the basis of changing convictions, values and imaginations in a given context, and how it is projected as a perspective into the future. That means that lifestyles embody life practices—and more precisely individual and collective habits—of populations in a given life-world that comprise, and are expression of, both the effects of the past and the anticipation of the future.

Characteristics and features

Interestingly, even if belonging to one and the same civilization or culture, lifestyles are always stratified “in their inside”—that is, according to class, gender, education, age, access to life options (e.g., professions), services and goods (e.g., housing). Socialization and social inclusion or exclusion (often caused by the environment or milieu of origin) also play important roles. Lifestyles are always dependent on life standards. For example, a person
living in Western civilization and thus embedded into a mainstream lifestyle characterized by
equality, individualism, open access to technology and professions may still be disadvantaged
by age or the lack of education, thus being forced to conduct a lifestyle not corresponding to
his or her aspirations. In many civilizations around the world, lifestyles are still dependent on
gender.

Insofar as lifestyles consist of the complex multidimensional interweaving of all these
dimensions and factors, they are often interpreted as the symbolic embodiment of culture in
the broad sense, that is, to the extent that culture is defined as “the inheritable of social
practice” (Johannes Heinrichs). The relationship between a culture and the lifestyles
inhabiting it is shaped both by its affirmation through “ordinary” lifestyles and the opposition
(or protest) of “alternative” or “non-aligned” lifestyles against its prevailing mainstream.

Correspondingly, a lifestyle has the double function of distinguishing and unifying
groups and individuals within a given society, as well as creating symbolic (cultural) centers
and peripheries. According to Pierre Bourdieu, lifestyles negotiate between the objective
structures and features of a society and the subjective practices possible in it. They
incorporate social structures by transforming them into symbolic capital, that is, into habits
publicly visible that thus influence the cultural self-consciousness of a society. In this sense,
lifestyles are not only the (passive) expression of given societal patterns and formations, but
can also be interpreted as (active) agents of symbolic power, because they influence the ideas
of what a good life can and should be in a society, thus ultimately also affecting its political
and institutional framework. As a consequence, different groups in a given society compete
for symbolic capital by the means and in the “space” of lifestyles. In this sense, lifestyles are
the complementary cultural dimension of the material struggles within a society, thus
acquiring a pre-political or contextual political role. Given that according to Ramón Saldívar the “power of culture” as a unifying and dividing force is at the core of globalization, this pre-political role today is seen as increasingly important, because in the age of global communication systems and of a media culture that revolves around the production, distribution and exchange of images, lifestyles depict and influence the inner conflicts as well as the integrative potentials of the arising global civilization.

Modern societies are lifestyles societies

Social research into lifestyles systematically started in the United States in the 1940s, when it became a political tool of distinction towards the Nazis (“lifestyle of joy” against “lifestyle of dead”). After the end of World War II, it continued to be politically used for the “re-education” of Germans with the goal of the development of democracy. In the McCarthy era of the 1950s, the notion of lifestyle served as a—sometimes authoritarian, if not oppressive—tool of homogenization and unification within the West in the context of the East-West polarization. Since the 1960s, research concentrated on the analysis of lifestyles as a matter of protest and their symbolic use as agents of liberation, left-of-center pluralism and differentiation (e.g., the “politically meant” lifestyle of the hippies, flower power generation). The leading philosophical movements of the 1970s and 1980s like structuralism, postmodernism and semiotics concentrated on the relevance of lifestyles as social codes, that is, on their—constructive or deconstructive—function within the symbolic order of the materialistic society (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard). After the end of the Cold War and during the start of globalization in the 1990s, the research on lifestyles
increasingly became part of the interdisciplinary field of contextual political analysis, where culture, psychology, philosophy, ideas and personal and collective attitudes are seen as politically relevant fields of societal action.

In recent years, research on lifestyles has further spread out to include additional fields, becoming one of the avant-garde fields of experimental inter- and transdisciplinarity. It now also comprises the broad notion of “how time is invested,” for example, how spare time is spent by populations in a given society, including entertainment, social relations, and dress, and how and by which mechanisms the “spending of time” is tied to values, worldviews and identities, thus revealing the social structure and its inbuilt habits and trends. Another facet was added when medicine started to conceive lifestyle as a way of healthy or unhealthy living, including nutrition, sports, media consumption and the general quality of life of individuals and collectives, including the respective social prerequisites. It has been proven, for example, that the nutrition habits of teenagers depend on the context of their milieus, and that “intensive” lifestyles carry increased health risk. Last but not least, the notion of lifestyle was extended in recent years to the globalized ways of dealing with the environment, including the (over)use of natural resources, per capita energy consumption and pollution, and the ways animals (e.g., cattle in the West or whales in Japan) are treated in the industrialized global food industry to support given lifestyles that have become destructive for the global society (Jonathan Safran Foer).

Because of this multiple relevance and the grand plurality of lifestyles found in present open societies, some commentators since the 1990s have spoken of Western civilization as “lifestyle society.” The same though is still not the case on a global level. In general, the law is that the wealthier, knowledge- and education-centered, democratic and
technologically evolved a society is, the more lifestyles are created in it that synchronically coexist along each other. In turn, the less developed and pluralistic a society is, the fewer differentiated and autonomous lifestyles exist in it. That tendency is connected to a second one: that the four basic social discourses of economics, politics, culture, and religion are more tied to each other and more hierarchically structured in less developed societies than in developed ones where the basic principle is their mutual autonomization and emancipation. It follows that societies in which all four discourses are closely connected and influencing each other directly produce on average fewer different lifestyles.

Historical and global aspects

Seen from a diachronic (historical) viewpoint, societies reaching the stage of industrialization and the division of labor usually evolve from monistic lifestyles and social uniformity towards a greater variety and pluralism of lifestyles. As four-dimensional interpersonal practices and as embodiments and expressions of social structures, lifestyles follow to a certain extent the “needs pyramid” of Abraham Maslow: In less evolved societies, they are tied mainly to economic and political needs. As their social context evolves, their structural features and expressions tend to increasingly include specific cultural and spiritual needs, and their overall center of gravity shifts towards the upside of the need pyramid. It can be further generally affirmed that the more differentiated a society is, the more important the symbolic aspect of lifestyles as a cultural projection into the public rationality becomes. In turn, the more lifestyles are admitted publicly, the more liberal, open and democratic a society becomes. The respective acceptance is created through the mechanism of “differentiation
through repetition” (Gilles Deleuze). That means that with respect to a given mainstream lifestyle, a differing or alternative lifestyle is the more accepted, the more often it appears to the public perception being repeated through symbolic baits, among others the media or public celebrations (e.g., gay pride day parade) being thus step by step introduced into the public imaginary.

Seen on a global level, lifestyles today cover as different approaches as monistic stone age styles in Papua–New Guinea, religious fundamentalist lifestyles in layers of the population in Iran, authoritarian collectivism like in modernizing China to the radically pluralistic lifestyles (egocentrism) in the open post-modern societies of the West. With the ascent of globalization and the rise of “competing modernities” (Martin Jacques) between the West and evolving societies like China, South East Asia or South America, the term increasingly comes to mean the interweaving of a network of different civilizational habits in between culturally adverse global societies. In fact, globalization seems to have brought a mixture of lifestyles on the one hand, but also the need of new distinctions and confinements between some of them. For example, while what is currently understood as “global lifestyle” orients itself mainly on Western patterns and models (according to the examples set by U.S. pop culture in particular), increasing parts of non-Western cultures feel the need to distance themselves from it. On the other hand, the rising global civil society wants to preserve certain ethnic and indigenous lifestyles as part of the biocultural diversity (analogical to biogenetic diversity) heritage. Globalization in this sense creates new problems and chances of melting pots and networks of lifestyles as well as of preserving and evolving identities and values connected with and expressed through lifestyles, and this requires delicate new balances.
Lifestyles and globalization

Related to these developments, there has been an extended debate since the 1990s if globalization leads to cultural uniformity, and thus to a reduction of the number of different lifestyles, or to its increase. Connected to this debate is the question of whether there is one basic human lifestyle, independent of time, culture and space and thus a transcultural and transhistoric, anthropologically founded lifestyle of being human, based on social constants allegedly given by the human condition that can be found in all societies in history throughout the world (e.g., living in pairs, having family and children, competition for goods). If so, it could serve as an agent of unification and exchange for globalization. Another question is whether lifestyles can (and should) be evolved “from above” or “from below,” and by focusing on which discourse first: economic, political, cultural, or religious.

The most pressing question for the future of globalization though is how the transition of lifestyles towards sustainability can be managed on a global level, and how the distribution of the respective costs and burdens will be distributed. That is because different lifestyles differ in resource intensity, energy consumption and pollution. The individualistic and consumption-oriented lifestyles of the West are environmentally the most intensive in the world. Since they nevertheless continue to function as a role model for large parts of the world population, the challenge consists in the transformation of lifestyles towards a so-called LOHAS, or lifestyle of health and sustainability. Since it is estimated that the world population will increase from 6.9 to 9 billion people by 2050 who will in essence try to take over the Western lifestyle, the implementation of LOHAS becomes a core issue of global development. It can be achieved by reforming mobility, focusing on green and renewable
energies and changing the habits of consumption (Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker). As Paul Ehrlich has pointed out, as far as this change in its core involves the change of habits, lifestyles become more essential in preventing a global collapse of society. This is because the problems of environment, technology, justice and peace cannot be solved without a change in the behavior—and that means without a change of the present lifestyles.

Critics have questioned how reliable and significant the concept of lifestyle may be as a category of global studies, given the increasing commercialization and the resulting artificial homogenization of lifestyles by the global media and economic culture, and if and to which extent therefore the notion of lifestyle can and should be conceived as an independent category of social research. Others have argued that the influence of lifestyles on global culture and politics is overestimated, because empirical evidence shows that in most cases they directly depend on the development of global and local economies and the institutional framework. Others have questioned if lifestyles are indeed integrative elements of global culture, pointing towards the role of post-conventional lifestyles as subversive elements within Western culture, and at terrorism as the potential end of the classically liberal Western lifestyle. Others have criticized the concept of a hybrid connection between lifestyles and culture in postindustrialized societies, particularly between mainstream life and its often collectivistic religious and cultural foundations on the one hand and the often sharply individualistic and secretive lifestyles embedded into it, because this relationship seems to be broken instead of hybridized (Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt). As a matter of contextual politics though, the notion of lifestyle during recent years has come to the forefront of global studies, especially with regard to the research in diversity and into the dimensions and perspectives of the alleged “clash of civilizations” (S. P. Huntington), but also if it comes to
concretely evaluate the social impact of religion on the global society (like, e.g., the mainstream lifestyles produced by Islam as fundamentally different from those of the West).

Lifestyle thus has become not only a core category of contemporary cultural politics (like in Germany with the integration debate of Islamic immigrants since 2010), but also a core aspect of “hard” institutional politics like in France and in Denmark with the debate about prohibiting the veiling of women since 2008, and its wide and complex impacts on societal liberalism.

As a result, there is a new critical interest in global social research today particularly in the interdependency between lifestyles and the lead culture of secular, pluralistic societies, in their role for global democratization processes, but also in the question of when and how lifestyles may function as agents of decreasing pluralism by using the freedoms which open democratic societies concede against them (like, e.g., the patriarchal and authoritarian lifestyles continued by some immigrants from non-pluralistic societies also after their transition to the West). It seems national governments can play a proactive role in the promotion of sustainable lifestyles as global development patterns, and in fact increasingly do so at least in the democratic societies of the West. Correspondingly, it seems to be possible that civil society movements may occupy the forefront position in establishing the cultural changes needed as a prerequisite to develop sustainable lifestyles in the arising global society.

Given the strong dependency of lifestyles from political and social arrangements, from the system of global economy, as well as from cultural and religious patterns, it remains an open question whether lifestyles can be evolved with or without prior or simultaneous global democratization, and to which extent.

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See also Globalization; Social Structure; Stratification; Modernization; The Family; Consumption; Popular Culture; Fashion; Entertainment; Contextual Politics; Homogenization; Pluralism

FURTHER READINGS


