What motivates fashion? Pick three readings (Veblen plus two either of the required or optional ones) and describe how the author sees the function of fashion.

According to the Veblen and Thorstein chapter, *Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture*, fashion is motivated primarily by the desire to convey one’s financial well-being and social class to outside observers. Since not everyone can necessarily see where we live, whether or not we have servants, or how much money is in our bank accounts, we can use our clothing, which any outsider can plainly observe, to signify how well off we are. By wearing expensive and stylish clothing (or at least clothing that appears to be expensive) we can demonstrate that we have the means both to purchase such expensive clothing, and to keep up with the current fashion trends (i.e. not dragging out last year’s sweater because we could not afford to buy this year’s sweater). If our clothing is always up to date with the latest looks and designer labels, this can be a strong indication to the outside world that we are financially stable enough to invest the time and money into looking as fashionable as possible.

Veblen and Thorstein take their argument even further, particularly in regards to women’s dress fashion. Women’s hats, shoes, skirts and even hair length are designed so as to prohibit any sort of manual physical labor. Thus, in keeping with such fashions, women are implicitly saying that they do not need to work for a living, and thus have the luxury to don themselves in such fineries which prevents doing physical labor in the first place. A woman wearing work boots, on the other hand, is showing that she does not have others working for her, and therefore, must dress in a manner which renders her capable of doing the work herself.

The function of fashion is interpreted differently in the Grant McCracken chapter, *Meaning Manufacture and Movement in the World of Goods*. McCracken postulates that the material objects of a culture serve to signify and authenticate cultural categories and meanings. In other words, all of our material possessions – the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the food we eat, the homes we live in, etc. – are imbued with meaning that helps to delineate which cultural categories we prefer to identify ourselves with. Our
possessions are indicative of our age, gender, class, occupation and lifestyle. In contrast to Veblen, who believes that we use fashion primarily for social class differentiation, McCracken interprets fashion somewhat more broadly; he thinks that our possessions and their symbolic meanings are used to define us as individuals in a number of cultural categories, including, but not limited to our financial well-being.

Fred Davis, in his chapter, *Do Clothes Speak? What Makes Them Fashion?*, has a similar view as McCracken – Davis, like McCracken, thinks that fashion and clothes are used to signify social identity across several domains, beyond just social class or status. However, Davis takes his argument one step farther. He argues that the reason that fashion is continually changing is because it mirrors the fact that social identity is also constantly undergoing change and modification. Our social identities are influenced by a large number of factors, including the fact that we are always aging, the new people we encounter in our lives, and social and technological changes in the world, to name a few. Given that all of the influencing factors are in a constant state of flux, it is only logical that our social identities are also in a state of flux. Thus, to accurately convey our ever-changing identities through fashion, it bears to reason that fashion must also be in a constant state of flux. Changing fashions are thus motivated by the constantly changing state of the world and of the individual.

**Think back to last year, before the election. Describe the Democratic primary race in terms of fashion. What constitutes the status hierarchy among candidates and supporters? What are the signals, their costs? What changes over time?**

Last year’s Democratic primary race is an example of a mobile hierarchy, in which each candidate’s status is continually changing, and therefore, the signals each candidate gives off must be constantly transformed as a result. Candidates must do everything in their power not only to retain their current supporters, but also to attract new supporters over to their platforms. Thus, a candidate must ensure that as the race progresses, the new signals he gives off are not only consistent with older signals he gave previously, but are also designed to win over undecided voters who were not originally convinced by the older signals to support that particular candidate. In other words, a candidate cannot entirely change or reverse the signals he gives off, or his original group
of supporters will rescind their support, and he will be viewed as wishy-washy, or unstable. But at the same time, in order to stay in the race, the candidate must continue to adjust his signals, even slightly, in order to attempt to win over new supporters.

The signals that the candidates display include many things, from their positions on different issues, to how well they speak in public, to their ability to engage and excite a crowd, to their leadership experience and ability, to their knowledge of the issues facing the country and their proposed solutions to fixing the country’s most pertinent problems. The costs of making these signals are high. The candidates must spend a great deal of time researching the campaign issues, and be able to speak about them articulately and dynamically in public. Additionally, each candidate must also research his opponents and his opponents’ views, and come up with compelling reasons why his stance is better than that of his opponents. Candidates must also spend a huge amount of time and energy traveling, meeting their potential constituents, and spreading the messages of their platforms. Finally, candidates must also expend effort in raising money for campaign expenses.

The costs to the receivers (potential voters and/or supporters) are not quite as high. The receivers pay in terms of time spent getting to know the candidates, listening to them, reading about them and about what they stand for. Each receiver has his own set of concerns, and candidates must ensure that they give off signals that cater to particular groups of receivers. For example, if a candidate is speaking at a school, he will most likely address education reform as one of his top priorities. He might arrange a photo shoot with a classroom of schoolchildren, and use this photo as a marketing tool to signify his commitment to education. He might wear a t-shirt or a sweatshirt emblazoned with the name of the particular school that he is visiting. Thus, his fashion and his signals are influenced by each particular event that he attends, and who the probable receivers of his signals will be. If he is speaking at a senior citizens center, it does not make sense for him to wear a school sweatshirt, or to spend much time talking about education reform. At the senior citizens center, he is more likely to address Medicare, as this topic is more pertinent to the receivers at this event. Thus, a candidate’s fashion signals will change, depending upon the audience whom he is addressing, and the receiver to whom he is signaling at any given time.
How are fashions embodied in blogs? In addition to reading the Adar et al paper, you may want to look at sites such as blogdex, Technorati, etc.

Blogs are useful utilities for both inciting and spreading the latest online fashions. This is done primarily through linking to other websites, and particularly, to other blogs. Bloggers often read and comment on the blogs of others, and very often, they will link to the blogs of others. For example, if a blog includes a link to an interesting website, other bloggers who read this initial blog will then learn of the website. If they too, find it interesting, they may include it in their own blogs, either by linking to the website themselves, or by linking to the referring blog. Then the readers of the secondary blogs will learn of the website, and may choose to link to it, and so on. In this way, knowledge of the website spreads quickly throughout the blogging population, and becomes fashionable, so to speak.

Because blogs are a medium which quickly and constantly changes, blog-based trends tend to be short-lived and subject to rapid change, which is one of the defining hallmarks of fashion. Thus, because of their dynamic and fluctuating nature, blogs are an embodiment of fashion. Blogs reflect the continually changing identities, statuses, and interests of their authors and audiences, and this is further reflected by the fashion trends that blogs initiate and/or reveal.