

The “Fashion” of Manspreading and Socioeconomic Status:

A Marxist and Feminist Analysis

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

Hunter College

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

Scott Lizama

SOC 101

12/21/18

The “Fashion” of Manspreading and Socioeconomic Status: A Marxist and Feminist

Analysis

“Manspreading” is a relatively new term coined by the online feminist movement that is used to describe the practice of men sitting with their legs spread wide apart. It may or may not interfere with the comfort of another person sitting next to the manspreader, and it may also produce social tensions given that it violates rules of social conduct. Manspreading is a hotly contested topic in the realm of feminism, as it is construed to signify everyday sexism, a lack of regard for other people, an assertion of male dominance and suggestiveness. This practice is aggravating to most, given that it deprives people of seating and disrupts delicate social norms. I often see men manspreading on public transport, and it is disconcerting, because manspreading in my mind equates to inconsiderateness and social deviance. In analyzing the mannerisms of manspreaders in this paper, it would also be prudent to understand the socioeconomic backgrounds from which they originate, due to the fact that there may be observable patterns that can be identified in understanding what types of people manspread. I point to fashion and overall appearance as an indicator of socioeconomic status (SES) in my paper, as it may reflect occupation and class. I also point to feminist theory in examining the sexist nature of the practice. Emma Jane in her article “‘Dude ... stop the spread’: antagonism, agonism, and #manspreading on social media” offers a feminist analysis of manspreading and invokes the idea

of “womanshrinking”, which is “ the tendency for females to sit in closed and constricted positions.” (Jane, 2016). She argues that there is a relationship between body position and power, while citing the schism between men’s rights activists and feminists in their interactions online. The concept of “womanshrinking” is imperative in understanding the historically and presently relevant topic of sexism -- “...there has existed a long-standing social imperative for girls and women to adopt constricted and closed positions...This has been framed as being necessary to... preserve sexual innocence, maintain reproductive health, and uphold decorum. “ (Jane, 2016). In addition, Jane references the implications of psychological research which cites the idea of dominance as reflected through posture and body language -- intuitively, “Open and expansive body positions, for instance, are characteristics of dominant individuals, while submissive people take up less space by contracting their postures, sitting with closed arm and leg positions, and using diminutive, if any, gestures (Burgoon and Dunbar, 2006: 289).” Jane’s paper helps me to explore the feminist underpinnings behind the “#manspreading” movement and consider the theory of “womenshrinking” in a way that sheds light on the historically abstract but very real. I am able to frame my research around feminist theory while contextualizing the reasons why people might manspread. In addition, an analysis of subway interaction by Stéphane Tonnelat and William Kornblum finds that manspreading is inherently gendered, with “...gender-oriented behaviors being observed by both riders and researchers. For example, a popular Internet blog called Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train displays hundreds of pictures of men spreading their legs apart while sitting next to women pressing their legs together, and in 2014, the MTA added a poster against ‘manspreading’ in the trains.” (Tonnelat and Kornblum, 2017). Though there is no available data that can accurately quantify the number of manspreaders, the

MTA is well aware of the issue, given that they implemented signs in train carts saying “Dude...stop the spread, please. It’s a space issue.” In considering the aggravation of many women about something as seemingly trivial like this, it is important to acknowledge the experiences that many women have with their male counterparts while on the subway -- “Gender Relations on the Subway” rears its focus on the sexual harassment and submission/vulnerability that women experience in taking public transport. Despite the paper focusing on matters of groping, exhibitionism, female discomfort, and unsolicited conversation, the overall effects of manspreading and the severity of these acts all heighten the level of vulnerability and discomfort that women experience in the microcosm that is the MTA. Offering a microanalysis of gendered interactions on the subway, Tonnelat and Kornblum cite moving anecdotal evidence about instances in which women were touched, mocked, and shown genitalia -- thereby contributing to the hostilities between the sexes that may very well reflect the state of the social world today, leading to discourse regarding manspreading in popular culture. Instances of “minor” oppression mirror large-scale systems of oppression, and blatant sexism and harassment pave the way for discourse regarding manspreading to seep into feminist rhetoric and popular culture. This paper helps me to draw inferences about the broader implications of sexism in the context of the New York City Subway system. Lastly, in Yuet See Monica Owyong’s article, “Clothing semiotics and the social construction of power relations”, she posits that we base our assumptions about people around the clothing they wear. An inherent relation of power is established between two people in their interactions. Semiotics, “... according to Palmer (1993, 2), refers to ‘the theory of signs, or of signaling systems’” (Owyong, 2009). In positioning this article within the scope of my research paper, I seek to understand the mechanisms by which fashion and clothing operate in

capitalist society as a way of signifying power relations, class structure, and inequalities all through the lens of Marxism. Understanding how men dress on the subway and observing their mannerisms is indicative of a greater socio-economic phenomenon that may explain the carelessness or job-related fatigue that may be experienced by those in the lower-class. Jobs have their own standards for fashion, as “In a large multi-national corporation, the president is usually dapper in a well-cut designer suit, while, lower down the hierarchy, staff in charge of sanitation are usually decked in loose-fitting uniforms, a symbol, almost, of their uniformity and lack of a unique identity.” (Owyong, 2009). The “power suit” (the dark suit and matching pants of business executives), “...aside from representing a certain formality and professionalism, endows the wearer with a considerable degree of power and dominance.” (Owyong, 2009). Linking this to the Marxian principles of class inequality, professionally-dressed people are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner in other areas of life -- their privilege, education, manners, and incentives allow for this. However, the inklings of class conflict may make themselves evident in the mannerisms of those who do not dress well -- they may choose to break social norms, consciously or unconsciously making the choice to resist and reject them. These norms can very well include sitting properly in a train cart -- and this is precisely where a discussion of Marxism infiltrates a discussion about manspreading. This paper explores the issue of manspreading and seeks to address it through the feminist and Marxist schools of critical sociological thought in understanding fashion patterns and the socioeconomic status (SES) of people who do it. I explore factors such as correlation in my observational research in arguing that there are distinctive fashion habits associated with those who manspread, which point to correlations between SES and manspreading, with lower SES being correlative with

manspreading. This paper details the fashion habits of men who manspread, and from there, I attempt to mindfully draw conclusions about SES. A description of my findings includes a correlation between manspreading and low SES as indicated by distinct fashion patterns and a discussion of policy design that can change subway seating arrangements or emphasize education regarding manspreading.

In conducting my field observations, I chose to examine the New York City subway system. In order to ensure accuracy, I examined the first carts of the B, Q, and 6 lines for three days, twice a day, at around the same time of day — morning and afternoon, before and after the start of my school days. I did this because I aimed to have consistency in my findings, given that the MTA and capitalism in general operate on a very strict schedule — a schedule including rush hour, where business executives and blue-collar workers alike herd into train carts like cattle awaiting slaughter. Anyways, my data collection mostly took place from about 8-9 A.M. each morning and from about 1-3 P.M. each afternoon. I recorded the number of men manspreading (if any, which there were) on my phone, and I offered detailed descriptions about the attire and overall appearance of each in my notes. I paid special attention to hats, shoes, physique, and uniforms — given that these items can be especially reflective of a person's overall appearance. I operationally define manspreading as “sitting with one's legs further apart than the length of one's shoulders”. My data collecting experience was not too difficult, though sometimes I had to stand and walk around the entire cart to scan for any potential manspreaders. This had to be done discreetly, as I was taking notes on my phone — a fairly difficult thing to accomplish, given that I do not want to draw unnecessary attention to myself/plant biases in their heads and reinforce them in my own. Sometimes, during the morning hours of rush hour, it would be difficult to

navigate the cart, and I tried my best to visualize people from a distance or walk as close as I could. Overall, collecting data seemed a little disquieting simply because I felt like I was invading the privacy of people, therefore I did not choose to photograph anybody manspreading on the train for the purposes of this paper — it may have even posed a legal issue, and that would be truly disquieting!

My research has determined that there is indeed an existing correlation between manspreading and the fashion habits of those of a low SES, as observed through manspreaders' patterns of dress indicated by having unprofessional, visibly worn, or uniform attire on the train during peak morning rush hours and the afternoon hours. Presumably, some people are going to work during the early hours of the morning — I had also observed two MTA officers, an electrician or some other type of trade worker, and a man with paint on his clothing — all blue collar jobs that do not require wearing professional attire or a suit, but rather a uniform. Blue collar jobs are typically lower paying than white collar jobs, and the same dominance that it displayed as a result of wearing a suit is not displayed in an MTA uniform, which strips the worker of their individuality and agency. This may be indicative of the Marxian principles of class conflict, given that, ironically, blue-collar workers working for the MTA choose to not abide by a constrictive social code of sitting, while being unable to not abide by an even more restrictive mode of dress. In addition, people who are not going to work may not work a traditional corporate nine-to-five schedule, also invoking questions about SES. I had observed 8 out of 11 (~72 percent) people of whom I had perceived to have related dress patterns, and I was able to draw conclusions about SES. They typically wore worn shoes, hoodies/baggy jeans and sweatpants and other baggy clothing, puffy coats, uniforms, and had work materials. I

operationally defined low SES as wearing these items of clothing, which is possibly the best and only assumption I could draw regarding SES, as I cannot conduct any surveys regarding home income and occupation. I had attempted to calculate a correlation coefficient with a calculator, but unfortunately, I either did not have enough data or had inputted mine incorrectly, to my despair. A striking majority of the manspreaders I observed I perceived to have distinctive fashion patterns that I related to low SES, thusly indicating a disconnect between the sacred, observable social norms potentially followed by others of a higher SES and those who possibly rebel against the injustice of the system or simply ignore it by choosing to manspread — those who are completely dejected and wrung out by life, to the point where a concern for anyone that does not include themselves dissipates. 7 out of 11 of the men I observed manspreading were also big and rugged-looking, possibly indicating an assertion of dominance/a disregard for imposed social norms regarding the clothed exposure of their genital region — relating to the feminist school of thought that seeks to understand hypermasculinity, hypersexuality/suggestiveness, and antisocial, unreceptive, socially oblivious behavior. In a U.K. news article written by the Independent, when women conducted social experiments by manspreading, “Interestingly, the women attracted more stares and glares than the men.” (Petter, 2017). Feminist fervor has naturally fueled the fire of the debate as a result of this finding. In proposing solutions to tackling the problem of manspreading without fighting fire with fire, advertisements should be put up in public transport systems -- and the MTA is a pioneer in doing so. An increase in population calls for an increase in space, but we are all getting “closer” -- “The new ads come as more riders are crowding onto the subways than at any time in recent history. In 2014, the system logged as many as 6.1 million riders on a single day, up from just

under 5.1 million riders on the busiest day a decade ago. The city’s population, meanwhile, has swelled to more than 8.4 million people, pushing everyone closer and closer.” (Fitzsimmons, 2014). Improvements to infrastructure could be made, limiting manspreading with the creation of mini boothlike barriers separating the seats -- similar to the ones on the wooden benches in station platforms -- though more compact and sleek -- in order to prevent men from stretching out their legs to their fullest capacity. Education and civility, instead of rage and “bleach-pouring” (Christodoulou and Stewart, 2018), about the undesired effects of manspreading and its impact on women AND men can certainly achieve a middle-ground that will not generate adversarial and retaliatory efforts from either party.

My analysis of the distinct fashion of manspreading within the Marxist and feminist frameworks has confirmed a connection between socioeconomic status as indicated by dress and manspreading, and I was able to draw such a connection through an observational study of various manspreading subway riders. About ~72 percent of people I had seen manspreading I had perceived to have lower SES due to what they were wearing at the time: baggy clothing. ~36 percent of people manspreading worked blue-collar jobs, and ~46 percent of people had old and unfashionable shoes. The attitude of manspreading is typically one of neglect and a lack of consideration, but this fashion of manspreading includes uniforms, worn and baggy clothing, and material, work-related items that starkly differ from the “power-suit” culture of the corporate world. This type of fashion is representative of the large-scale issues of long-standing class inequality — something that can only be remedied by focusing on a macro level of analysis.

Figure 1: Percentage of Blue Collar Workers vs. Ambiguous (n = 11)

as seen manspreading on the New York City subway

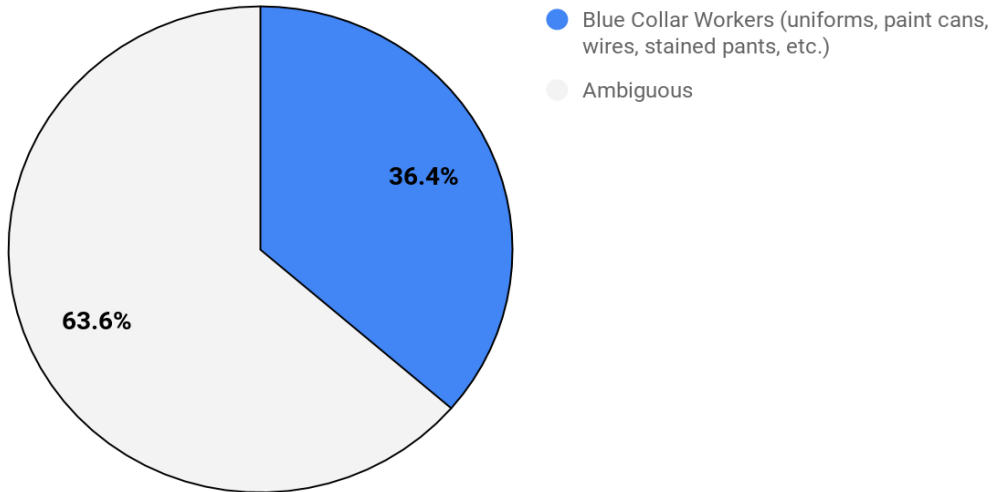


Figure 2: Type of Clothing Worn (n = 11)

as seen on those manspreading on New York City subway

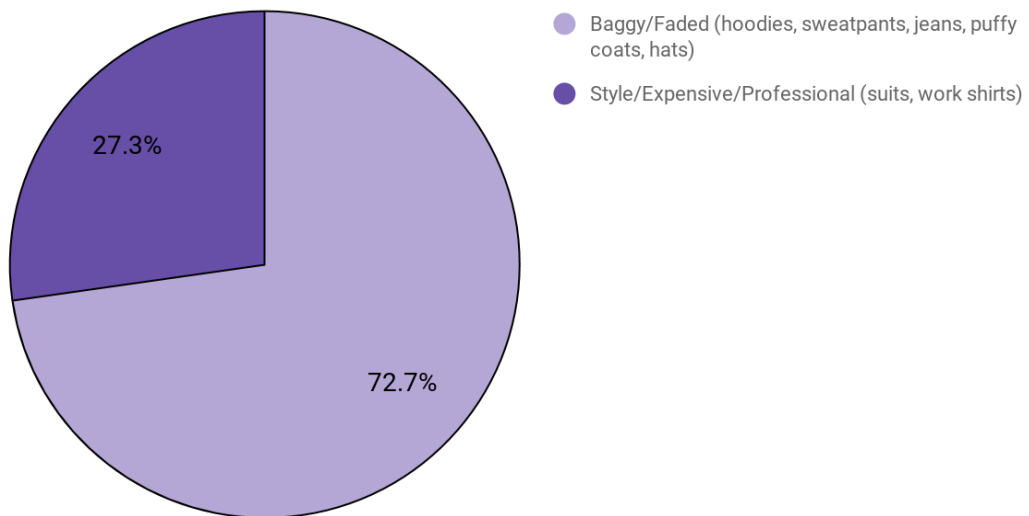


Figure 3: Type/Condition of Shoes Worn (n = 11)

as seen on those manspreading on New York City subway

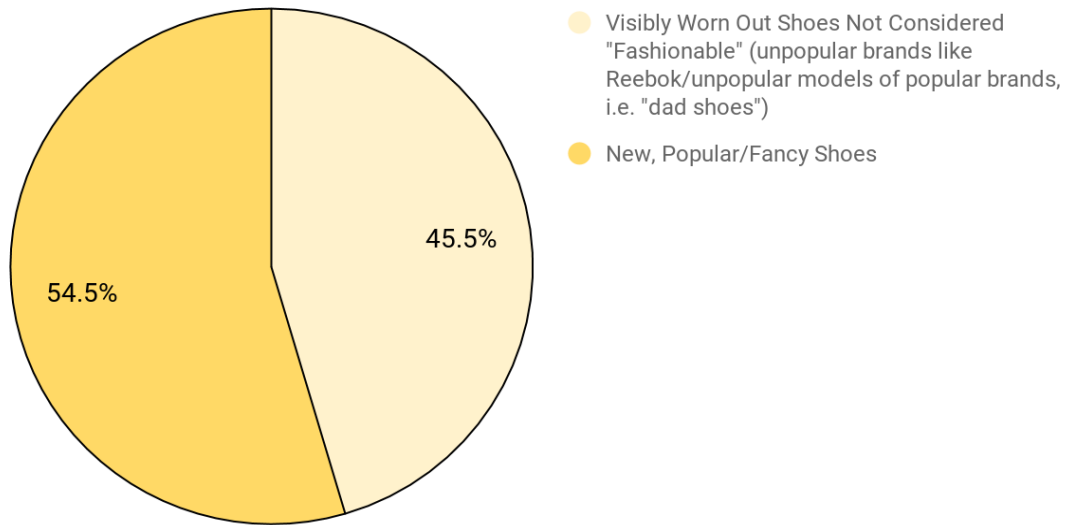
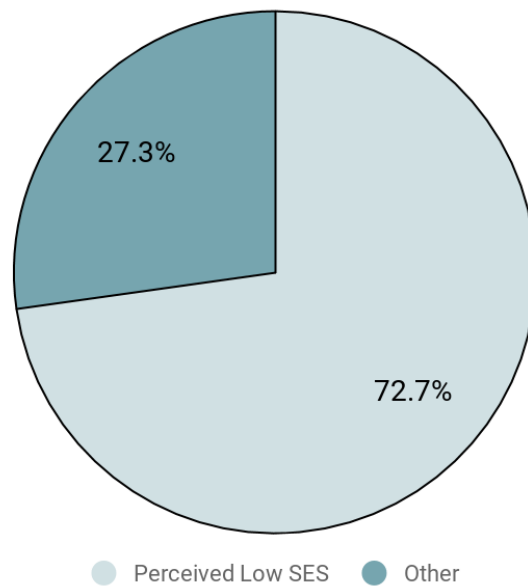


Figure 4: Overall Perceived Total of Low SES Manspreaders (n = 11)



References

- Christodoulou , Holly, and Will Stewart. “Woman's Brutal Mission to Stop 'Manspreading'.” *NewsComAu*, 26 Sept. 2018,
www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/law-student-pours-bleach-on-manspreading-passengers/news-story/22addf51059afa33b6decc13f54b8d44.
- Fitzsimmons, Emma G. “A Scourge Is Spreading. M.T.A.'s Cure? Dude, Close Your Legs.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 20 Dec. 2014,
www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/nyregion/MTA-targets-manspreading-on-new-york-city-subways.html.
- Jane, E. A. (2017). ‘Dude ... stop the spread’: antagonism, agonism, and #manspreading on social media. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(5), 459–475.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916637151>
- Petter, Olivia. “There's an Entirely Reasonable Explanation for 'Manspreading'.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 27 July 2017,
www.independent.co.uk/life-style/manspreading-scientific-explanation-revealed-men-behaviour-public-transport-etiquette-a7862771.html.
- Tonnelat, S., & Kornblum, W. (2017). Gender Relations on the Subway. In *International Express: New Yorkers on the 7 Train* (pp. 138-169). New York: Columbia University Press.
Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/tonn18148.9>
- Owyong, Y. S. M. (2009). Clothing semiotics and the social construction of power relations. *Social Semiotics*, 19(2), 191–211.
<https://doi-org.proxy.wexler.hunter.cuny.edu/10.1080/10350330902816434>