

## READING 4

### Fads

David A. Locher

David A. Locher is an author and college professor at Missouri Southern State College. The next excerpt about fads is from his book *Collective Behavior*. As you read this classification essay, also look for elements of definition and illustration writing.

1 Fads can take a wide variety of forms. However, almost all fads have a common pattern. They always appear quickly. They seem to come from nowhere and suddenly occupy the attention of virtually everyone. Then, as quickly as they came, they fade from popularity. Most fads can be placed into one of three general categories: activity fads, product fads, and fashion or apparel fads.

2 Activity fads center on some leisure activity like breakdancing or rollerblading. People suddenly feel excited about taking part in an activity that has never seemed appealing before. Prior to the 1950s, nobody felt the urge to stuff themselves into a phone booth with a large number of other people, and few have done it since then. However, it was all the rage for several years in the 1950s. Disco dancing came and (thankfully) went. Manufacturers often capitalize on these fads by producing a range of accessories to go with the activity. Often, music and movies that relate to the activity are rushed into production in an attempt to cash in on the fad before it ends. The song "The Streak," by Ray Stevens, and the film *Wheels* (a skateboarding film) are both good examples of attempts to make money from fad participants.

3 Useful product fads center on the acquisition of products that serve some purpose, however unimportant. In late 1998, "onion-bloom machines" suddenly became popular. Millions of Americans bought this kitchen tool designed to cut a large onion into a ready-to-fry "bloom" similar to the popular fried "onion blooms" served in restaurants. They were advertised on television almost every night. Stores quickly sold out their supply of the devices. The product itself is relatively useful, or at least serves some function. In this case, it makes a kind of variation of onion rings. However, the product is neither particularly necessary nor terribly important. The vast majority of onion-bloom machines are probably gathering dust in kitchen cabinets and closets all over the United States. Like many products at the center of these fads, onion-bloom machines remain on the market, but prices and demand dropped dramatically once the initial excitement wore off and people no longer felt the need for such a product in their lives.

4 Frivolous product fads may be the most interesting of all. People may stand in line for hours, fight with each other, and spend hundreds or thousands of dollars just so they can own something that is useless. The Pet Rock is the ideal example of this type of fad. In late 1975, an entrepreneur marketed a plain rock in a cardboard box called "The Pet Rock" and sold over one million at five dollars each. The Pet Rock was not decorated, nor did it do anything. It was, in fact, an ordinary rock. Today it may seem difficult to understand why one million Americans would pay five dollars for a stone, particularly in 1975 when five dollars could buy a meal or two tickets to the movies. Such is the nature of useless product fads. They are always difficult to explain or understand after they end.

5 Fashion fads may or may not involve the purchase of a particular item. For example, millions of American women purchased and wore “leg warmers” in the 1980s. These wooly socks without feet were worn over pants or stockings and were used for their look, rather than practical function. Other fashion-related fads may not involve buying anything. In late 1999, at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri, hundreds of young women on campus began wearing their hair loosely gathered into a small ponytail that stuck straight up from the top of their head. The only accessory required was a rubber band. No products were purchased. The rapid adoption of the unflattering look and its relatively rapid disappearance would categorize the hairstyle as a fad.

6 Fads usually seem strange or even ridiculous in hindsight. Looking back, it is hard to believe that hundreds, thousands, or even millions of Americans took part in bizarre fads such as pole sitting, phone booth stuffing, and breakdancing. What drives otherwise normal people to pay money for a rock, to jump from a bridge or crane attached to a bungee cord, or to stand in freezing weather for hours in order to run, push, shove, and fight over a thirty-dollar talking toy? According to Turner and Killian, in their book *Collective Behavior*, there is nothing wrong with the participants in fads. Most of them are ordinary people. It is the situation that is abnormal. Once confusion and uncertainty set in, people can potentially be led into unusual behavior.