

CONSTRUCTING SELF IDENTITY THROUGH THE LENS OF FASHION

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ABSTRACT

Fashion is part of our everyday life. Every day, one makes an artistic decision through their style of clothing. It is a given that our choice of clothing on a daily basis gives an impact to ourselves and the people around us. What a person wears reflects him/herself – be it their mood, ideology, or personality – and brings forth a perceived identity, a perception of who they are by the society. There are some that say people can leverage fashion to cultivate self image, to deliberately determine how people would see them. On the other hand, some say that how one is perceived by the society happens unintentionally through how they present themselves including what they wear. So it can be said that fashion can show one of two which is as follows: how we perceive ourselves, or the parts of ourselves that we disclose. This paper explores the impact of fashion towards self representation, encompassing trend shifts in the community.

Keywords: *artistic decision, perceived identity, self image, self representation*

ABSTRAK

Fashion adalah bagian dari kehidupan kita sehari-hari. Setiap harinya, orang membuat pilihan artistik melalui style berpakaian mereka. Tidak dapat dipungkiri, pilihan pakaian kita sehari-hari memiliki dampak terhadap diri kita sendiri dan orang-orang disekitar kita. Apa yang seseorang pakai mencerminkan dirinya – baik suasana hati, ideology, maupun kepribadian – dan membangun suatu persepsi oleh lingkungan sekitar terhadapnya. Ada yang berkata bahwa seseorang dapat menggunakan fashion sebagai sarana untuk membangun citra diri, untuk menentukan bagaimana masyarakat memandang mereka. Namun, ada juga yang berkata bahwa cara menampilkan diri, termasuk pilihan berpakaianannya itulah yang secara tidak disengaja membangun persepsi masyarakat terhadap orang tersebut. Jadi, fashion dapat menunjukkan antara bagaimana cara kita memandang diri kita atau bagian apa dari diri kita yang kita tunjukkan ke orang lain. Paper ini mengeksplor dampak dari fashion terhadap representasi diri, mencakup pergantian trend dalam komunitas.

Kata Kunci: *citra diri, persepsi masyarakat, pilihan artistik, representasi diri*

INTRODUCTION

The true essence of fashion is to express oneself. Fashion is our chosen skin, where individuality and conformity is simultaneously celebrated. There are two ways in which communication through fashion goes. You express yourself and choose how you present yourself through your choice of attire, and that choice will in turn reveal a great deal about you such as your personality, which determines how others perceive you. However, some holds strong to the idea that the society dictates a certain ideal in how people dress. They claim that society stereotypes people through their fashion choices. Thus, people may face a dilemma on whether to embrace individuality or conformity.

“Conformity is the only real fashion crime. To not dress like yourself and to sublimate your spirit to some kind of group identity is succumbing to fashion fascism. (Simon Doonan)” One’s self expression may be deterred by the need of a sense of belonging gained by conforming to the norms and values of the surrounding environment.

Trends come and go very quickly while norms and values within the society has been long established and progresses gradually in accordance with said society’s beliefs. With that, many of today’s young people observe the ever-changing trends and adopt a personal style that fits their traits and values, a reflection of their society. That being said, fashion combines one’s

authentic style with an element that still conforms with his/her social group.

This research paper uses Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development which is a comprehensive psychoanalysis theory indentifying 8 stages of development an individual undergoes from infancy through adulthood. According to the theory, stage 5 titled identity vs. role confusion explains how during adolescence, about 12-18 years of age, people are in the process of searching for their identity through the exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals.

The research method used to collect data is descriptive qualitative by content analysis, literature study, covert participant observation, and focus group structured interview.

BODY

Fashion and identity are inherently connected. Everyone communicates something with their sense of style, whether done intentionally or not. The way people choose to represent themselves on a daily basis might seemingly be trivial, but its impact go beyond surface level. The saying “you are what you wear” explains how the way one dresses acts as a cue to one’s internal workings. It is the physical form of one’s personality, mood, character, insights, thoughts, viewpoints, perceptions, etc. It can be said that how you dress is an accurate indicator of how you view yourself and your life. Ideally, fashion is a reflection of one’s

true self as an aesthetic exterior to represent the person within. This process is very empowering and gives an impact on your mood, confidence, and self-acceptance – all of which contributes to how others see you.

On the other hand, however, there might be some factors that restrict people in their fashion choices which may lead to the feeling of being oppressed. In this case, it doesn't only remove the benefits fashion may offer when worn authentically, but it also makes the person who wears it feel worse or uncomfortable, giving the opposite of the intended effect. Such factors include money, weather, geographical location, gender identity, religion, body type, culture, etc. With that, people are searching for a solution that satisfies both the necessities of one's personal stylistic desires and the limiting circumstance, making each outfit distinctive to the particular wearer and situation. Communication through fashion is different to verbal communication.

Messages are transmitted through symbols and use emotional impressions or illusions, as Hoffmann like to call it. The perceiver examines a style of fashion for a statement or symbols that reflect the person in terms of social stature, values, lifestyle, etc. Intrinsically a form of self expression, fashion plays a huge role in people's everyday lives. For some people, however, it is often overlooked. They simply don't care about fashion statement and wears whatever. What they don't realize is, even if they are not actively

conveying anything through their fashion choices, their fashion choices in itself is conveying something. They are unconsciously building an image of themselves and projecting it to the society. It's less about whether or not they care and more about whether or not they're conscious. An example to illustrate the significance of fashion in self expression is the use of uniforms. Uniforms are worn in school, the military, prison, etc. What these situations have in common is that the uniform plays a role in removing the sense of individuality from the people wearing it. This practice alone is sufficient to demonstrate the power fashion has in self representation and how huge an impact its absence due to restrictions may have.

A case study to further explain this phenomenon is the use of school uniforms. The first school uniform is used in 1222 in England. A school required the students to wear an outfit called cappa clausa which looks like a robe. However, modern school uniforms are used since the 16th century.

The tradition of wearing school uniforms began with the purpose of giving students a sense of identity and giving the school a sense of cohesion. It was also meant to bring equality to the students and reduce socioeconomic disparities. That way, students can focus more on their studies instead of what they wear. From the purpose itself, we can see that the institution of school ignores the self expression aspect and accustom conformity to students.

In the early 1900s in America, public schools began to use uniforms and officials noticed a change in the student's attitude and behavior. Disciplinary issues declined after the implementation of the uniform policy. Hence, other schools follow suit. In 2003-2004, only 1/8 schools require wearing uniforms while in 2015-2016, the number increases to 1/5. In this case, uniforms act as a means of social control.

Over the years, school uniforms have changed to be more modern. It has become less formal and more casual. Despite these changes in style, its purpose remains unchanged.



Figure 1. Cappa Clausa (First School Uniform)
Source: <https://barbarafreeres.de/en/school-uniforms-of-the-world/>



Gambar 2 School Uniform Today
Source: <https://www.mouthshut.com/product-reviews/Ryan-International-School-Rohini-Delhi-Photos-925725708>



Figure 3 Military Uniform
Source: <https://www.stripes.com/news/army/army-s-maligned-ucp-uniforms-quietly-retired-years-after-new-camo-design-became-the-norm-1.601442>



Figure 4 Prison Uniform
Source: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-23/to-ease-prison-crowding-california-will-vote-on-lighter-sentences>

A study shows that adolescents are more concerned about fashion compared to any other age groups. This can be explained by stage 5 of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, identity vs. role confusion. Adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. During this stage, individuals want to have a sense of belonging and want to fit in to be part of a society. It is also in this stage that individuals will re-examine their identities and endeavor to find out exactly who they are. According to Bee (1992), at the end of this stage, what should happen is "a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be, and this can be expressed through various means, including one's way of dressing."

This is the stage where adolescents' body image changes. This is a period of exploring possibilities use the outcome of their exploration to form their personal identity. They might experiment with different lifestyles, appearance, and behavior, in response to role confusion or identity crisis experienced in this stage. If pressured into adopting an identity for whatever reason, they might respond with rebellion – forming a negative identity as well as feeling unhappy.

Fashion in this stage is used as a means of self discovery. When adolescents are experiencing role confusion and have lost a sense of who they are due to struggle with emotional wellbeing such as mental health, they will feel like it is difficult

to dress which felt true to themselves because they are no longer sure just who that person was. Thus, experimenting happens. Hero worship and peer influence plays a big role in an adolescent's identity creation. When a particular style of clothing is used by someone famous or is in vogue, it is blindly followed by many adolescents. Thus there are acclaimed and sought after signature looks imitating stars and pop icons. This process will eventually develop said adolescent's self identity awareness once they're through the stage.

A case study to support this theory is Rumspringa in an Amish community which is a rite of passage during adolescence. As a background, the Amish is a group of traditionalist Christians that are known for segregating themselves from the rest of the world, and adopting a lifestyle revolving around agriculture. They practice simple living, dress plain, and refuse to adopt the conveniences of modern technology. It means, they are not allowed to own cars, televisions, cell phones, use electricity, etc. Should they break those rules, it will result in shunning and excommunication. Rumspringa is a period when Amish adolescents are free to explore the outside world and do the things an Amish aren't allowed to do without receiving consequences. In this period, they are experimenting with many things including the way they dress to portray themselves as they are without having to conform to the Amish rules of dressing. For the first time, they are embarking on a journey of self discovery and create a personal

identity outside of the Amish. After two years, once the time is up, they are given the choice to either stay an Amish and get baptized as an official member or to leave and navigate their own way in the free world.

Fashion is also a major part of culture. The collective fashion statements is a representation of the society's socioeconomy as a whole. Fashion in the society states a great deal about its culture at large. Thus there is a prevalent notion is that people feel as if the society pressures them to dress a certain way. This creates an ongoing debate between on whether we should dress for ourselves or dress to create an impression. This is related to the desires of the internal self and the expectations of society.

The latter indicates that clothing may be used to fit into certain social groups and create an identity out of conformity. The case might be that one may want to dabble with personal style but is worried about the society's reaction that will ensue. It may be enough to discourage and deter deviance, getting one to conform. This contradicts the purpose of fashion. Fashion was never meant to be about seeking the approval of others, but to be confident and take pride in your individuality, the only implication being the judgment that might entail.

There's no denying that one's style of dressing is to an extent influenced by their social context since social codes of dressing promotes social

acceptance which satisfies human's need of social interaction. Since self branding plays an important role in how one fits in today's society, it requires thorough reflection upon what kind of image one wants his/her name be associated with. This means, they can continue to dress for themselves, representing who they are, while in pursuit of their own goals, one is choosing to strategically abide by certain expectations in a particular situation. For example, in a job interview, one wants to show the company who one truly is, and at the same time one wants to be someone the company would consider hiring. The key is to find balance between the need for personal expression and the necessities of a circumstance.

But at the end of the day, being comfortable in your own skin is what matters. It is most rewarding to have a better understanding of the self, for it will heighten the sense of ownership to yourself. Being authentic will allow you to attract likeminded individuals and from there grows a sense of belonging, achieving the same result people strive for by conforming. You reap more benefits by doing so.

CONCLUSION

Fashion portrays the array of characters within people. Personal style help accentuate that. The importance of fashion in defining self concept cannot be overstated. As explained by stage 5 of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, identity vs. role confusion, adolescents discover

themselves through experimenting with their fashion style. And as shown by the Amish case study, Rumspringa—a period of exploration without having to conform to the community's rules—is significant in building adolescents' identities and self awareness.

The growing trend of Gen Z's self awareness for their appearance encourages honesty in self expression through daily stylistic decisions. Although this challenges the prevailing social agenda of culture as an agent of social control, this is a step towards the better. It conditions people to appreciate artistic expressions and remove prejudice from what people choose to wear, both of which promotes embracing uniqueness and boosting self esteem.

But, that is not to say that one should resort to deviance and blindly go against conformity. There is a pattern/trend that social institutions are seeking ways in which they can get people to conform, fashion being one of them.

With each passing year, more schools are adopting the uniform policy due to the statistic of increased conformity after its implementation, in addition to the fact that the equality it creates decrease socioeconomic gaps. From that school uniform case study, we can see that even though it strips students off of their rights to express themselves, they are still provided with a sense of identity which many wear proudly shown by their school spirit.

To conclude, whether one should dress to express oneself or to conform to society's expectations shouldn't be a debate for the reason that both can go concurrently. Contrary to popular belief, individuality and conformity isn't mutually exclusive. Fashion allows people to have a sense of belonging while still being true to who they are. So, it is wise to think about how you present yourself through the way you dress. Taking deliberate command of how you dress and look is a step closer to being in control over your own life, achieving your goals, and living life at the helm of your decisions.

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