

# YOU ARE WHAT YOU WEAR: SYMBOLIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PRODUCTS AND IDENTITIES.

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## ABSTRACT

**This article discusses the relationship between fashion products, personal identity and social identity revealing its importance in design and emotion research, and how clothing and accessories for personal use can affect, influence and assert our identity. In a sociological context definitions of identity and self-identity are discussed and related. Fashion as a phenomenon of identity exposure, influencing the development of people's personal style. This article proposes a descriptive framework linking products, personal identity and social identity, among the dimensions found, lays the concepts of Giddens's self-identity, Belk's Extended Self, as well as social status and fashion.**

**Keywords: product design; fashion; identity; social identity and personal style.**

## INTRODUCTION

Fashion has always been connected with the expression of personal social status, it can be easily perceived by analyzing the Western history. The philosopher Lars Svendsen wrote that Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant and Herbert Spencer share the same vision about the emergence of fashion, which they say was originated in the imitation of nobility clothing by the common people. The lower classes have always sought to elevate their social status by the use of "fashionable" clothing and its inherent symbolism contained therein. The use of symbols through clothing is an indicator of an individual identity (Svendsen, 2010).

Clothing was initially developed with the intention of protecting the body from the weather, but since the

earliest civilizations clothing has expressed the culture, ideals and status of the societies that had created it (Walford, 2007). In the old class society, those components of the clergy, the nobility and the people (peasants and bourgeois) sought to distinguish their different social classes through the use of symbols to express status. These could be forms of behavior, language, objects usage and mainly through clothing (Lobach, 2001). Colors, styles and materials held symbolic meanings determinant in the affirmation of major or minor status. The use or nonuse of certain products were not mere conventions, during the Middle Age prevailed laws about what could be worn for which social class. Fashion was a privilege for the upper classes. The social hierarchy limited the use of certain types of clothing and accessories for the clergy, the nobility and the commoners. At some point, the cost of materials for clothing manufacture became more affordable and to ensure the correct use of those items, were created sumptuary laws that determined what each class could wear (Walford, 2007).

From the seventeenth century the sumptuary laws continued to exist, but it came to exert less force, because the domestic economies needed to be maintained, so the distinction between social classes began to cease to exist and "fashion became a commodity that was traded throughout Europe, remaining elitist through consumption, quality and extravagance" (Walford, 2007). Anyone could be fashionable if could afford to acquire the products. At this point the working class began to use fashion trends adapting them to their pocket, replacing expensive materials for more accessible ones. From this century the fashion became popular (i.e. no

longer restricted to certain social classes) and the distinction in dress was seen in the materials choice.

For Barthes (1979) the power of meaning in clothing is determined by the symbolism instilled in it, this can be covered at a social level (social norms - Fashion) or at an individual level (significant associations for the individual's memory). Today, according to Kälviäinen (2002) people use products / objects, which contain an adequate symbolism, to compensate for the lack of some feature that they should have in their conceptions, so a person who is powerful is likely to use items that praise power, such as: a high-heeled shoe or a tie. People are constantly confronted with the question to be themselves or whom they would like to be. "The multiplication of people in one-self is always considered by the fashion as an index of power" (Barthes, 1979), the individual's power in being able to turn into another and the fashion power in its ability to transform people.

Thus, the dress is "a means of symbolic display, a way to give external form to the self-identity narratives" (Giddens, 2002), but also "is a means of self-display, (...) is directly related to the occultation / revelation about the personal biographies - turns the conventions to basic aspects of identity" (Giddens, 2002). According to Simmel (2008) and Svendsen (2010) there is a link between fashion and identity. The dress not only serves to express our identity, it serves to expand our self. The garment is part of the person, it is not something external to our personal identity (Svendsen, 2010). Danesi (1999) states that the "clothes convey persona (identity, gender, age, status, etc.) and regulate social interaction".

"Consumer goods are seen as a kind of 'outer skin' of our identity, which we acquire to express the 'inner self'" (Dittmar, 2011), i.e. they are used to outsource aspects of our identity. The boundaries of identity surpass the physical body, and there are two explanations in psychology for this, the first concerns the instrumental functions of the products as well as help the man to "exert control over their environment and experience a sense of mastery" under the same. The second highlights the symbolic functions of objects, which "can represent interpersonal relationships, emotional comfort, group

belongingness, and a range of personal characteristics, values, and beliefs" (Dittmar, 2011).

In this context, this article aims to address the relationship between personal products, especially fashion products (apparel and accessories), personal identity (self) and social identity. While performing this literature review research, dimensions were found that connect products, personal identity and social identity which led to the creation of a descriptive model that combined all those elements and formed the individual's personal style. Analyzing the model resulted in the creation of two new possibilities of representation. The first presents the individuals with a greater inclination to follow fashion trends, and the second represents the individuals who prefer to display their personal preferences.

## **SOCIAL IDENTITY AND FASHION**

"Identity can be defined as the subjective concept (or representation) that a person holds of him- or herself" (Dittmar, 2011). Furthermore, is multifaceted, without forming a unitary structure, being a set of several self-representations (Dittmar, 2011). Thus, each person has many identities, identities that can be, among others, social identity, personal identity and self-identity.

For the construction of social identity, objects in general are of great importance. Baudrillard (1972) states that, the social function of the objects does not arise only from the satisfaction of needs, but also a symbolic production. The objects are indexes of social belonging and are part of individuals and groups social tactics. Particularly fashion products, such as clothing, are part of a dynamic social code of seduction (Danesi, 1999). The standard consumer attitude moves between the distinction, given by originality, and the conformity, defined by the possession of conforming objects by couples. The individual submits to the public verdict, where "everyone knows if, at bottom, it does not feel judged by their objects, and each one, in essence, is subjected to this trial or even by their disapproval" (Baudrillard, 1972).

People use fashion as a means of expression, and with the help of its symbols show, even if

unconsciously, the group to which they belong. The use of fashion helps the search for a proper identification, but also helps people to feel socially accepted in the social groups to which they belong (Lazzarotto, 2010). Simmel (2008) argues that fashion is able to compensate the “person insignificance, their inability to, just by themselves distinguish their existence, by incorporating a characterized circle precisely by the fashion, that stands out for them and somehow convene for public awareness”. Fashion helps the interaction between people, since the clothes we wear express our identity traits for issuing their meanings (Oliveira, 2002).

For Baudrillard (1972) formal innovation occurs in order to perpetually re-upgrade privileged cultural elites. In this process, the fashion cycle enables us to always provide new material as a distinctive feature, where paradigmatic oppositions allow the creation of social discriminants (polished / matte, loaded / stripped, smoothed / rough, etc.). The aesthetic value is always immersed in the social logic: the objects of modern design, “functional”, “rational”, “audacious”, are designed to be distinctive signs. In traditional societies, the hereditary decoration filled the role of testifying social achievements, the objects functioned as a declaration of social destiny. In contemporary societies, with social mobility, the objects act as a distinctive feature of the possibility of ascension. The objects reflect social aspirations of social mobility (Baudrillard, 1972). The contradiction identified in this flux and reflux of distinctive signs, is that “all objects are revocable before the fashion instance” (Baudrillard, 1972).

Much more than an information vehicle between a sender and a receiver, fashion is a signifying system that promotes people’s identification with others, enabling interpersonal relationships. “While establishing identity and alterity, and disseminating tastes, aesthetic preferences, styles, ways of feeling and living. Once adopted, these fall within the definition of living manners that brings us to advance in your understanding, to approach it as a phenomenon of significance” (Oliveira, 2002).

The people’s identification with *maisons de haute couture*, contributed to the construction of a symbolic

universe of great emotional value brands. Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, among others, have established a business model and concept of lifestyle that spread throughout the world through advertising and cinema, transferring the identification between clothing and social classes. From the relationship of taste and attitude, the *maisons* name’s became brands of desire. In late 40’s, the prêt-à-porter made the fashion system accessible to the general population, allowing the fashion brands emergence in the mass production system (Lipovetsky, 1989). With the idea of fashion democratization have been developed brands with the intention to represent groups and subcultures identities aiming to express their values. The weight of some brands is so great today that for many people their identity is associated with the brand, regardless of the product.

People demonstrate to be adept of group or practices by the manifestation of identity signs, where the garment is configured as an essential part, but not unique, since the culture, habits, objects, tastes and accents also exalt identity signs (Godart, 2010). Through these signs, people will recognize as similar to others. Of course, not all signals are visually perceptible. Godart (2010) states that it is with the observation of these identity signs, that the fashion industry develops “its fundamental phenomenon of imitation and differentiation.” The clothing could be used as a mode of imitating other people (social identity) or differentiating others (personal identity). In the same way that fashion is used to unite people with similar tastes through imitation, it is also used for personal expression through differentiation. For Simmel (2008) imitation is fascinating to people because it set them free from “the pain of choosing and let them, without more, appear as a product of the group, as a social content receptacle”.

We could compare this fashion phenomenon of imitation and differentiation as what Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1999) call as integration and differentiation. In their opinion “things can serve as a means of individual differentiation” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1999), emphasizing the individual aspects of people’s personality, dealing with their personal uniqueness. The integration is related

with social identity, about the power that objects have to expose personality traits, culture, people's lifestyle, helping them to identify similarities between them and others. Thus, "the object symbolically expresses the integration of the owner with his or her social context" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1999).

According to Krippendorff (1989) "products can become conventional symbols of social differentiation, integration or status."

For Dittmar (2004) "as signs of social identity, material goods signify group affiliations and social standing, including sex-role identification, socioeconomic status, or belonging to a subculture." According to Solomon, "many of the product meanings are derived from their association with social roles" (apud Kälviäinen and Solomon, 2002). The status is acquired through the symbolism present in the products. Symbols are central to the whole identity conformation (Svendsen, 2010), they are used to give meaning and still say something about the user. Not only in past societies, but still today, they serve to communicate our personal identity, as well as our social identity, the difference is that today the symbols have often transient meanings, which will be determined by current fashion trends, so what it was before fashionable, may now be outdated and in a possible future may become fashionable again. Products are related to stereotypes and are their styles that will give the possibility to identify them. Thus, tastes and preferences will be formed by their reference group choices. And the use of these products will be mediators of the social interaction between the user and their social groups (Kälviäinen, 2002).

## PERSONAL IDENTITY - SELF

The objects acquired chosen by people express their personal identity (Krippendorff, 1989). As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1999), "things" (our personal belongings) may reflect aspects of the individual's personality, and even act as identity shapers. For the authors, things "are expression of one's self, (...) things one uses are in fact part of the one's self" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1999). Many of our old objects with the time start to show traces of our presence, new forms adapted to our body, wear and deformation, these features reinforce our sense of belongingness them. Besides

the fact that, "material possessions systematically influence how we perceive the identity of other people" (Dittmar, 2011). They are also used by people "to express who they are and to construct a sense of who they would like be" (Dittmar, 2011).

According to Ahuvia (2005), "people, and things, we love have a strong influence on our sense of who we are, on our self." Objects, things we love, represent and influence on our sense of personal identity. This can be seen especially in clothing and personal use products. For Belk (1988) who created the concept of extended self, people use their favorite possessions "to enlarge, expand and fortify their sense of self" (Ahuvia, 2005). The personal identity expression is affirmed in taste and in the exposed personal image and it is not strictly dictated by fashion trends. Today the search for personalized products is on the rise. People customize their products of personal use in seeking to reflect with greater intensity their personality, personal tastes in their appearance and home decor. Dittmar (2011) states that our "homes functions as an identity shell" acting as a private resting place, a space for social interactions, also serving as a shelter of our personal items that symbolize who we are. According to a study by Jordan (2002) people prefer products that contain in their aesthetic features, aspects that somehow reflect their personality traits.

Our personal belongings as well as emphasizing our personality traits are also able to embody our personal data. A good example for this is the objects acquired in trips that can relate and evoke memories of the places we walked through. Thus, "we are what we have" (Belk, 1988) and what we possess can affirm our own identity and narrate details of our life story. Memory related objects that refer to "affective memory, have the power to 'hold' and 'release' the memories that people invest on them: memories of an era, of a loved one, or an important moment" (Russo and Hekkert, 2008).

Our personal belongings as well as expose our identity, also exalt our tastes and preferences. To Kälviäinen (2002) the taste should be interpreted by the designer as a demonstration of lifestyle preference and as an orientation for guiding product development. The taste is intimately connected with

the expression of identity and social interaction. The apparel products serve as an expression of self, socially affirming our identity. “Material things function as extensions of bodies, shelter for bodies or display bodies” (Kälviäinen, 2002) as a physical extension of human abilities or an extension of the human body itself, as a body protection, or to highlight aesthetic body characteristics (gender). Another interesting factor about taste is the transference of the objects’ attributes to the people’s identity, so, if a product is seen as rare, this feature will be transferred to the user, “product uniqueness is used in the search for individuality” (Kälviäinen, 2002)

## PRODUCTS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS OF MATERIAL POSSESSIONS

The social psychologist Helga Dittmar (2011) has more than two decades researching the psychological functions of material possessions, including those relating to consumer culture, identity and well-being. The framework below (Figure 1) shows a “map of the main types of psychological functions that material possessions fulfill” (Dittmar, 2011). At first, the functions related to material goods appear separated, they are: *functional-instrumental* (which make everyday activities easier, practical functions) and *symbolic-expressive* (expressing who we are).

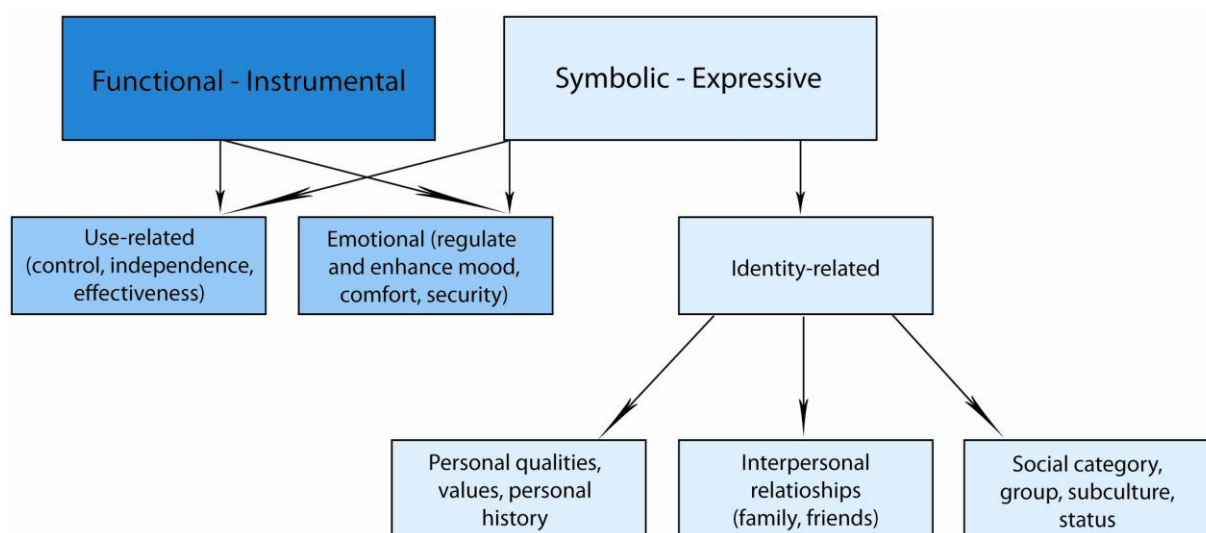


Figure 1: An integrative model of the psychological functions of material possessions. Adapted from: Dittmar H. (2011) *Consumer Culture, Identity and Well-Being: The Search for the 'Good Life' and the 'Body Perfect'*. New York: Psychology Press, p.40.

Then we can see that both functions can be related to *use-related* and *emotional*, a benefit that product ownership might cause. The *symbolic-expressive* function is also directly related to the *identity-related* expression, and this can be subdivided into: *personal qualities* that indicate the individual identity, their memories, values, attitudes and personal history; *interpersonal relationships* with the individual's social circle groups (social identity); and the *social category* that also refers to the individual social identity, their status and subculture.

The author emphasizes that the proposal distinctions “are analytical, rather than absolute, of course, and

several psychological functions can be interwoven in a single material good” (Dittmar, 2011).

## PRODUCTS AND IDENTITIES RELATIONSHIP DESCRIPTIVE FRAMEWORK

Based on a literature review about the relationship between products, personal identity (self) and social identity was created a descriptive model (Figure 2), which aims to understand the importance of studying the influence of products, especially clothing, on the individuals identities. According says Dittmar (2011), the “material possessions are important to people because they constitute symbols for personal and social identity”. It is believed that the study of identities

and products might contribute to the field of design and emotion.



Figure 2: Products and Identities relationship descriptive framework. Developed by the authors.

This framework relates personal identity (self) and social identity, which together form part of the individuals self-identity. Self-identity is a definition created by Anthony Giddens that express the reflexivity of the self, is the identity continuously analyzed, planned and can be consciously changed, “the self is reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography.” Giddens warns that the material goods (mass production) are standardized influences in selecting a lifestyle. And the “lifestyle selection is increasingly important in the formation of self-identity and daily activity” (Giddens, 2002). The self-identity is formed by the reflection between the self and the society and social groups it lives with.

In the dimension between products and personal identity (self) arise the concept developed by Belk (1988), the *extended self*, it proposes that special objects are able to expand the individual’s self, reflecting part of his or her self, their affectionate memories that include their memories and their significant associations. In the dimension of social identity and products arise the fashion trends and social status acquired with the products usage reflecting the social symbolism expressed by those. Thus, combining all these levels creates the personal

style, which also expresses the lifestyle and communicates the individual's identity.

### FRAMEWORK DEPLOYMENTS

We could also propose two other framework developments, the first (Figure 3) addresses the preference for fashion trends and social status, which leads to the individual’s disposition to demonstrate their social identity in their personal style.

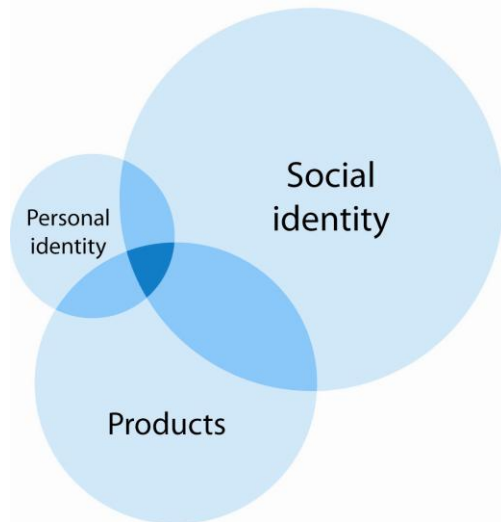


Figure 3: Social identity > personal identity framework. Developed by the authors.

The second (figure 4) shows the individuals that focuses on displaying their personal taste, they often have products that contains personal memories, their own meanings are expressed in their personal style, magnifying their personal identity (self) representation.

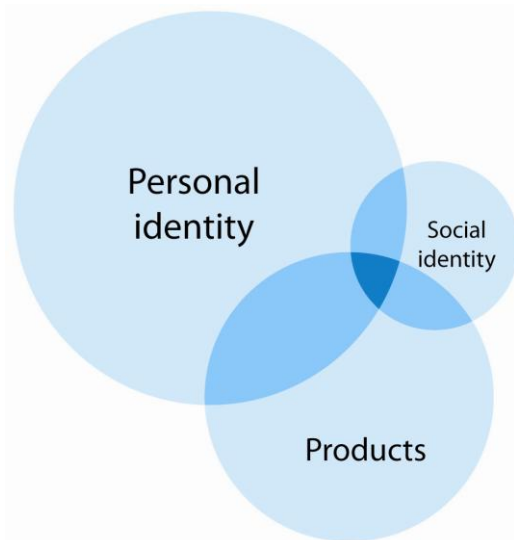


Figure 4: Personal identity > social identity framework. Developed by the authors.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The modernist view of functionalism, from whom the human being carry universal needs, has been replaced by the recognition of differences, the new modes of production and commercialization are beginning to attend. This way, the cultural and individual differences could be manifested on its plenitude, bringing new challenges to the projective disciplines. Nowadays the research in the field of design and emotion has grown impressively, where is found the *new human factors* adding more value to products, the quality is also linked to the affect that the product generates on people. As stated by Jordan (2000), "when people get used to having something, they then start looking for something more." In the hierarchy of consumer needs created by Jordan, we have at the first level *functionality*, on the second *usability* and on the third *pleasure*, in this one is stressed the importance of "products that offer something extra" (Jordan, 2000), here the products are seen as "living objects" with whom people maintain relationships. Among the challenges faced at the *pleasure* level, we can highlight the first, understanding people holistically, as one of the intents of this article, in particular around the issue of understanding "the wider role that products play in people's lives" (Jordan, 2000), this way could be possible to specify attributes in products sought for people and so to articulate the desired benefits with the product properties.

Nowadays, in the current post-modernity, we are so dependent on products both to survive, to make our lives better and also to help us position ourselves as individuals. Today, the people's needs with regard to products increased, "besides being functional, on a physical level, and usable on a physiological level, the recipient must establish a relationship in the subjective level, emotional or cognitive" (Niemeyer, 2008). Thus, personal products also must be able to express the lifestyle, personality and the people's identity. So, who are us without our beloved products? According to Lucy Niemeyer with the help of our relationship with our products, we are able to reconstruct ourselves, to revise our readings about the world and also to situate us in front of the world, so we know who we are and feel part of something.

The framework proposed in this article, and its deployments, were developed based on the theoretical referential, structured from a literature review. It has not been tested to verify its validity as a descriptor of the phenomenon of product adoption and the identity construction.

Primarily, its objective of practical order is to assist in the development of target market research. Thus, it is expected, that the mentioned benefits and requirements will be incorporated into the product development. For this to materialize, studies aimed at validating this framework are being planned. It is understood that it could be used for both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

We believe that the framework can be useful in quantitative research aimed at mapping the consumers perception (with a focus on marketing issues) or the users satisfaction (with a focus on ergonomic issues), and to evaluate products (focusing on design) allowing the identification of relevant clusters to understanding the phenomenon. In qualitative research, with the same focus, its use may lead to the identification of response patterns also relevant to the explanation of the phenomenon. In short, the possible applications are linked to the ability of quantify or describe affective factors related to the consumption and possession of objects.

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