

## Visible Expression of Social Identity: the Clothing and Fashion

### Sosyal Kimliğin Görünür Temsili: Giyim ve Moda

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#### Abstract

This paper includes the investigation about the relation between social identity and clothing and also fashion. And this relationship has been taken into consideration over the visual expression because even during the ancient times, the cloths were the basic and simple way of representing the identity and social classes. The visible expression of identity over clothing from Ancient Egypt to today's clothing and fashion has been researched in this article. And the results have showed that every pieces of clothing from fabric to colouring have visual significations about social identity.

**Keywords:** Identity, Clothing, Fashion, Visual Expression, Visual Signification.

#### Öz

Bu araştırma makalesi sosyal kimlik ile giyim ve moda arasındaki ilişkiyi kapsamaktadır. Bu ilişki, giysinin ve modanın geçmiş çağlardan günümüze kimliğin ve sosyal statünün bir göstergesi olması dolayısıyla, görsel anlatım üzerinden ele alınmıştır. Yazıda giysinin ve modanın görsel temsili Antik Mısır'dan günümüze alınmıştır. Sonuçlar giysinin kumaştan renge her bir biriminin sosyal kimliğin ifadesi noktasından görsel anlam taşıdığını göstermiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kimlik, Giyim, Moda, Görsel Temsil, Görsel Anlam.

#### Intoduction

Clothes are more than a piece of fabric as Virgina Woolf says "Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us... There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (1928/1956).

The most visible material item of the fashion symbol is the garment, which carries multiple and various meanings. The dynamism of the garment symbol can carry open or closed codes depending on culture, gender and social location.

Cloths can carry many significant signs according to their shape, colour, surface decoration, embroidery techniques etc. And each one can be the expression of identity over ethnicity, religious beliefs, age, education and social class. Through observation of clothing styles over these items, the assumptions could be made about a person's identity.

A distinctive and typical style, form or character of the clothing such as 'zoot suits', 'ao dai', removes the garment from functional and ordinary element to the symbolic area.

Clothing is an "identification" tool that functions in determining the symbolic boundaries between people in a sense. Fashion and clothing is a field where clothes are used to create and reveal a cultural and social identity. The identity phenomenon of the person is embodied in body by clothing and fashion. And this point has been going on from ancient times and also will go on in the future, too. This research bases on representation of the social identity over the clothing and fashion. And clothing and fashion as visible expression of social identity examined in two main titles. Firstly, the definitions of the terms such as identity, clothing and fashion have been given. Secondly, symbolism of the clothing and fashion in the context of social identity with also historical process has been examined. The clothing and fashion in the context of social identity also has been examined under some subtitles such as social classes, gender and cultural. And all these items have been explained with visual images and supported by the literature investigations.

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### **Defining 'Identity', 'Clothing' and 'Fashion'**

Oxford dictionary defines identity as follows; the fact of being who or what a person or thing is and the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is.

And Calhoun writes: "We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made...Self-knowledge – always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery – is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others" (1994,p. 9-10).

As Castells says that from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. And he argued that "the construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations" (2010, p. 7).

In simple way of explanation of identity "identity is the answer or answers that individual gives for the question 'who I am' or the answer to the question asked by the community 'who are you, where do you come from' (Güvenç, 1996, p. 3).

The identity has two main platforms. First one of them is about personal and the second one is about social and community.

Personal identity can be defined as having a clear and stable image of a person's goals, descriptions and abilities. But social identity is mostly about an individual who feels belonging him/herself in a group or a part of a group.

According to Social Identity Theory, people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort (Tajfel ve Turner, 1985).

Psychodynamically, according to Freud, an identification process occurs as the identity begins with the individual expropriating or involving foreign persons or objects (Aşkın, 2007). Both sociologically and psychologically, identity takes part in the field of the clothing and fashion in many ways of expressions.

The terms fashion and clothing tend to be used synonymously. But while fashion has many different social meanings, clothing refers to the general raw material of what one person wears (Kawamura, 2016,p. 19).

Then when we talk about the clothing, it means that any covering for the human body. This covering started from one piece of woven fiber and has come to these days with technologic improvements. And "fashion is a look or a style that is popular at a given time" (Rath, Peterson, Greensley and Gill, 1994,p. 3).

Is fashion the subject of the clothing or the clothing is the subject of fashion? Anyway, fashion and clothing are used as an alternative to each other because fashion is more associated with clothing than anything else. We still have to remember that fashion is everywhere and everything.

Sproles and Burns (1994, p. 2-7) defines fashion "the style of dress that is temporarily adopted by a discernible proportion of members of a social group because that the chosen style is perceived to be socially appropriate for the time and situation". In other way, "fashion is an accepted look, the prevailing style" (Rath and others, 1994, p. 3). "The term "clothing" is thus regarded as a more generic term for the description of what people wear, whereas the term "fashion" connotes a sense of both synchronic and diachronic instability: what is considered "fashionable" in one part of the world may not be considered so in another part of the world,

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just as what is considered “fashionable” today may be considered dated or even *passé* tomorrow” (Owyong, 2009).

Defining the clothing is easier than defining fashion because there are also many other definitions about fashion in the literatures. But generally the term ‘fashion’ will take into consideration with its closer relation to the clothing in this article.

### **Clothing and Fashion in the Context of Social Identities**

Society is made up of large sampled social classes (race, gender, language, economic situation, profession etc.) that have power, position and respectability among them. (Hogg ve Abrams, 1988, p. 22). And the individual wants to feel himself psychologically belonging to a group and part of a group. And The Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the mid-1970s, is a social psychology theory that deals with group membership, group processes and intergroup relations (Argyle, 1992, p. 92; Brehm ve Kassin, 1993, p. 103).

Social Identity Theory focuses on the concept of social identity rather than personal identity (Demirtaş, 2003). Turner (1987, p. 30) explains that individuals define and evaluate themselves, taking into account the social groups they are members of, and classify themselves. At the end of this classification they become identified with the group they are placed in. This identification leads to social identities.

And it is possible to say that the basic expression of the social identity starts with the clothing. As Barthes (1983, p. 45) says at the book ‘The Fashion System: ‘we have seen that a fashion utterance involves at least two systems of information: a specifically linguistic system, which is a language (such as French, English) and a ‘vestimentary’ system, according to which the garment (print, accessories, a pleated skirt, a halter top, etc.) signifies the world (the races, springtime, maturity) or fashion”.

Fashion is a form of non-verbal communication. The dressed body communicates our personal and social identities (Barnard, 2002; Barthes, 1983; Calefato, 2004; Lurie, 2000; Saucier, 2011). It expresses our thoughts, feelings, and desires, as well as group membership (Hebdige, 1981).

It means that clothing and fashion carry some vestimentary codes and these codes can be the signs of something because visual elements which carry also some communicative purposes are the codes of the clothing and fashion.

### **In the Context of Social Groups**

Depending on the social group psychology, individuals wear some special garments which all the group members also wear it. This makes the individual a part of the group.

“The garment is always involved in a social context, and it puts the position of the individual in the face of the group” (Fussell cited Waquet and Laporte, 2011, p. 73). Inclusion, opposition, incompatibility, disdain, or rejection can be find place by clothing. Clothes refer to a style (lifestyle) and those who share this lifestyle want to see and identify each other to look like the custodian of these symbols.

For example ‘zoot suit’ has some communicative purposes for Zoot-suiters who are Young Afro Americans or Mexican-American Youths, to express their identities in the society.

The zoot suit consisted of a broad-shouldered drape jacket, balloon-leg trousers, and, sometimes, a flamboyant hat. Mexican and Mexican American youths who wore these outfits were called zoot-suiters. These individuals referred to themselves as pachucos, a name linked to the Mexican American generation’s rebellion against both the Mexican and American

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cultures. “Zoot suits were the part of exertions of black-isolated American teenagers to create a distinctive and positive identity for themselves” (Barnard, 2002, p. 195).

The significant and communicative expression over clothing in the context of social groups mostly is seen at sports team’s fans. For example if you wear a t-shirt which belongs to Real Madrid football team, it means that you support a team Real Madrid and wearing that t-shirt makes you a part of that team. And you feel a group belonging.

Another example about the group identification over clothing can be NBA jerseys. “NBA player on the basketball court conveys the occupational identity of the wearer, while an NBA jersey on the shoulders of someone in the arena who stands watching a live basketball performance, communicates the wearer is a fan, and quite possibly a fan of a particular player”

Other example can be given in the context of anti-conformism group belonging during 1970 s in England: Punks. Punk culture emerged as a movement and rebellion of freedom of expression in the mid-1970s. This subculture is based on Punk Rock, music which against the minimalist music system. The punk movement that appeared in England in 1976 and spread throughout Europe over the next 10 years brings the example of union of clothes and accessories that are not in common. The provocation of this movement's philosophy has been visualized and coded by violation of clothing elements. Using of metal nails on leather belts and showing hooked needles and pins over the garments were the some visual elements of the Punks and so that the whole appearance is served to the opposition and anti-fashion movement . “Instead of ‘peace and love’ as hippies, the punks created a deliberately aggressive, confrontational style, utilizing the visual accoutrements of sadomasochism. Their slogans were ‘anarchy’, ‘no hope’, we are all prostitutes’

The symbolic items about punks as Hebdidge’s (1979) said are cheap trashy fabrics, vulgar designs, nasty colours and the illicit iconography of sexual fetishism. An individual who feels her/himself as a part of this subculture and adopted their anarchic philosophy worn garments like others worn.

This style of subculture becomes a popular fashion style during that time. Some of the high fashion designer ignored this style but some liked it. For example “Vivienne Westwood, in particular, enthusiastically embraced punk, and her role underscores the naïveté of any rigid separation between anti-fashion and fashion”

A communicating with the others through clothing and fashion shows which norms are shared and accepted by individuals depending on a treaty between them. And it can become a sign for others.

### **In the Context of Social Classes and Statues**

“American sociologists have long considered clothing as a major explanatory note of belonging to a social class” (Fussell cited Waquet and Laporte, 2011, p. 73). We can see that the clothes have always been used to distinguish between the powerful and the weak in the history of costume. If we look at the Ancient Egypt, we can notice that the clothing style from pharaoh to commoners had changed.

As Tortora and Eubank (1989, p. 19) noted, despite the relative simplicity of Egyptian costume, “costume served to delineate social class”. “Oftentimes, the adornment of jewellery and clothing of superior material marked one’s superior status; the lack thereof marked the relative inferiority of one’s position”

When we look at the Ancient Roma (B.C.509-476) ‘toga’ is the definitive representation of the Ancient Roman. Toga is a kind of body covering for a man which is large white woollen or linen piece of fabric was carefully folded and draped on the body, in order to produce a

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garment that represented a specific type of Roman. Togas were important social representations; denoting power, occupation, and social place of upper class Roman citizens because foreign, prisoners and slaves were wearing a simple tunica (tunic), toga ban for them. The rank and status was one of the factors that determine who to wear toga and which colours to wear. There were several types of togas which were worn by different ages and different statuses. For example 'Toga Praetexta' was one of the special togas. It was off-white in colour and featured a wide purple border that denoted the wearer was a Senator or some type of Magistrate.

At this point, we can notice the symbolism of colours. "The symbolism in the colours of the clothing continues to be one of the most powerful and the most symbolic sign" (Waquet and Laporte, 2011:70). As seen at Toga Praetexta, important person's toga had a purple border because the purple was a colour which was not easy to obtain at those times. Even today purple is the sign of elegance. And black-coloured garments mostly the sign of mourning. Black dressing up as a symbol of mourning is a compromise that goes back thousands of years. Queen Victoria, for example, is famous for her black dressing up during her widow for forty years.

Also every item of the clothing has significant symbols, especially fabrics. The symbolism of the fabric consists of many items. The fabric with some adjectives, such as expensive-cheap, rare-widespread, has had significant signs both in history and today. For example, in ancient Egypt linen and then cotton are considered noble fibres because they are not of animal origin. For this reason, according to the famous historian Herodotus (B.C. 484-426), people were not allowed to go into temples with woollen clothes and to be buried with woollen clothes.

Another example, silk was very precious fabric because of its hard producing process and still an expensive one. At history of costume we can notice that just important persons such as royal members can wear a garment which was made of silk. Or the fur was the same. Fur was so fashionable during 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and at the same period just sultan and his relatives could wear fur at Ottoman Empire.

Although sociologist George Simmel is not the sole author of the "trickle-down" theory, the general public still attributes it to him. In his article, Fashion (1904), Simmel argued that upper-class members of society introduce fashion changes. The middle and lower classes express their changing relationship to the upper classes and their social claims by imitating the styles set by the upper classes.

In the twenty-first century, assessing one's social class is no longer a straightforward task because categories have become blurred and the boundaries are no longer well defined or fixed. Now one's social class would be decided by one's life-style choices, consumption practices, time spent on leisure, patterns of social interaction, occupation, political leanings, personal values, educational level, and/or health and nutritional standards.

If we think clothes and social classes over choices high fashion and mass market can be given as an example because of the choices of the costumers' from different social classes. Even mass market productions change from class to class. And each brand has different costumers from different social classes. Nature of consumption patterns with symbol systems emphasizing the idea that fashion is a struggle to convey the image of a person (Kawamura, 2016, p.150). "High-end acquisitions such as Armani suits and Salvatore Ferragamo shoes might communicate to the observer that the wearer is upper class, while clothes from Wal-Mart might communicate the opposite, that the wearer is working-class or poor" (Saucier, 2011).

By the 1960s, the fashion industry had begun to produce and distribute more than enough products for everyone to be able to dress fashionably. This democratization of fashion

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means that by the twenty-first century anyone across the world could imitate a new style instantaneously. The direction of fashion change is no longer unilinear-it traverses geographical places, and flows from both the traditional centers of style as well as "the periphery." Through global media and popular culture, members of the lower classes, and subcultural and marginal groups, have been able to influence fashion as much as those in the upper classes.

The key to assessment in 2000s is often in the details. Higher status is indicated by a perfectly cut and fitted garment, the use of natural and expensive fabrics, and brand-name wear. One's class affiliation is often given away by the choice of accessories, such as eyeglasses, watches, especially bags or shoes. These have become more of a class signifier than dress itself.

These signs are created by the society system directly or indirectly because in a society with a strong social stratification system, objects tend to reflect the given social hierarchies. According to the price of the garment an individual can classify his/herself in the society by buying and wearing it. And also he/she can show his/her social status with it and others can read that he/she belongs to upper class in the society.

### **In the Context of Culture**

Culture is a dynamic concept involving all material and spiritual life practices in human life. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952, p. 181) have complete and useful definition for culture:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.

As Erinc says "social culture is the whole of the values that make a society different from other societies and that have the society 'past riches' that makes it unique and free" (2004: 12-13). And J. Baudrillard incorporates the garment as a universal form into the more general system of object-signs that participate in fashion as a holistic social phenomenon (1984, p.12). As Wilson argues, the reason why clothes are seen as both trivial and important at the same time is a result of their proximity to the human body: '[clothes]... force us to recognize that the human body is more than a biological entity. It is an organism in culture, a cultural artefact even, and its own boundaries are unclear.... Dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self' (Wilson, 1988, p. 2-3, Subbaraman, 1999). If we look at the clothing as a communication system, we can notice that the clothing refers also codes about cultural structure of a person or society.

For example over the centuries, clothing has been one of the way in which people of the India have created their sense of self, sense of community, and sense of place by wearing 'Sari'. Sari is a traditional garment of Indian women which are the sign of their culture. It means that if we see a woman with sari we exactly can be sure she is from India. And it shows that the clothing is the simple way of defining a person herself in traditional and social culture.

Also traditional clothing 'kimono' with T-cut and embroideries is the universal symbol of Japan. Its colours and selected motifs - mostly taken from nature - are loaded with strong symbolic side meanings and show many things about age, status, and give much knowledge to the observer about wearer.

The elegant dress 'Ao dai' is a tunic with a slit on the long side. It has become a symbol of womanhood and is seen as a symbol in Vietnam and also the symbol of the cultural identity. In Vietnam, 'ao dai' is worn at private and formal invitations. This garment, which is made of pure silk fabric, is tightly wrapped around the waist and the word 'dai' refers to long.

And Scottish skirt, part of national clothing in Scotland, is a symbol of kinship and manhood. The other example is 'Chuba' which is the traditional costume of Khampa women, worn to protect body from the cold and keeps the whole body warm from neck to the ankles.

These examples can of course be increased. And generally it is possible to say that clothing is the most competent and social identification of all cultures from one society to the other.

### **In the Context of Gender**

The semantic and phonetic similarities of the terms male-female and feminine-masculine are dissociated from these similarities in the biological dimension and the social dimension. The concept of gender which is formed within the framework of the difference of these dimensions and which is theoretically expressed first with Freud and psychoanalytic approach has many explanations (Akdemir, 2017). There are those who advocate that biologically based differences need to be expressed in terms of sex, sociocultural based differences should be expressed in gender, as well as in the case of differences between men and women (Dökmen, 2016, p. 18). In general frame; the biological aspect of being a woman or a man corresponds to sex, whereas the understanding and expectation of society and culture related to the biological structure of the individual corresponds to the gender (Akdemir, 2017).

And the clothes are visible expression of gender identity of the person not just about the wearing style but also using the terms for representing the gender identity such as the book titled 'White-Blouse Revolution' which was edited by Gregory Anderson in 1989. In this book "the authors all recognize a variety of structural factors as relevant in explaining women's secondary statuses in white-collar office work"

If we look at the subject in the context of wearing style items for woman and man, the pants is the sign of masculinity in the history until 1960s. In fact at the history of costume we can see that women wore a kind of fully pants for sportive occasions such as riding, biking especially at the being of 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the pants that we know as these times began to be worn by women in the 1960s. "Women's trousers re-emerged in the 1960s. as a preference of relaxation and especially young people who struggle against class and gender discrimination." (Waquet and Laporte, 2011, p. 76). As Bard's said (2012) women's discovering this important symbol of the last two centuries is not an individual identity without a political dimension or a preference for a practical garment. this is the expression of the desire and challenge of gender equality. Trousers have become popular and fashionable for women by the collection of Yves Saint Laurent 'Le smoking' in 1966. These suits are expressed as 'androgen style' which is a fashion style that challenges with existing concepts by gender identity. "Adrogeny (androgyny) is a term formed by combining the words 'andro' meaning 'male' in Greek and 'gyne', meaning woman in Greek. it is an expression of opposition to the traditional masculine and feminine categories and that people can be both feminine and masculine. Androgynous (androgynous) is also called for those who show both masculine and feminine qualities at a high level" (Dökmen, 2016, p. 74). And also during those times "jean pants which had a stance against gender discrimination have become the symbol of social role liberation" (Akdemir, N. August, 2017).

There is another point which is about the gender identity. "Gender identity means that one is to define herself/himself as woman or man. This identity is the most important element involved in one's self-concept." (Dökmen, 2016, p. 26). "Gender identity is the personal and internal meaning of femininity or masculinity that is shown as identity, personality and behaviour" (Rice, 1996). An individual's sexual identity and gender identity are performed and continuously negotiated (Goffman, 1959) via a visual language or symbols such as dress (Davis, 1992). Gender identity refers to individuals' inner sense and self-awareness of their characteristics of maleness and femaleness (Kelly ve Elaine, 2015).

Under these descriptions it would be appropriate to mention the concept of queer. The role of clothing and fashion cannot be underestimated by expressing the identities of queers. “Queer is a term utilised by individuals who favour a more fluid understanding of sex and gender. It is sometimes used as an umbrella term for all who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex” (Kelly ve Elaine, 2015).

Queer identity mostly finds symbolic expressions about their gender identity with their clothing. For example according to the stereotypes man should wear as man and woman should wear as woman, I mean, man should not wear skirt except cultural forms, and should not wear so colourful clothes. But person’s biological identity can be male but he can feel like a woman. That time he can wear more fluid than men’s wearing. And this wearing style carries a sign about his gender identity.

And fashion industry takes this point into consideration. Many fashion brands start to prepare collections for queers. And also these brands carry this subject into their advertisements. And we can see that many fashion houses’ collections are more with fluidly identity. “This gender-bending approach to fashion has begun to achieve critical mass in pop culture and on the catwalk, with Alessandro Michele dressing his Gucci girls in dandyish suits and his Gucci boys in floral and brocade. More broadly, designers such as Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons at Calvin Klein are knitting their men’s and women’s collections together, showing them on the same catwalk and twinning certain looks-identical fabrics, identical embellishments, nearly identical silhouettes” (Singer, 2017).

### Conclusion

The clothing and fashion in the context of social identity has been investigated in this paper. And this subject has taken into consideration under some subtitles because there are many types of social identity.

Firstly, expression of group identity over the clothing and fashion has been investigated under the subtitle ‘in the context of social groups’. Secondly, expression of statues and classes over the fashion and the clothing has been investigated under the subtitle ‘in the context of social classes and statues’. Thirdly, expression of culture identity over the clothing has been investigated under the subtitle ‘in the context of culture’. And fourthly, expression of gender identity over the fashion and clothing has been investigated under the subtitle ‘in the context of gender’.

As a result it is possible to say that the clothing and fashion are one of the most important ways of expressing the identity because of its full of signs, codes and meanings inside them.

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