

Clothes – for
individuality or
conformity's sake



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RESEARCH PAPER: The reasons why people wear what they wear Done by: Marcus Introduction A walk through any cultural museum gives us glimpses of how our earliest ancestors looked like. We may remember and characterize them by their unkempt hair and exhibition of unruly behaviour. But can any of us remember what they used to wear? If you look closely enough at the exhibits, you will realize that most of our ancestors roamed the earth with nothing but a few pieces of animal skin or leaves on their body.

Little did we know, that those few pieces of animal skin are the earliest forms of clothing. Now, let's fast forward in time and take a look at today's world. As you turn around the bend to any busy street in the world, endless lines of boutiques will greet you with sophistication and glamour to the tastes of Chanel, Gucci and many more just like these. Waltzing out of their glass doors, you will find shoppers with illuminated faces of indescribable joy laden with huge shopping bags filled with their buys.

Comparing the wide array of clothes which vary in colour, texture and material that are available to us now and the limited choices that our ancestors had, it is clear that the look of clothes has evolved tremendously with the passing of time. Let us now examine whether the purposes clothes have changed. Back then, clothes were made with two simple objectives. Firstly, they were worn to conceal human parts for the purpose of modesty (Harms, 1938). Secondly, they helped to increase survivability (Danesi, 2006, p. 496) and were often "perceived as additions to our protective bodily hair and skin thickness" (Danesi, 2006, p. 96). But today, clothes have become more sophisticated and have changed from mere "objects for the body" to "

cultural objects” (Bovone, 2006 p. 377) that can actually “ articulate the soul” (Bovone, 2006 p. 377). It is also ironic to see how people today use clothes to accentuate body parts, such that they can act as devices for enhancing physical attractiveness as compared to the initial purpose of modesty (Laurie, 1981). Thus, it is evident that clothes hold more significance today than in the past, where they were only considered as mere body coverings.

What we should know is that clothes are more than just a few pieces of cloth meticulously stitched together. They are a form of non-verbal communication, a new language (Roach, 2007). In the same way that different words and phrases are adeptly pieced together to convey certain messages in languages, clothes can also be mixed and matched with varying colours or textures to express a multitude of different meanings (Roach, 2007). This mix and match process for clothes can result in an unlimited number of outcomes. What then are some of the messages that can be conveyed using the language of clothes?

Through clothes, one can actually “ shout” out his “ personality, social status, and overall character” (Danesi, 2006 p. 123). As a result, clothes are able to establish social readability such that we are able to guess who a person really is just by a single glance (Vinken, 1999). Other than being a form of non-verbal communication, clothes are also a means of social organization with the ability to categorize the society into groups. They have this ability simply due to the fact that people usually “ position themselves and one another within groups according to style choices centred on clothing”(Croghan et al, 2006).

This is relevant to a literal interpretation of the old saying “ Birds of a feather flock together”. In this case, the feathers refer to the clothes that people wear. Being a form of non-verbal communication and also a means of social organization, we can see some of the purposes of clothes. Knowing what clothes entail prompts the question why people choose to wear what they wear. Amidst all the different reasons why people wear clothes, there are two main reasons. Firstly, clothes are worn for personal purposes with the objective of helping people to express themselves.

Secondly, clothes are worn for social purposes with the objective of fitting into a group. Personal Purposes: Self-Expression Popular belief is that clothes reduce an individual’s freedom as they diminish his choices due to the fixed number of clothes available in the market (Bovone, 2006). Although this is somewhat true, we have to understand that these fixed numbers of clothes can be mixed and matched to form endless permutations of combinations of choices in clothes (Roach, 2007). It is exactly because of these endless style choices that people are able to use clothes for self-expression in many ways.

In this essay, I would like to focus my attention three forms of self-expression - clothes as an avenue through which people are able to express their moods and feelings, their individuality, and their physical attractiveness. Clothes as a means of expressing one’s mood Imagine two people walking into an empty room. The first person wears a bright, vibrant Hawaiian shirt with electric blue shorts while the next person dons a dull black top with plain black jeans. What would you infer about their moods? Most people would assume that the former is feeling happy or cheerful whereas the latter is feeling down or angry.

They would probably be right. The reason why we are able to make such accurate guesses about the moods of people is because whether consciously or subconsciously, people wear clothes to express their moods and feelings (Roach, 2007). They do so by varying the colours and textures of clothes. For example, if an individual feels energetic and light hearted, he could choose clothes with colour contrasts to express his mood (Roach 2007). So to a considerable extent, we are able to tell a person's mood just by the clothes he wears.

Thus, clothes can be used an outlet for people to externalize and express their feelings. However, we should also know that clothes can conversely be used to give people false impressions of their mood, and these people may do so because they wish to hide their feelings or communicate a different mood (Roach, 2007). Hence, taking this into consideration, it is not always accurate to base someone's mood solely on the colours and textures of the clothes that they wear as these clothes may very well be chosen with the purpose of hiding one's true emotions.

Clothes as a means of expressing individuality As humans, we have a basic need to express ourselves to show others who we are and why we are different, this expression is what makes each of us individual, unique and special (Vinken, 1999). Through the endless options of clothing combinations, we are able to have this freedom of expression and effectively showcase our individuality (Roach, 2007). Generally, people do so by wearing clothes that are rare. Buying expensive or fashionable clothes are two common ways to achieve differentiation through rarity (Roach, 2007).

Declaring uniqueness through clothes is perhaps most evident in young people as they often pay more attention to the need of establishing authenticity (Croghan et al, 2006). A study on the dressing of Japanese teenagers to school is a testament to this as it reveals that although majority of the Japanese children wear uniforms, they modify their clothes to make themselves unique by adjusting the lengths of their skirts (Stephen et al, 2008). That being said, we should understand that using clothes as a means of differentiation is actually a very superficial approach.

This is because people that try to be different by wearing unique clothes are actually all wearing the same thing. Thus, to truly be special, we should focus more on developing who we are on the inside and not merely fixate on our outward appearances. After all, our personalities and attitudes are what will eventually set us apart from the rest. Clothes as an instrument to express attractiveness As mentioned above, the outlook of clothes has changed tremendously from the past. Today, other than for the purpose of preserving modesty, clothes are also used to express physical and sexual attractiveness.

Some clothes have this ability as they are designed to deliberately conceal and reveal certain body parts to arouse sexual interest (Laurie, 1981). These clothes make the body like a wrapped present that invokes curiosity and teases people to “undo the package” (Laurie, 1981 p. 212). Other than strategically revealing certain body parts, clothes are also able to express attractiveness by placing emphasis on them (Vinken, 1999). Clothes with these abilities are gaining popularity as can be seen from the “roaring success of the wonder and push-up-bra” which enhances a woman’s

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cleavage (Vinken, 1999 p. 9). Furthermore, the adorning of these type of clothes also allow wearers to publicly announce their availability of sexual pursuit (Roach, 2007). Thus, clothes are not only used to showcase and enhance physical attractiveness, but also to express a person's availability. However, the rampant use of clothes to express sexual attractiveness today also calls attention to the problem of indecent exposure. In an attempt to enhance attractiveness, some people end up revealing too much. As such, we should know the limits as to how much flesh should be revealed without looking inappropriate as indecent exposure might result in the attracting of wrong attention of persons such as rapists and molesters. Thus, though the expression of attractiveness through clothes is effective, it should be adopted with care.

Social Reasons: Fitting in

From above, we know that many people wear what they wear for the personal purpose of self-expression. However, people also wear clothes for social purposes and many authors have argued that clothes tend to produce "conformity rather than difference"(Croghan et al, 2006 p. 71). Clothes are able to be used for this purpose as they are actually a means of "social organization" which are able to "establish social readability"(Vinken, 1999). This is so as people generally wear clothes to fit into groups of their choice. Adhering to dress codes show clothes as a form of conformity that actually governs the way we dress. Sometimes, the failure to abide by these rules of dressing would result in undesirable consequences that may vary with each group.

Some of the more common groups which people dress to fit into are social groups, occupational groups and gender groups. Fitting into Social groups

People, especially young teenagers, position themselves in groups of their

choice that centre their style choices made based on interests, clothes and music (Croghan et al, 2006). In a way, to gain membership to these social groups, you have to pass the preliminary requirement of dressing like them. Through clothes, people are able to “ establish their status and credibility”(Croghan et al, 2006 p. 64) within these groups and thus they feel a sense of belonging to them. The dress codes are usually selected because they portray a certain image or convey a certain message that the social group thinks is ideal. For example, motorcycle gang members like to wear stiff leather jackets and boots to convey toughness (Danesi, 2006). However, the meanings of these dress codes although known to the group is sometimes unknown to people outside the group (Crane, 2000). Failing to dress in accordance to these social groups would most certainly mean failure to gain entry.

The consequences of not fitting into these groups might be dire as it could result in one being ostracised and deemed as a “ personal failure”(Croghan et al, 2006). Thus, some people will do whatever it takes to ensure that they can follow the dress code and successfully gain acceptance into the social group of their choice. However, it is ironic to see how people try so hard to “ fit in” and try to dress indifferently to be unique when they do gain membership,. They achieve this by trying to make variations to their clothes from other group members but keeping the main essence of their dress code.

All in all, this ambivalence demonstrates how people want to feel like part of a group yet also as a unique individual at the same time. Fitting into Occupational Groups Other than dressing to fit into social groups, people

also dress to fit into their occupational groups at their workplace. These dress codes at work are more commonly known as “ uniforms”. The emergence of these uniforms dates back into the past where shamans actually wore special clothing to show who they are (Danesi, 2006). Uniforms today manifest themselves in almost every workplace such as students in school, doctors in hospitals.

These uniforms are specially designed and custom made for each type of job which entails the purpose of improving job efficiency or establishing identification. For example, “ police uniforms adorned with brass buttons, badges”(Roach, 2007) helps to announce that policemen are law enforcers. Also, men’s suits help individuals to better perform business roles as they are symbols for management roles in business (Ogle, 1999). It is important to note that dressing the right way to fit into occupational groups is of paramount importance as failure to do so may be detrimental to a person’s career prospects(Ogle, 1999).

However, with the endless options of clothing that are presented to us today, the term “ uniform” seems to have lost a little of its meaning as people do not strictly follow these uniform codes anymore. Instead, they make different modifications to these uniforms that changes the appearance of them. Thus, the diminishing role of uniforms makes one ponder whether uniforms will cease to exist in the workplace in years to come. Fitting into a gender group Perhaps the most important group that a person should wish to safely belong to is the gender groups.

Thus, one of the most important reasons why people wear what they wear is so that they can appear as a male or a female. Clothes are able to help one fit into a gender group as they have the ability to differentiate between sexes. This ability which started since the 19th century (Vinken, 1999) is based on the perceived fact that “ what is properly worn by a man cannot be worn by a woman”(Laurie, 1981). The consequences of not fitting into the right gender group are disastrous as can be seen from cases where people did not fit into their gender group.

For example, in the past women wore clothes such as trousers or the Bloomers which were actually clothes that were identified with men. As a result, these women were subjected to the ridicule and humiliation of the public and ostracised publicly (Foote, 1989). However, in today’s world, dressing up to fit into the right gender group is not that crucial as can be seen from the popularity of famous female brands such as Chanel which actually uses masculine styles in designing their apparels (Vinken, 1999).

Thus, it seems that clothes may have lost a little of their ability to differentiate between sexes as there is no longer a clear line between the dressing of a man and a woman. Conclusion In conclusion, people wear clothes for personal and social reasons. Firstly, the main personal reason is that of self-expression which can take many forms. Individuals can use clothes to express their moods, their physical attractiveness and also used as a means to help one stand out from the rest. Secondly, people wear clothes to fit into groups of their choice such as social, occupational and gender groups.