

# Guccification: exhibiting material wealth through fashion

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## **Thesis Statement**

Fashion is an unspoken form of visual communication that bears a multitude of messages embedded within the dress. An outfit has the ability to make a statement while brands can demarcate social class. Seemingly superficial, fashion, when contextualized, holds great significance in a particular society. An example where this holds true is China, where their affluent indulge in luxury merchandise, thereby using fashion as a tool to inform others about their status in society. Once reserved for the upper classes, luxury items were viewed as exclusive and a visual indicator of wealth and status.

As a greater number of Chinese, in particular the growing middle income group, progress in their wealth and become moneyed, they have subscribed to the same mentality of communicating their new found status through the inclusion of luxury goods into their dress. Thus, the presentation of oneself through the use of branded goods has become highly visible as a means of communicating their wealth and status in China. This dissertation will explore the reasons behind the intentional inclusion of luxury labels as a presentation of oneself and decipher how the exhibition of trendy material goods as part of one's dress communicates and reinforces their status in the Chinese society.

## **Literature Review**

In chapter three of Kimberly A. Miller-Spillman's book *The Meanings Of Dress, Dress As Nonverbal Communication*, Miller-Spillman theorizes dress as "one of several modes of nonverbal communication that does not involve

verbal expression through speaking or writing” (79). This theory expresses how visuals are effective in communication which is highly pertinent in deciphering the case studies in this paper. Miller-Spillman further deduces that “ dress refers to meanings more abstract than the actual physical objects of dress” (85). This provides greater perspective into the implied meanings of dress. Appropriated in the context of the Chinese, Miller-Spillman’s writings are key theories which analyse the underlying reasons behind the branded attire of the affluent Chinese, suggesting that there are implicit messages to be communicated that are embedded in their choice of dress.

In chapter two of *The Visible Self* by Joanne B Eicher, Sandra Lee Evenson and Hazel A. Luts, the relationship and functions of dress, culture and society are discussed. Eicher, Evenson and A. Luts write that dress “ primarily changes how the individual is perceived visually” (35). This statement provides preliminary insight to why the Chinese use dress as a means to convey their status. The authors also mention that concepts of culture and society are essential to understand the meanings and analysis of dress (35). This quote illuminates the complexity of the Chinese dress beyond reasons of mere vanity. This concept aids in forming an in depth analysis of how the Chinese send visual signs of their status and wealth to other members of their society.

Another piece of literature reviewed is titled *Chinese Luxury Consumers - Trends and Challenges for Luxury Brands* by Brand Strategist Martin Roll. This online article provides background information on the affluent Chinese

and their manners of consumption. The data and research collected on the wealthy Chinese and their impact on luxury brands will account for an accurate analysis and rationalization of the case studies in this dissertation.

### **Method(s) Of Inquiry**

Various approaches will be undertaken to fully investigate the reasons behind the incorporation of branded wear as a form of communication in the modern Chinese dress. Primary research will consist of a series of questionnaires answered by the Chinese from the middle income class, to gain a first hand understanding of luxury consumption from a Chinese perspective.

To provide further insight into this dissertation, this paper will also include detailed analysis of secondary research from online journals, articles and reports. Images of Chinese who sport luxury labels will serve as case studies and visual support, thus forming a comprehensive study of the subject covered in this dissertation.

The utilization of designer goods as a medium of unspoken communication is especially significant in the dress codes of China.

In the visual delivery of status through fashion, apart from the garment itself, the viewers, as receivers of this visual communication, are also important as their reactions transmit feedback back to the sender. A third factor, the viewing venue where the branded item is worn to be publicly displayed as part of an outfit, is also a crucial factor which should be taken into consideration. In Figure 1, a Chinese woman is spotted at Art Basel, one of

the world's leading art shows, clad in a Gucci T-shirt. This visual branding of Gucci on a basic white T-shirt not only lends this look a stamp of approval in the fashion realm, it also hints at the price of the shirt. It is also worthy to note that her ensemble, which consists entirely of international luxury designer merchandise from Hermès, Stella McCartney and Céline, purposefully serve as tools in wealth communication.

Therefore, by strategically appearing head to toe in designer wear at the Art Basel, an event where the wealthy and cultured assemble, the lady in Figure 1 is attempting to visually speak of her affluence to the members of the cultured arts society in hopes of gaining recognition and acceptance.

Dressing in trendy luxury labels helps in being identified as affluent in the vast populous of China. In Vogue's 25 Ways to Gucci: Shanghai's Style Remix, people who " epitomize the Shanghainese aesthetic" were selected to be photographed as part of an editorial. In Figure 2, a Chinese doctor Gao Rong Rong, is photographed alongside her mother and daughter, all of whom are dressed in Gucci. This feature on Vogue. com, a digital extension of the fashion publication, recognizes the Chinese as active and capable consumers of luxury labels. Being selected by an Italian brand to be featured in their latest collection, the status of Gao and her family are validated and boosted in society.

The subjects are photographed casually, making an allusion that luxury wear is part of their daily dress. Through depicting wealthy families who have the financial capacities to be styled in Gucci, these images create an aspirational

story which in turn encourages Chinese consumers to purchase Gucci products to be identified as wealthy and reinforce their status as affluent equals in society.