

Fashion, gender and identity

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



gender is a meaning that a culture assigns to sexual differences' and within gender, 'masculinity and 'femininity are the divisions that a culture creates between behavior and 'characteristics considered to be appropriate to men and women' (Bernard, 2007, 185- 186). Fashion aids in the social construction of gender through separating male and female fashion and promoting the stereotypical feminine figure. From the days of stays and petticoats to corsets and crinolines and now with padded bras and Spanx, fashion has seen centuries of shrinking and augmentation of the body to achieve the 'feminine' shape.

The 'communicative function' of the body and the way in which it is molded is like a 'language' - a 'cultural communication' (Descanters, 1997, 11). Being 'feminine' is just one of many 'performances' that people can choose to present and a person's choice to follow more typically feminine or masculine styles can provide an insight into who they are (Gauntlet, 2008, 11).

Although certain guidelines may be socially expected, in the western world, we are largely in control of what we wear and thus are perpetually communicating some element of personal identity every time we get dressed, whether it is intentional or subconscious.

Using the visual examples of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France and a fashion icon in the late 18th century and Lady Gaga, a current fashion and pop icon, this essay demonstrates how, even though centuries have passed, the practice of augmenting and shrinking the figure through fashion garments to achieve a 'feminine' shape has continued to perpetuate social constructions of femininity. Then, the example of Andrea Pelvic is used to

demonstrate how appearance can communicate identity, In particular gender identity.

Beginning in the 16th century in Europe, Women's bodies were universally forced onto bizarre, unnatural shapes' (Smith, 1998, 5). Stays, petticoats, corsets and crinolines with stiff fabric, boning and wire were used to force the body into the desirable 'friendly' silhouette of the time. Constant dissatisfaction and change with the idealized shape of the body reinforced the idea that the natural body needed to be 'improved and restricted' to be considered attractive (Smith, 1998, 5). We see this trend continue into modern day clothing and undergarments.

This constant restriction and augmentation, which occurs almost solely to the female body, aids in the social construction and communication of gender. Britannica Image Quest A royal exemplar existed in the form of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France from 1774 until 1792 - a time when all of Europe was 'culturally and stylistically influenced' by France, during the Rococo era (Coving, 2006, 56. Descanters, 1997, 35-36). The desired feminine physical ideal at this time was the 'hourglass female figure: a tiny waist, ample bosom and large hips which enhanced femininity (Tallahatchie-Villas, 2007, 36-37).

Marie Antoinette had to 'learn to be a woman (or at least how to perform femininity)' through the molding of her body with fashion garments (Goodman, 2003, 6). In Figure 1 (above) the Queen is depicted with her hand resting on her commodious and voluminous skirt, serenely gazing into the palace. It can be seen that her body is distinctly shaped to the 'hourglass'

figure that Tallahatchie-Villas (2007) refers to as an image of 'enhanced femininity - the tightly laced corset has shrunk her waist and her bosom is being flattened and pushed upwards to have an overflowing effect.

At the same time her hips have been augmented by a large pannier shaped undergarment and gathers and ruffles of fabric add to the luminous result. Corsets had been present since the beginning of the 17th century, initially made with an iron structure, which was replaced by whalebone in the 18th century. At the beginning of the 18th century, the farthing' - a framework of hoops' that aristocratic women had previously worn to provide volume under their skirts - was replaced by the crinoline (Charles & Carl, 2010, 30).

The crinoline augmented the size of the hips and changed shape to follow changing fashions in the desired feminine physique. In the early 18th century the shape of the crinoline was round, it then came oval and then 'conical' (Charles & Carl, 2010, 30). By the mid 18th century they had become a 'pannier' shape meaning 'side hoops' or false hips' - a shape that was flat on front and back and extended on the wearer's left and right, giving her exceedingly wide hips (Cumming, Cuning & Cuning, 2010, 148). This is the shape we see in Pannier-Aligns illustration of Marie Antoinette in Figure 1

In this illustration there are a number of elements of composition and execution that support the conclusion that the molding the Queen underwent were both expected and desirable at this time. There is the artist's decision to place her in a standing position in which the full scale of her skirt can be realized, the addition of shading to its size. The enormity of the Queen's

gown in relation to her head and the background of the portrait ensure that her curvaceous feminine shape instantly draws the viewer's eye.

The artist's decision to contrast the rich, dark objects in the background with pale colors to illustrate her in the foreground again draws attention to this almost ethereal feminine form. One wonders how widely this image was distributed, given our knowledge of Marie Antoinette influence on fashion. Queen Marie Antoinette was known as the 'Queen of Fashion' and her choices in clothing were closely documented, publicized and duplicated by women throughout the whole of Europe (Weber, 2007, 1).

Her wardrobe has even provided inspiration for current designers such as Much Dolce & Gabbana for her millennium collection at the Autumn/ Winter 2012/13 London Fashion Week and John Galiano for his Spring 2010 Couture collection for Dior in Paris (Clarinda, 2012. Maida, 2010). The consequence of her choice to conform to the notion of molding her body, restricting and augmenting - wrought undergarments and fashion garments - to achieve the hourglass shape ensured this practice remained in fashion and in turn contributed to the social constructions of the feminine physical ideal.

After the fall of the monarchy at the turn of the century this fashion of restricting and augmenting the body, molding it to achieve the ideal feminine physique, persisted. The use of the waist- shrinking, bust- raising corset was continued into the nineteenth century, although steel boning began to be used instead of whalebone. By the mid sass, 'cheap, mass-produced' corsets were developed and became a staple of nearly every woman's wardrobe (Gag & Steele, 2005, 291).

At this time, flexible sprung-steel rings suspended from cloth tapes' known as 'Hopkins' were in fashion and augmented the size of the wearer's hips (Gag & Steele, 2005, 317). The corset remained in fashion into the early twentieth century, when it had become a 'straight front' corset that 'pushed the pelvis back and the bosom forward,' forming the desired feminine physique at the time - the 'S' silhouette (Gag & Steele, 2005, 293). The fashionable body in this period was augmented towards the back with use of a bustle skirt.

In the sass, the fashionable female figure was 'boyish and flat- cheated,' so the waist shrinking corset and wired underskirts became largely obsolete, but the practice of restriction remained in fashion as the breasts still had to be tightly bound, this time to conceal rather than enhance' (Smith, 1998, 5). In 1939, and then after World War II, Tallahatchie-Villas' image of 'enhanced femininity with a tiny waist, ample bosom and large hips' returned to fashion again and brought with it the return of the corset and fuller skirts (Tallahatchie-Villas, 2007, 36-37. Gag & Steele, 2005, 293).

From the sass onwards the process of restriction and augmentation to achieve the desired feminine physique dictated by fashion at the time has continued. A review of more recent trends and products and fashion exemplars appears below. Currently there is no singular feminine' silhouette that is being dictated by fashion. In some areas of fashion media we are seeing the same boyish thinness as in the 2012). There are still some 'corset enthusiasts' and elements of these undergarments such as boning and full

skirts are still being used in many women's garments as well as in haute couture fashion.

There is a myriad of other new garments encouraged by fashion for women to restrict, augment and mold their bodies into any desired shape. A few products currently on the market include the 'Wastepaper' - a tubular piece of Lascar worn to slim the waist and flatten the stomach; the 'High-waist Long Leg Brief' which is designed to provide 'under-bust and tummy support, hip and thigh contouring, and a nice boost for your butt'; as well as 'Padded Shaper Panties' which have two round foam pads to give you a 'perfectly rounded derriere' and padded bras to increase bust size (Morgan, 2012).

Compared to the days of corsets and crinolines, the variety of ways in which fashion encourages women to squeeze, expand and mold their bodies have grown. Figure 2 - Photograph of Lady Gaga at the 2009 METMusicawards. Photocourtesy of Getty Images, 2009 Lady Gaga, is 'Without question, the world's biggest pop star' and a current fashion icon (Robinson, 2010, 280). She famously morphs her body into the sexualities feminine hourglass shape with boning, padding and structured garments - often designed specifically for her by current avian garden fashion designers such as

In the above photograph (Figure 2) Lady Gaga is wearing a Jean Paul Gaultier padded and boned body suit, which drastically shapes her figure into the curvaceous, hourglass silhouette of 'enhanced femininity' that Tallahatchie-Villas refers to (2007). The boning restricts the size of her waist while the underwear and padding on the cups over her breasts raise and shape the bust and the padding on her hips augment their size.

Although this is an exaggerated example and would not be considered a ready-to-wear garment that women would be seen in on the street, Lady Gaga's style choices are influential on how women choose to dress in mainstream culture. More than four hundred years after the first corsets and petticoats came into fashion, we see that the process of restricting and augmenting the female body to achieve a look considered to be feminine is still widespread.

Through encouraging this practice and promoting a desired feminine physique that is difficult to attain naturally, fashion aids in the social construction of gender. An individual's choices about the clothes, make-up, accessories and styling that they adorn before venturing into public can communicate a lot about who they are. At the same time, the changeable and impermanent nature of these external applications means that no definite assumptions of a person's identity can be made and these variables can easily be manipulated by the individual, allowing them to become who they would like to be.

An individual's unique interpretations of, and resistances to conventional fashions is known as 'appearance style' and is a medium through which individuals can 'announce' who they are or who they want to become (Gag & Steele, 2005, 34). There are some elements of appearance that we are accustomed to observing and processing almost immediately when we look at a person. For example when you see a stranger, it is highly likely that you will be able to tell if their gender is male or female almost instantly and their appearance style aids in this immediate recognition.

When you observe the combination of their choice of hair cut, cosmetics, clothing, accessories, shoes and mannerisms; you can draw a conclusion about what gender that person is 'announcing that they are. This shows that the individual has the power to manipulate these components of their appearance to communicate their understanding of their personal gender identity. An example of how successfully appearance can provide an insight into gender identity and also how easily it can be manipulated can be seen through examining performances of Andre] Epic. Pelvic is biologically a man but models as both a male and a female.

At his first fashion week - New York Fashion week Fall/Winter 2011/12 - he walked in five menswear shows and four womanlier shows and this number has since grown (Morris, 2011). Pelvic explains how he began to mold himself into the typically feminine aesthetic, creating an appearance style that would be read as male - he grew and dyed his hair, 'started wearing skinny jeans... Shopping in the women's aisle and putting on make-up' (Morris, 2011). Pelvic was voted the ninety- eighth sexiest woman in the world in Fem.. 'One Hundred Sexiest Women' list last year (Peck, 2011, 24).

Figure 3 - Andre] Pelvic in 'Hem' ad campaign.

Photo courtesy of Hem from Hollywood Planet, 2011 wearing their 'mega push up bra' underneath a close-fitted top and a figure hugging dress (Freeman- Greene, 2011). The bra is claimed to 'add two cup sizes' to its wearer's bust, which it has achieved successfully with Epic's originally flat chest Quicker, 2011). His body has been manipulated so that his appearance style communicates his gender as female. His hair is long and blow-dried in a

typically feminine style, he is wearing make-up and a necklace, his arms are void of hair and his body has been manipulated to augment the bust with padding.

He attempts to channel the poses that female models often make by moving and looking at the camera in a fluid and dramatic' manner (Morris, 2011). The close up angle of the photos and the choice of shots where Pelvic is making direct eye contact with the camera enforces the believability of Epic's feminine appearance. The success of the communication of Epic's gender identity as female in this advertisement demonstrates the extent to which an individual can communicate who they are or would like to be through their appearance.

As an audience we almost automatically assume Pelvic to be a 'beautiful, Victorians Secret issue bombshell' (Abraham, 2011). This mutual communication and interpretation that can be achieved through manipulating the variables of appearance style allows for an individual's look to say much about who they are. Fashion aids in the social construction of gender through separating male and female fashion and promoting the stereotypical feminine figure.

In numerous centuries past and continuing into the present, the practice of women using wire, steel, elastic and padding to mould their bodies to the fashionable shape of the time has been common, even expected. We have examined how Queen Marie Antoinette encouraged this practice in the 18th Century by wearing a corset to nip her waist and enhance her bust as well as hoop pannaier skirts to widen her hips. In the 21st Century it has been

demonstrated that this body distortion is still common with pop con Lady Gaga wearing a boned and padded body suit that provides her with that feminine, hourglass shape.

We then saw how this practice is so typically expected to be feminine that the biologically male model Andre] Pelvic can display his female gender identity by donning a padded bra. When examining these three examples, it becomes clear that the molding of the body into the feminine physical ideal through restriction and augmentation is communicative of the wearer's gender, whether intentional or projected by society, and provides an insight into who they are.