

Introduction fashion a means of demonstrating belonging



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Introduction

Fashion is like a kind of visual arts: people come to Karl Lagerfeld's fashion show and express their excitement the same way they do at the Louvre when looking at da Vinci's Mona Lisa. Fashion is like sports: everybody wants to outstrip competitors and be the best. Fashion is like a magic wand: it seems to one that he/she just needs to put on a new splendid outfit, and his/her life will change completely.

Funny as it may seem, these words are hardly an overstatement: today, fashion is constantly in the spotlight in media and remains one of the most discussable things in society. Scholars give different evaluations to the influence of fashion on contemporary people emphasizing both positive and negative social impacts; however, the fact of this influence is evident. That is why it is reasonable to continue the study of how fashion trends influence an individual's life and how they are perceived by people. The paper aims at describing the influence fashion has upon our lives.

The key notion of this discussion is identity. It is quite broad and can be defined in different ways; there are several levels of identity, and each of them requires particular discussion (Schwartz and Pantin 4). This approach seems to be appropriate for investigating fashion: as Loughran (4) marks, on the one hand, when people make decision about what to put on, they focus on their own principles, interests, and preferences. On the other hand, fashion trends find their origins in culture, traditions, social processes etc.

and thus promote people's integration. The study embraces three levels of identity and implies discussion of several questions, such as: 1) how can be <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-fashion-a-means-of-demonstrating-belonging/>

the notion of one's identity defined? 2) what is the mechanism of influence of fashion on an individual's identity? 3) for an individual who demonstrates interest towards fashion trends and adjusts his/her style to them, is fashion a means of demonstrating belonging to some group, or, backwards, the way to highlight his/her exceptionalism? 4) how does the communicative function of fashion work? 5) What expectations do individuals have about the results of efforts they make to follow the fashion trends? Fashion helps us to define and show who we are and what we do, and the research below aims at understanding how this help comes to be. The study includes analysis of scholars' works and study of the cases from history and contemporary media.

Levels of Identity

Scholars offer different schemes of an individual's identity depending on the identity levels they mark out. Based on Erikson's and Marcia's models, Schwartz and Pantin (1-40) describe five levels of identity, which are: 1) ego identity; 2) personal identity; 3) social identity; 4) ethnic identity; 5) cultural identity.

Hall (cited in Kirchner 3) offers a generalized model of one's identity, which includes three levels: 1) individual; 2) collective; 3) national. It is possible to state that the individual level included into this scheme corresponds to the ego identity and personal identity from the abovementioned model; the collective identity is similar to the social identity; national identity is similar to ethnic identity and cultural identity. For the aims of this study, the three-level identity model is used in analysis of the link between fashion and

identity. Below, the role of fashion at each of identity levels is discussed.
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Individual Identity

It is reasonable to begin the study with the level of an individual identity, which can be defined as “ a kind of self-identification as a human being with cognitive and social capabilities” (Kirchner 3). An individual’s appearance is considered to be an important element of his/her identity: as Craik (137) argues, “...Our body image forms the basis of our idea of self and identity as an individual, shaped both by our bodily performance and by how others perceive us”. This corroborates the reasonability of studying the “ individual-fashion” link. The notion “ individual identity” includes a set of characteristics that outline who an individual is and how he/she is perceived by the other people. It seems reasonable to say that one’s identity is a priceless and inalienable asset he/she is lucky to possess.

Not accidentally, an individual feels the desire to “ communicate” his/her individual identity to the society (Kellner 264). Oscar Wilde highlighted the importance of this “ communication” with humor and at the same time very precisely, “ It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible” (quoted in Davis 1). The “ messages” about one’s individual identity are numerous: style of life, interests, masculinity/femininity, ambitions, good taste, intelligence, profession, wealth, any kinds of personality traits etc.

At the same time, a range of devices used in expression of these characteristics is also very wide: color and color combinations, silhouette, cut, fabric, length, style, texture and oth. (6) Different combinations of these devices provide one with an opportunity for eloquent self-expression and endless experiments. Fashion is able to express any “ dramatic type” one
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chooses: conservative, cool, glamorous, successful, tender, intelligent, charismatic, “ snobbish”, passionate and oth.; fashion specialists are always ready to offer the audience the corresponding style.

In her (2005), Reynolds provides a broad range of “ fashion personality” types, for example: the “ classic type” preferred by women who “ want to make a good impression”, “ think long term”, and “ self-monitor”; the “ creative sparkler” type offered to bright females who “ have many different sides and like to express them all, mixing colors, moods, and textures...”; the “ nature girl” type which is for women who want to emphasize their inner world and “ prefer comfort over fashion”, etc (157-159). However, keeping in mind the fact that every individual is unique and inimitable, it is reasonable to assume that a number of such “ fashion personalities” is incredibly big. Evolution of one’s identity starts at the moment of his/her birth; some characteristics are formed under the influence of the external environment (Schwartz and Pantin 8). Thus, it is interesting to answer the following question: how do one’s dressing habits form? Craik (136) offers an interesting term “ prestigious imitation”: it reflects a young individual’s desire to “ imitate” people whom they consider to be authoritative. Small children copy the actions their parents take and “ absorb” the knowledge about what is good and what is inadmissible. Fashion also becomes an object of “ prestigious imitation”: a child understands what he/she can put on for different occasions; being provided by the external environment, this knowledge is extending. However, this may give birth to a question: does this mean that the way an individual looks is formed by the environment only, regardless of his/her personality? Kellner disproves this statement

(263) and refers to an interesting example of Madonna, a famous American singer.

Madonna's extravagant style was not created as a means of drawing attention of the audience; the singer began forming it during her young years: being pushed by the teenage "rebel spirit", the future star began experimenting with her clothes - as Madonna herself says, "Only because we knew that our parents didn't like it" (265). The abovementioned example can be evaluated from the perspective of fashion's communicative function. Craik (137) talks about social "performing" and "projection" of bodies: an individual has a desire to communicate to the society who he/she is.

Fashion "equips" one with a choice "of clothes, style, and image through which one could produce an individual identity" (Kellner 264). Thus, Madonna makes her original choice in clothes and style in order to brightly and precisely demonstrate to the society who she is and how she perceives herself. Fashion and other industries use the idea of "choice" to address customers' individual identity and increase sales. Providing different "modifications" of the same goods, brands give customers an opportunity to show who they are thus fulfill their self-"positioning".

Craik (138) offers an example of Nokia advertising: an illustration of an "unremarkable ear" presented phones for everyday users; a "delicate ear" was used to illustrate phones for mothers who take care of their children; an ear with many rings meant a phone for "cool guys" etc. Gadget, clothes and accessories brands give customers an opportunity to highlight the most important characteristics of their personality with the help of their products.

However, communicating personality is not the only function of fashion in one's life. Many people consider fashion to be a means of changing one's personality and, as a result, of changing his/her life - the term "fashion therapy" seems to quite precisely reflect this effect. For example, talking about a "vampire trend" in fashion, Brunelli says a vampire look is not the way to communicate the society that one is a "vampire within", but rather the way to become "less vampire" (172). Giving shape to the "shady" side of one's personality is a step towards defending his/her tender soul and bring more peace and harmony to it. Many fashion specialists state that changing style does bring strong positive changes into an individual's life and issue "guidelines" for those who want to improve their lives with the help of "fashion therapy". Reynolds says that every element of one's look matters: your ear-rings, hairdo, shoes or bag are able to tell more than your words do; for example, the author writes, "Now, that you've fostered the proper shoe attitude, you're breaking new ground in all areas of your life and loving it.

You're using fashion statements to say to yourself and to the world that you are a woman who values her appearance, appreciates quality, changes with the times, and possesses the all-important *je ne sais quoi*" (219). The French expression used by Reynolds denotes some enigmatic charm that is difficult to describe with words but possible to express by means of fashion and style. Thus, fashion is an effective tool that an individual may use in order to understand, formulate and demonstrate his/her individual identity, to emphasize his/her "extraordinary" nature. However, it is impossible to imagine billions of people who create their individual dressing styles based on their unique personalities; the notion of fashion trends comes to mind and

makes this idea unrealistic. How come we are all unique but prefer to buy the same t-shirts and bags regardless of what country we live in? The study of the sources devoted to fashion and identity gives an opportunity to make the following conclusion: paradoxically, people express their uniqueness through their belonging to certain moves and trends. A bright example of such contradiction is a teenager who begins to copy the style of a certain informal social group or a favorite rock-band in order to communicate the characteristics of his/her inner world to the society; this imitation gives him/her the precious sense of individuality, despite the fact of copying. This leads to the study of the connection between fashion and the collective level identity.

Collective Identity

Most individuals cannot exist separately from the society; they try to find groups of people who share their interests and life style or have similar characteristics of personality. The sense of an individual's belonging to a certain social group is what scholars call his/her collective identity (Sevanen 35). Despite people consider fashion to be a means of becoming exceptional in their own perception and that of the other people, they often follow its trends to get an opportunity to join a certain group of people through their appearance - or, at least, to get the sense of belonging to this group. People follow different fashion trends as they want to look like representatives of groups they sympathize with: celebrities, the " middle class individuals", feminists, " popular" high school classmates, members of informal social group, etc. The abovementioned case of Madonna at first seems to be an exception from the rule: the famous singer brought her unique style onto the

stage and made her fans follow it with excitement. However, the future fashion icon also found her inspiration in copying and imitation (Kellner 265): Madonna was inspired by the fresh fashion trends of the 1960s-70s that were revolutionary and provocative. Long-haired and informally dressed rock bands opposed their style to the conservative trends that dominated in the society earlier. “ By means of such fashion moves, individuals could quickly produce their own identities through resisting dominant styles in their own ways” (Kellner 265).

Even criteria that seem to not require any “ verification” through appearance, such as being a male or a female, are reflected in individuals’ looks. Male and female identities are discussed in (Crane 2000): by means of clothes, accessories and style, one demonstrates how he/she understands being a man or a woman. Nevertheless, today the manifestations of this identity criterion become more and more blurred.

Davis talks about “ androgynous symbols” in fashion: men and women “ exchange” the visible attributes of masculine and feminine identity (36). Rolley studies the style of female homosexual couples who lived between the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century; the author marks that on the one hand, the desire of a couple to feel their union, and on the other hand, the intent to demonstrate it to the society made it use the language of clothes, “ It could also, through the use of gendered dress, suggest heterosexual difference and the presence of active “ masculine” desire within the sameness of lesbianism” (34). At the same time, the gender criterion strongly interacts with the other ones, such as profession, wealth and social status; therefore, fashion mostly presents us not just a <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-fashion-a-means-of-demonstrating-belonging/>

man or a woman but rather a successful male businessman, a charming wealthy lady, a young male freelancer fond of music and philosophy, etc. It is of particular interest to discuss fashion regarding the collective identity of women, as their social status has been evolving for centuries, which has been reflected by trend changes in the female fashion world. Emancipation of women led to active “ borrowings” from the masculine style: the difference between an outfit of an early 19th century woman and a contemporary female demonstrates that a woman: 1) obtained a right to demonstrate her beauty and to choose any style she likes; 2) started living a more active life full of everyday routine and obligations; 3) is not afraid to be unique. The clothes became more revealing and at the same time more convenient.

On the other hand, the women’s liberation inspired females to revise their attitude to fashion itself: feminists criticized numerous manifestations of fashion and argued that women should not be “ enslaved by ludicrous “ beauty” standards” (cited in Hollows 140). At the same time, female fashion is able to reflect a broader range of social tendencies than the women’s emancipation itself. Being strongly interested in fashion, women present themselves in the role of consumers of fashion industry.

The opposition of the “ consumption capitalism” (Hollows 138) and the society that condemns the consumption cult (Gurova 80) is reflected in women’s style. Gurova emphasizes that in the Soviet society, simplicity and modesty in style were considered to be the main manifestations of a good taste and at the same time the sign of resistance to the “ irrational consumer behavior” (80). Soviet clothes also had a role of an indicator of one’s

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lifestyle, position in the society etc: the totalitarian spirit advanced the possibility of quick “ classifying” people based on their appearance. Thus, at the collective identity level, the communicative function of fashion performs itself in several dimensions. Firstly, an individual demonstrates to the other people his/her belonging to a social group (or, at least, his/her sympathy to it): he/she declares that he/she shares the ideas and values of this group and is proud to be a part of it. Secondly, the style of a social group communicates these ideas and values to the rest of the society.

Rebellion, aggression, peacefulness, aspiration for changes – a range of messages that can be performed by a social group’s style is very big. In some sense, collective identity can be understood as an individual identity of a social group that, analogically to a single individual, wants to demonstrate what it is and how it positions itself. Thirdly, social groups’ style is to the great extent the reflection of the processes that take place in the society. Recurring to the abovementioned example of Madonna (Kellner 266), it is impossible to omit the fact that the revolutionary fashion trends of 1960s-70s grew on the basis of significant social changes that took place throughout the World and especially in the USA. The growing popularity of anti-war ideas, “ sexual revolution”, emergence of 1960s counterculture and particularly of hippie subculture – these social trends found their incarnation in literature, arts and, undoubtedly, fashion. The image of a 1960s hippie is highly recognizable; it is saturated with symbols that tell one about the ideology of the hippie movement: long hair, bright informal clothes, the pacifist emblem communicate the ideas of returning back to nature, rejecting the “ mainstream” values of the American society, living in

harmony with the environment and the other people, avoiding aggression, feeling inner freedom and expressing one's "self" (Crain 290). Other subcultures, such as punk, hip-hop etc, also eloquently demonstrate the values of their representatives: as Crane writes, "The clothing behavior of street cultures has been compared to a "magnifying glass", making it possible to observe the fluctuations in people's attitudes and behavior that constitute the character of a particular period of time" (187).

The ideas provided above lead one to the idea about significance of historical events and social trends for evolution of fashion and one's preferences in his/her style, and therefore corroborate the reasonability of studying the role of fashion at the broader level, which is national identity.

National Identity

National identity can be presented as a specific kind of collective identity: it concerns an individual's sense of belonging to a big, historically formed group of people united by a big range of factors. Correspondingly, the characteristics of one's national identity are formed under the influence of external environment: they "take shape in some socially, culturally and historically specific context. To a great extent, they are products of various social, cultural and historical factors or determinants" (Sevanen 46). The notion of national identity is connected with those of ethnical identity and cultural identity: to the great extent they are similar when ethnicity, nationality and culture of a certain community coincide; however, in the contemporary globalized World where many countries' populations are multicultural, certain differences between these sets may exist. For the needs of this study, we use a generalized notion of national identity which <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-fashion-a-means-of-demonstrating-belonging/>

implies an individual's belonging to a big group of people historically formed on a certain territory and united by ethnicity, values, traditions, culture, social norms etc (Kirchner 3). These characteristics manifest themselves through a big range of visual means, such as visual arts, utensils, architecture etc. Fashion is also an important element of this range: national costumes of different ethnical groups are a subject of their pride and become a tradition that is passed from one generation to another.

Khan (61-74) provides an interesting example that illustrates the power and significance of national identity. In 1982, Zandra Rhodes demonstrated her collection based on the elements of the Indian national female costumes. The Indian sari was quite originally interpreted by the author, " Ripped, shredded at the edges, scattered with strategic holes, it constituted, people felt, not a design but an assault" (61). The designer did not take into account cultural significance of sari for Indian women and provoked a strong negative reaction. The key characteristic of a nation is its sense of union: people who belong to the same nation have a common history and a common culture; their task is to communicate it to the rest of the World and to their next generations. Therefore, it is not an overstatement that the function of the national identity is survival of a nation; that is why, national identity continues being expressed in fashion, despite the popularity of global style trends and growth of international fashion businesses. Not only has not globalization eliminated local spirit in fashion, but, as it has been stated above, has brought new interesting tendencies in maintenance of national identity. It is of particular interest to study contemporary Islamic identity which is to some extent a unique case and requires separate discussion.

For many centuries, the clothes of Muslim women have been communicating the image of an ideal female as it is seen by Muslim men: a wife should be tender, enigmatic and chaste. Besides, female costumes also have been reflecting women's role in family and society: a woman receives care, attention and protection from her man and is at the same time ready to listen to his opinions and decisions. Thus, the costume of an Islamic woman does not expose her body in public; her sexuality is covered with enigma, and only her man can enjoy it. Today in Islamic countries, social life remains strongly influenced by religion and traditions based on religious postulates; however, in some societies, intensive process of secularization can be noticed.

A bright example is Turkey where religious and secular ideas co-exist. Turkey is an official candidate for EU entrance; democratic parties gain authority in the country; women's rights become broader - and these tendencies inevitably incarnate in fashion: as Akpınar says, "It is possible to observe a Muslim female director of an underwear firm covering her head with a chic "turban" and wearing a fashionable Islamic-style suit while taking care of female and male models who are dressing only in underwear" (135). This case shows how Turkish females' collective and national identities interact: on the one hand, they communicate their belonging to the strengthening emancipation move; on the other hand, they emphasize their respect towards Turkish culture and traditions. A similar view is expressed in (Cjnar 2005): Islamic costume traditions assimilate with those secular and give birth to new interesting trends, such as "wearing elegant dresses and stylish headscarves in compliance with the Islamic dress code" (89). It is interesting

that, according to the author, not only does not this tendency blur the Turkish people's national identity, but strengthens it: they have an opportunity to present themselves as a stylish, contemporary nation and to demonstrate the charm of Islamic fashion.

A similar idea is offered in (Khan 62): after the "sari incident" described above, the attempts to make a sari an element of the up-to-date fashion style were taken by the local designers, and this experiment proved to be successful. Having complete understanding of what is good and what is inadmissible for the Indian society regarding wearing the national clothes, the designers offered contemporary versions of Indian looks that nevertheless reflected the "Indian spirit". Another interesting perspective is the fashion trends of Muslim diasporas existing in different countries of the World. For example, in her essay titled *To Be French*, DeGroat discusses the issue of integration of local and immigrant cultures in France: while some immigrants accept the local culture and begin calling themselves "French", big immigrant communities have been resisting to the integration, which is reflected in fashion (73-92); in this case, it is mostly spoken about Muslim immigration to France. Like in case of collective identity, national identity can be characterized by fashion in many dimensions. For example, speaking about Hofstede's (2003) famous classification of nations, it is possible to say that the criteria offered by him are communicated by the way the representatives of a nation look. Particularly, the representatives of nations with high power distance will more actively demonstrate their social status and prosperity while the low level of power distance will make fashion more democratic; collectivistic societies encourage unification while those

individualistic appreciate one's individual style and originality; for nations with orientation to the past, national costumes are of big value while those oriented to the future prefer a "globalized" style. It may seem that considering the contemporary globalization trends, national identity in fashion should gradually disappear; however, stating this is very untimely and even groundless.

Scholars who study globalization in different fields noticed that global trends meet the opposition of "localization", and offered a term "glocalization" (2007): globalization obtains its "human face" when the global trends approach different parts of the World; the global meets the local, and they enrich each other. Thus, it is possible to imagine that soon we will be able to see Arabic women in a "global look" or Karl Lagerfeld's collection devoted to a sari or a hijab.

Conclusion

The study corroborated the statement about fashion's ability to define and show who we are and what we do. At three levels of one's identity, through its communicative function, fashion demonstrates the traits of an individual's personality and his/her belonging to small and large groups of people. At the individual identity level, one shows how he/she understands him/herself and forms the other's perception of him/herself. Fashion does not just reflect one's life; it is able to bring positive changes to it.

At the collective level, people use fashion to demonstrate their belonging to various social groups. Different styles used by these groups communicate

their values and world-view. They also reflect the tendencies that take shape in the society.

The national identity level presents a kind of collective identity with a very big community united by common territory, history and culture. Nations need national identity in order to survive, and fashion serves to this function. Despite the global trends, national fashion trends do not seem to disappear, at least in the nearest future.

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