

# Fashion, gender and social identity

[Sociology](#), [Gender Studies](#)



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Abstract Garment and fashion is the subject of intense sociological, historical, anthropological and semiotic analysis in contemporary social theory. The phenomenon of fashion, the impact of which is recognized by the famous cliché: “ You are what you wear”, offers a dense, rich set of costume options and reveals multiple and unexpected ways through which fashion is part of the concrete, tangible, profound, complicated and symbolic process of forming of the modern and postmodern Self, identity, body and social relations. The development of gender identity is a social construct with garment and fashion being two factors of this configuration. Even fashion should be considered as part of the social processes of discrimination, namely the reproduction of hierarchy’s position and prestige in a deeply unequal society. The aim of this study is to detect different types of human ideas about the evolution of gender through clothing and fashion, what is “ feminine” and “ male” appearance in the evaluation of various dress styles. The research part of this paper includes the results of a Qualitative social research. The theoretical framework of feminist theory and the process of informal and conversational interview are chose in order to release the interviewees. Keywords: Fashion, Gender, Social Identity,

Feminine, Male 2 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity 1. Introduction 1. 1.

The role of dressing People, sometimes interact with objects, in this case garments, as if they are humans, sometimes because they want show to others what they believe they represent (Adelman, 2008). Direct physical contact and intimacy of the dress with the body, makes it highly visible in the construction of social identity in general and gender in particular. The materials which are worn and carried on the body are obvious and with these people create " social contacts" involved in the unstable interaction between the body and the outside world (Joyce, 2005; Turner, 1980). Dress as a form of material culture is particularly suited to express the relationship between personal values and those assigned to material goods, because of its close relationship with the perceptions of the Self. The dressing affects and reflects the perceptions of Self and has specific character as a material object, due to the direct contact with the body, acting as a filter between the individual and the surrounding social world (Crane & Bovone, 2006). The body is regarded as the tangible and visible outer limit of the self, but operates as a collective experience, to the extent that mediates between the person actions and the external environment, society, being part of the natural and social relations. The body is a symbol of society and is categorized by it and especially the female body is also a means of preserving cultural symbols (Gasouka, 2007). The traditional national costumes, in many parts of the world, are still worn mostly by women and less by men. Simultaneously the body is experienced as an individual, it is protected, it can be hidden or restricted by the garment and thus the limits of personality are constantly renegotiated, i. e. paradoxically the garment is used to blur the boundaries of the body (Fisher

& Loren, 2003). Social information is imprinted on the body, which incorporates and reiterates them through movement, which is usually ceremonial. The movement, like a physical (or 'tangible') experience impresses the cultural knowledge and beliefs of a person, constituting the tangible knowledge (Gasouka, 2007). Models at Fashion Shows always move ritually in the pretense of a social role. Costume transforms the movement of the body and regulates its use in everyday life. Garments are not fixed elements which dress an already defined or fixed body, neither forwards an already formed identity, but is a way that social identities are impressed and naturalized in the body (Butler, 1990; 1993, Bourdieu, 1984). Because during social interactions garment and body are simultaneously visible, the first is particularly strong in optical identity negotiations. The "social skin" (Turner, 1980) consisting of garments, attitudes, formation of the body and gestures, facilitates the integration into larger groups (Fisher & Loren, 2003). The dress refers to the social fabric of the similarities and the 3 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity differences in appearance (Butler, 1990; 1993). The clothes are visible, removable leather that expresses aspirations, fantasies and dreams. But never does anyone have full control of her/his appearance, as is dictated by the fashion industry, but also from other movements outside of it (Carter, 1978). The way everyone is formed through the clothes, makeup and behavior constitutes the sexual identity and social position, namely the dressed bodies constitute tools of self (Craik, 1993). The type of dress is important to the interpretation of body image and of course, has further implications in responsive attitude (DeLong, SalussoDeonier & Larntz, 1980). Garments are consumed in the functional benefits, but also as

signifiers of preferences, identity and lifestyle (Davis, 1988; Solomon, & Douglas, 1989).

1. 2. Social Restrictions on Clothing and the Relevant Reactions There are social restrictions on clothing along with legal disciplinary practices, which restrict people and increase the pressure on the participants to adapt into prevailing standards about their appearance and behavior. Dressing, because of its ability to transform the social body, has been also used for recording social identities through laws that limited the costs of clothing and marketing. Because of these regulations, tension is created giving a strange ability to clothing; to express separation or deviation from the social group, thus contributing to the creation of subgroups (Voss, 2008). Thus, clothing may become an operator of socialization, social control, and/or freedom from cultural factors. This socialization is shown by the important role played by the uniform in education, religious organizations and the military, while liberalization is shown by the plenty members of various forms in clothing of popular groups (folk groups) during the last fifty years (Crane & Bovone, 2006).

1. 3. Dressing and Values Everyone at the moment of her/his interaction with others, through clothing selects the Persona who she/he wishes to be. Namely she/he can freely choose one of multiple determinations or better, decide which favors her/his self-determination at that time (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Dressing is an important and controllable way to communicate one's values, particularly rich in emotional and psychosocial consequences. The public and instantly visible nature of dressing makes it an ideal field for the study of values surrounding this consumer good, as a link between values and clothing. The style in clothing is a combination of personal expression

and social rules. Dressing influenced by dominant values, social attitudes, socioeconomic status, life status, and some of the circumstances through which people want to assure their self-introduction. Clothing communicates symbolically the social identity, namely how a person wants and seeks to appear in society (Davis, 1985). In each case it 4 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity reflects the deep class character of contemporary society, considering the abysmal difference between the acquisition costs of branded clothing from cheap copies. Also men's clothing reflects the concentration of power and emphasizes the male prestige. 1. 4 Gender and Symbolic Language of Dressing For most people clothes usually highlight certain characteristics of the wearer, but the manner in which information is structured is not always known and the interpretation can vary. Whereas proposed by Lurie (1981) that clothing is a full visual language with a distinct vocabulary, probably it is more similar to music or poetry, where yielding clear concepts depends on the emotional mood of the person (Dodd, Clarke, Baron, & Houston, 2000). The code of that language, while it uses visual and tactile symbols of culture, it does that in a suggestive and ambiguous way, thus the resulting notions of the main elements of the code (fabric, color, shape, volume and contour) are always volatile (Davis, 1992). It would be wrong for somebody to think the dress code as the isomorphic equivalent of language. The dress code is semantically more ambiguous and indeterminate. Except in the case of uniforms, dressing usually suggests and implies much more than it optically states, thus approaching music rather than declarative speech (Davis, 1989). Anne Hollander (1995) argues that even the nudity is a form of apparel and clothing has the same dialectical

relationship with the body, like language with clear thinking. With the choice of clothing it is not expected for all the encoded rules encoded to be understood by this selection. The ambiguity of the dress code is a result of the temporary and capricious nature of fashion. On the other hand, the code is heavily influenced by the context in which it occurs, and its messages depend on people's identity, circumstances, places and even moods. Finally the code is associated to the social variance of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Namely for the same signifier, what is signified, or what it implies are obviously different for different social groups and/or cultures, and therefore it is hard to perceive it. Also different values are associated with the dress code at different periods. For example, long hair of male Hippies or beatniks symbolized freedom and liberation from gender (for the first), but their more conventional contemporaries, interpreted it as a perversion of gender rules and an effort to cover up for laziness (Dodd, Clarke, Baron, & Houston, 2000). Dressing is considered a visual text type, similar to pictures and advertisements. Clothing of young people subgroups, different cultures, primitive races and gay communities, helps to understand how the values of specific social identities are expressed (Crane & Bovone, 2006). However, emphasizing on code visualization is dangerous. On one hand it 5 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity focuses on facilitating social contact. On the other hand the semantics of appearance must be comprehensible to the observer and accurately reflect the identity and status of the wearer. The imaging techniques are a cryptography of his/hers moral values. Women risk being blamed for their clothing (Craik, 1993). If the property of clothing to shape the surface of the body is “ read”

erroneously as anything transient or superficial, then understanding it as a “social skin” is lost. West - European materialist traditions tend to detect identities of race or gender within the naturalistic context of the normal body, causing the dress to be morally evaluated, depending on the accuracy it interprets the truth of the material body. Garments overturning or concealing the reality of the body are considered to falsely describing an underlying (objective) material truth through the intentional distortion of superficial appearance (Stryker, 2006).

## 2. Qualitative Research Method

### 2. 1. Participants

The number of the research participants was eight, four women and four men. The effort was focused on equally representing both sexes and therefore there are four female and four male, as well as all age groups which was achieved through four young adults (25 to 30 years), two middle-aged (approximately 40 years) and two older participants (50 to 60 years). Due to the nature of the research’s subject, garment and fashion, it was deemed necessary to also interview fashion professionals. Indeed, the two middle aged participants are experienced fashion designers representing both sexes. Finally two of the younger people, a man and a woman, several times, dress with extreme and/or gothic elements although they do not adopt specific styles completely and were selected in order to represent the view of groups with special dressing culture. The interviews took place during January 2011 in Athens and in a place indicated by the participants, which was accepted by us, in order for them to feel as comfortable as possible and to be able to express themselves freely. The duration of each interview varied from 10 to 25 minutes. The official purpose of the interview was explained to all participants and the interview was recorded with their



consent in a digital medium. 2. 2. Materials and Procedure The type of informal and conversational interview was preferred because of the flexibility it provides and its adjustability to the circumstances, depending on the participant's 6 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity interests and preferences which were expressed by each of them. In addition several clarification questions were used in a few interviews since it was imposed by the progression. A set of 19 photographs was presented to the participants (Appendix). They were invited to express except from their personal feelings, like or dislike, and how they estimate the femininity or masculinity, which is emitted by each person shown in the photos, according to his/her "appearance" and dressing. The photos were picked out from professional fashion photography for magazines or television programs and with the criterion of emitting as a wide as possible range of masculinity or femininity of the photographed person. Therefore, the styles selected ranged from strictly classical sets to "weird" styles, photographs were reversing the traditional clothing of gender, males with female or unisex clothes and men with traditional men's suits or unisex, as well as couples with the same style of clothing (tracksuit, jean, etc.). From the stylistic aspect of the photos, a participant from the professional area of fashion marked "Stylistically . . . amazing . . . nicely selected, that, which a designer would propose". 2. 3. Results Participants were requested to comment on the level of femininity/masculinity of the individuals depicted in the nineteen photographs and to express whether they like it or not. One participant, the Female Fashion Designer, refused to comment, saying: "The aura [of people] cannot be caught on a photograph . . . it is something living. It has to

do with energy . . . which doesn't show here. It is a staged photo shoot, so you have to play the designer assigns to you . . . which here is something fake. It is like the roles we ask our models, as designers, to play, [saying] that my vision . . . is that. I cannot answer your question because it's all fake . . . I can see what [the designer] suggested [to the model] to do . . . what the stylist has asked [from the model]. It is a fact that models have to be very good actors. Fashion is something that requires you to play a different role". (Female Fashion Designer, 40 years old) Namely at this point she denies that garment has a crucial role in the creation of social and gender identity which contradicts intensely with the immediately following reply to the question; if a woman can adopt a male role and pull out masculinity wearing a set of male clothes: " Of course, she can do it, but if it is facilitated by makeup and hair styling" (Female Fashion Designer, 40 years old) But the research requested from the participants to precisely identify this role and comment on the extent each person in the photographs, woman or man, accomplishes to 7 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity support the assigned role. The main finding is that everybody, in some images, has failed to identify the correct biological sex of the models (and they were not transvestites), carried away by the clothing, which shows the powerful role of clothing in the construction of the appearance of a person as woman or man. For the 1st picture of the man with the English dandy suit, the three men have described it as masculine, while the fourth: " It does not give out masculinity [because] it is very dressy" (Male, Teacher, 50 years old). All three women said that it emits masculinity, especially one said: " Large extent of masculinity, I would love to see it on a man" (Female

Private Employee, 31 years old). Dressing is a handmade artifact which is close to anyone and for this reason it is strongly associated with the concept of the body. The body is significant due to the direct relationship with the anatomy, the sex and because with it each person presents itself to the world. With this intervention, dressing is the main element of a manufactured picture which indicates where people belong (Suthrell, 2004). For 2nd and 3rd picture, the one with the man wearing a sweater and a white jean's trouser and the next with the man in a long coat, all men suggested that these two pictures emit femininity, indeed one of them wondered about the 2nd picture: " Is he a man, huh? . . . he does not emit neither masculinity nor prestige" (Male, Engineer, 25 years old). Also, the three women suggested that the models emit femininity and all of them identified the handbag as the evidence that affected them in their judgments. We can therefore understand that almost all of men and women perceive men to be feminine by wearing or carrying only one or two " female" clothes or accessories (sweater and bag). The construction of identity and its consciousness is made in environments that restrict available categories of identity and we fear that maybe in our research we restricted the available options of designations, even though participants could express any characterization they desired. In order to trouble someone over gender identity, there is a necessity to find ways in which people perceive and understand these identities and means by which the social categories are constructed. Dressing is a tool for this exploration and fashion is the most direct way for the defense or subversion of the constant gap between the female male identity. For the 4th and 5th image all men reported they liked

the clothe's style and that: " They do not present feminine characteristics" (Male, Engineer, 25 years old). 8 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity " They are contemporary masculine looks" (Male, Sculptor, 30 years old). and one of them commented on the 4th picture: " Neither femininity nor masculinity, [only] freedom" (Male, Teacher, 50 years old). while accepting the style of the 5th picture. Women generally accepted these two styles and declared that they liked them, but their opinions differed in terms of the styles expressing masculinity or femininity: ""[For the 4th image] I get just masculinity. [For the 5th image] Is he a man? Or woman? The one with the black gives off intense masculinity and the other one strong femininity" (Female, Engineer, 24 years old). " The man is masculine [about 4th picture but] the same clothes could be worn also by women . . . can be worn by both sexes. The masculinity of the person on the left [5th picture] is much greater than the person on the right and I think this is due to the face and hairstyle and not of the clothes" (Female Private Employee, 31 years old). " It sends out neutrality [4th picture] neither masculinity nor femininity, while on the 5th picture, the style of clothes brings out masculinity but not in an absolute way. But that is how all children dress . . . today. Sometimes I think that one is wearing the clothes of the other . . . boys have begun wearing girl's clothes . . . now you can see a boy in a pink sweater with flowers and it would not seem weird. In the past . . . these was purely female clothing" (Female, Education Consultant, 59 years old). In the group of the 12th, 13th and 14th photographs, pairs of women and men are wearing identical clothes; the unisex style. Here there is also an agreement by all the participants that each model supports well her/his role and women emit

femininity while men masculinity. But several participants emphasized that the woman in the 14th photo also sends out elements of masculinity due to the male suit. It seems that the androgynous to unisex to somewhat neutral styles, are considered acceptable by anyone, women and men, and that it does not subtract masculinity from the men of the two pictures according to their judgment. This perception of uniformity, supposed gender anonymity, which is provided by the androgynous and unisex styles, eventually intends to focus on the differences between the two sexes (Cox & Dittmar, 1995). The everchanging culture of young people constantly imposes the need to transgress the rules, so each challenge to masculinity leads to the reversal and eventually the blurry discrimination between the two sexes that will never be able to be clarified again in the future (Craik, 1993). Pertaining to the 6th image, two of female and two of the male participants did not recognize that the model is a man with long hair (in three different poses), wearing three different Scottish outfits: 9 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity

“ This is my favorite look for a rock band, it does not send out femininity” (Male Fashion Designer, 41 years old). “ The three young women . . . wear Scottish skirts . . . it does not emit feminity. I would not like to see it on a woman” (Male, Engineer, 25 years old). “ We go towards the females looks. Ah! No! He is a man. Relatively masculine style” (Male, Sculptor, 30 years old). “ I like it very much, it does not send out feminity, but a comfortable female presence . . . especially freedom” (Male, Teacher, 50 years old). “ It sends out something weird . . . pretty strange. . . the whole set is repulsive” (Female, Education Consultant, 59 years old). “ They are members of a rock band . . . I admit that I cannot distinguish the sex of each member. [They

give out] masculinity, and if there is a certain woman among them she does not show any femininity" (Female Private Employee, 31 years old). "Woman, huh? . . . kind of a tomboy. She shows both elements. . . But she emits more femininity" (Female, Engineer, 24 years old). We can see that the male in the picture manages to confuse and create controversial opinions about his gender, as well as intense feelings of like and dislike while wearing only a kilt and having long hair, which may indicate that the skirt which is strongly considered as a feminine outfit, has a substantial influence in people's opinions. The designation of fashion as a contradiction means that it can give birth to images of fear or pleasure / admiration. The diversity of people of the same sex has great power because of the controversial emotions of desire - pleasure and anxiety that it causes. The essence of this contradicting identity is firmly engraved and symbolically encoded in the attitudes of people who know only certain types of identity from which they choose one for themselves. Because those types of identities signify their meaning from culture, they provide designers with an inexhaustible source of ideas and information on how to manipulate the visual and tactile symbols with which one obtains the opportunity to process images of him/her (Craik, 1993). In the 7th picture, all participants, women and men, agree that the two young men emit a strong feminine characteristic. All the participants express a strong dislike, which may indicate that the strong and visible contrast between biological sex and the emitted message for gender identity repels people. The bony male models which are used by several major fashion houses (like Gucci and Dolce & Gabanna) cause doubts about their masculinity (Craik, 1993). The models in the 8th picture managed to confuse

the participants where the three women and the two men believed that the man in the middle of the photo is a woman. The 10 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity remaining participants had doubts about his gender. This was perhaps because the model had very thin legs, while the two female models have had their hair glued back in a slick look and the clothes were all similar in total black. It is remarkable that one of participants who did not recognize the male model is a professional fashion designer and said that “she” does not lose “her” femininity with: “the very functional and current outfit and very fashionable, in respect to a woman . . . who goes to work” (Male Fashion Designer, 41 years old). Another participant said: “He must be a man and it is tragic . . . unacceptable” (Male, Engineer, 25 years old). In this case the man wearing the same clothes with women, but also the same hair styles of the three, managed to show a man sending out a pure feminine identity. Both sexes play, changing the existing rules of the game, because it is the first time that a man embraces the dressing habits of women whereas the reverse always happened. Designs and appearance of men's clothing have become more dramatic during recent years, creating ambiguity in the lines that in turn creates uncertainty, because the identity of gender cannot be understood in a simple and clear manner (Hollander, 1995). For the young man's style in the 9th picture there is also unanimity about not liking it. His style is cheesy and this repels the participants. It is ridiculous, foreign on him and it does not emit neither masculinity nor femininity. He is a man with purely female clothing; it is unacceptable, although three of participants reported some femininity. The same responses were given also for the 7th image. In the couples of the 10th and 11th

images, where there is a reversal of gender roles, again almost all participants weren't able to identify that one of the two models is a man. Once again, clothes make the man or the woman. For the couple of hippies in the 10th picture, almost all participants indicated that the two models transmitted femininity and specifically the one on the right (a man dressed like a woman) does so in a stronger manner. This is a perfect disguise; the model supports the role very consciously. The answers of the participants show that it does not disturb anyone since they do not realize the disguise. Dressing gives the model (him) a completely feminine identity. Finally, in the last group of photos (from 15 to 19) female models wearing clothes ranging from the traditional male suit to female costume to unsex clothes were shown. All the participants agreed that the women models emit femininity (although in a few cases they mentioned a neutral effect) and in many images they expressed intense pleasure and admiration. These findings indicate that both men and women do not react with disappointment when a woman wears clearly male clothes or has male elements on her 11 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity clothes, which this is now acceptable and no one finds that it removes her femininity. The motivations located behind the choices of clothing, such as the efficient performance of a role or the achievement of professional goals, can also affect whether it will affect people (Arnold, 2001). The line between accepting or not the rule of dressing remains thin, almost elusive.

### 3. Discussion

Fashion and clothing since they combine symbolic, social, political, and aesthetic elements, complicate the readings about how they can be considered as a basic space of the symbolic efforts on the construction of identities and the creation of gender, race and



categories. The phrase itself “is in fashion” refers to the rapidly changing configurations of meaning and style that characterize the innovations in clothing (Barnard, 1996). With the clear division of items of clothing in both sexes this indicates the social construction of difference in gender identities that transcends the biological sex. Fashion, as a product of culture, with its myriad of forms, reflects the predictions and concerns of society. Inherently contradicting and ambiguous, fashion manages to transpose the multiple concepts that are frequently implied by the entire body of the wearer. This inconsistency springs from our concern for the representation of our body. Fashion is ambiguous because of the uncertainties of responses caused by the garment as it may lead to confrontations. Fashion can present the hidden desires and fears of the wearer, with the dark color and severe lines of the classic costume. Fashion, with its provocation can raise concerns among viewers due to the ambiguity of messages such as the extreme forms of sub cultural, street costume movements, or provoke the perceptions and taboos, such as when a man is wearing a woman's skirt. Also, the dressing can protect the wearer from the outsiders of her/his group or class which are usually unable to understand the composite meanings that cover her/his entire body, like the encoded dressing in the various categories of homosexuals. The liquidity of fashion symbolizes the transitivity of culture, the phases of which must be captured and displayed thus allowing the fluidity of the definitions of gender identity and sexuality as well as of any other identity. During the last 30 years, due to rapid changes in cultural values, we observe that this process is intensified. Clothing illustrates the unconscious and conscious perceptions of

morality, the ideology of the fashion designer and that of the wearer's and hence the culture itself. Fashion is socially superficial but it is not sociologically insignificant. Fashion has great influence, as evidenced by the responses of participants and severely affects the social structure through the formation of different identities, including the gender. Fashion is capable of much bigger surprises, for glances towards the past and searches to the future.

12 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity Fashion does not only deal with the production of sophisticated images intended to smooth the physical reality of the body facing the cruelty of our culture. Now, fashion and dressing contain references to the dissolution and death, the uncertainty and the paradox by highlighting the insignificance of existence.

13 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity Appendix Table of images 1th 2nd 3rd 4th 5th 6th 7th 14 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity 8th 9th 10th 11th 12th 13th 15 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity 14<sup>th</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> 16 Fashion, Gender and Social Identity References

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