

Do our Feelings Leak Through the Clothes we Wear?

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Abstract

There is a substantial body of literature that suggests that clothing and more particularly fashion is a form of communication. It communicates how we want to be seen by others as well as how we see ourselves. But does it communicate how we feel? This paper draws a link between symbolic and emotional communication by suggesting that fashion changes our internal feelings and that many of these emotions are expressed to others through symbols such as the clothes we wear. A conceptual framework is presented explaining the effects of clothing on an individual consumer. This framework classifies the fashion effect into internally and externally communicated meanings. Knowledge of how fashion is used as a form of emotional expression is particularly important for those fashion retailers who display the clothing they sell to engender positive feelings that may then lead to purchase behaviour.

Introduction

Clothing and more particularly fashion acts as a major symbolic system that communicates meanings about our identity and social relationships (Coskuner and Sandikci 2004). It communicates not only how we want to be seen by others but also how we see ourselves (McCracken and Roth 1989). While much of the fashion literature explains how clothing acts as a symbolic non-verbal form of communication little cognisance is given to the expressive role of the emotions we feel when wearing these clothes. However we do wear fashion to make us feel good. This paper takes this notion one step further by suggesting that these feelings may be understood by others. The fashion designer Pierre Cardin expresses succinctly the notion of fashion being a symbolic expression of how we feel: "Fashion is a symbol of human emotion in each situation; it is also a symbol of modern life and developing society" (Cardin 2005). If this is true then fashion as 'a symbol of human emotion' implies that others must understand the symbolic meanings held within the clothing. For example one may wear a smart business suit into a meeting to show feelings of optimism and confidence. Likewise a sexy dress may express the wearer's feelings of passion, love or even excitement. This paper therefore seeks to address this gap in the literature by proposing a comprehensive model of the role of fashion on how we communicate to ourselves and others.

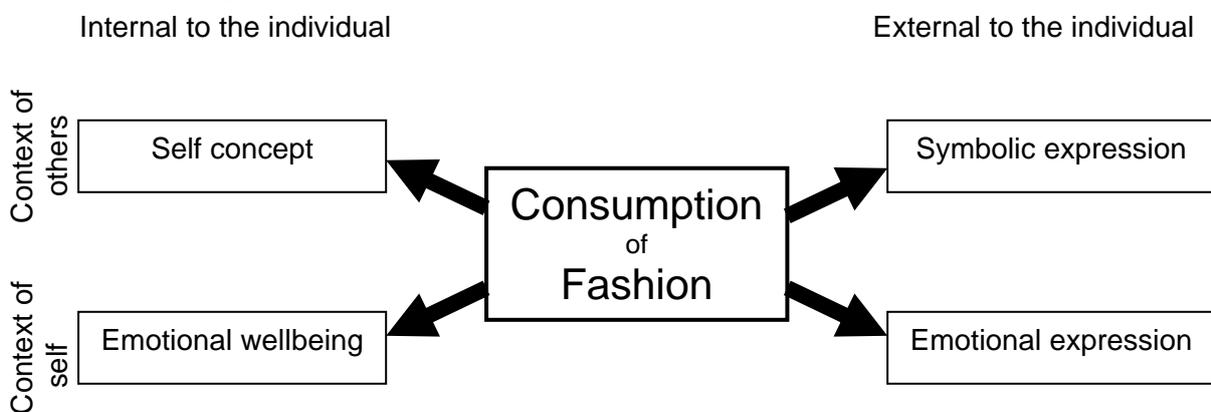
Not only do we dress in symbols and language that communicate with others, we dress for ourselves depending on our existing or desired emotional state. Moreover the clothes we wear engender emotions within ourselves, yet are also symbolic items that are capable of reflecting affective states. Fashion trends are therefore a representation of changes in consumer's emotions (Cho & Lee 2005). Emotional expression is also considered a form of communication as it engenders a change in the feelings in others. This may be through emotional contagion as in being empathetic to the feelings of others (Hatfield Cacioppo and Rapon, 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul and Gremler, 2006) or through emotional counter-contagion by rejecting or disengaging because of the emotions of others (Tombs, 2005). To date the symbolic and emotional forms of communication through fashion have not been integrated. Yet it follows that if we have an emotional attachment to the clothes we

wear then some of this emotion must leak out in the form of emotional expression just as personal symbolic attachment to clothes is also communicated to others.

Fashion’s Impact on the Consumer

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework of how fashion impacts on the customer. It shows that purchasing and consuming fashion has four distinct outcomes that can be classified into those factors which affect the consumer internally (self concept and emotional wellbeing) and those factors which express to others either consciously or subconsciously something about the consumer (symbolic expression and emotional expression). This framework makes the assumption that consumers of fashion do so for the garments symbolic and emotional properties much as its functional properties (Elliot, 1999); hence no factors are included relating to the functional aspects of clothing such as keeping warm, cool or safe.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of fashion effects



Each of these factors is influenced by the consumption of fashion and used in some way more than just wearing clothing as protection. In the context of fashion *self concept* is reinforced by the clothes we wear and the acceptance or otherwise of others around us (Cosbey, 2001; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Here fashion becomes more than just a mask to project our desired image. What we wear is much more personal and is influenced by the personal meanings, context-specific reference points, life goals and self-conceptions that we hold as important to us (Thompson and Haytko 1997). *Emotional wellbeing* occurs when people dress to either change existing mood or dress because of their existing mood (Colls, 2004). People consume fashion to fulfill emotional needs. As emotions can be thought of as “self-reflective, involving active participation, identification and management on the part of the individual” (Lupton 1998, p16) then the consumption of clothing should be considered as a means by which emotional needs are experienced. *Symbolic expression* comes when individuals dress to signify something about themselves to others (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). This may be a reflection of their own self concept or to portray his or her desired self to others (McCracken and Roth, 2001; Roach-Higgins and Eichter, 1992). However, McCracken and Roth (2001) suggest that as clothing resembles a language the addressor and addressee must share the knowledge of the same ‘code’ the clothing carries in order for this symbolic expression to occur. The same could be said about emotional expression. *Emotional expression* occurs both consciously through overt symbols, such as wearing a sexy dress or business suit, and subconsciously through emotional leakage from the emotional wellbeing of wearing particular garments. Although the constructs relating to self concept

and symbolic expression have been well developed in the extant literature little research has been carried out on the construct of emotional wellbeing through fashion. Surprisingly, even less research has been undertaken on the emotional expression of fashion despite the importance of creating desire when marketing and selling such objects as fashion items.

Fashion and Communication

If fashion is a form of communication then it must say something to another person in order to effect some change in that other person (Barnard, 1996). We may dress like others around us to signal we belong to that particular part of society and so generate some acceptance from those who dress the same (Roach-Higgins & Eichter, 1992). People wear business suits and not jeans and a tee-shirt for important meetings. People sports apparel to a sports event to signify allegiance to a particular team. Likewise the same people may wear leather jackets to fit in with fellow bikers. Therefore fashion is the outward symbol of conforming to their society. For example the photo on the right in figure 1 shows a woman whose business suit immediately signals professionalism and identifies her with a particular context. Individuals change clothing dependent on the context or situation they may want to be part of. Conversely we may dress to tell others we are different from them and so they should respond accordingly. This may be communicating some form authority such as a police uniform and so this uniform signals to others they have power and maintain the guidelines for the behaviour of others. This symbolic display through the clothes the police wear also evokes emotions in others. These feelings such as trust, confidence, safety or wellbeing may be aligned with the intended purpose of the clothing or they may evoke some misalignment and produce feelings of fear and mistrust. This emotional communication goes beyond authoritarian clothing and can be found where two societies come in contact with each other. The two photos below are a good example of “communicating the mood of a design” (Metzger 2006, p283). The photo on the right shows conservative business attire. The clothing is part of a corporate wardrobe designed to communicate professionalism and reflect feelings of confidence and trust in this person. The photo on the left shows two women of similar age and ethnicity to the one in the right-hand photo yet because of their outward appearance they communicate something completely different to the observer. Because of the brightly coloured hair and avant-garde clothing they are portraying themselves as having the freedom to do what they want and not being constrained by any corporate or societal norms. The clothing becomes a tool for expressing rebellion, disregard and even disgust at convention. Therefore the emotions expressed by the wearers of these clothes act to reveal the emotions that can be felt by those “in” or “out” of the two particular societies.



Fashion and Emotion

Not only is fashion used as a form of communication through the symbols and meanings held within our worldview and our place in society, it also influences the wearer internally through cognitive and emotional processes. Internal processing of the symbols and meanings of clothing may reinforce self-identity. For example when one wears national dress (Crane, Hamilton and Wilson 2004) or sporting apparel (Wann, Royalty and Roberts, 2000) they use this clothing to create a sense of belonging or a means of self completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). These internal processes affect the way we dress and the type of clothes we wear. They are likely to be influenced by the situation as well as the individual's personality, attitudes and emotions (Goldsmith 2000). Coskuner and Sandikci (2004 p287) found that the purchase and consumption of fashion was linked to feelings of power and status. They give the example of "attending socially or professionally important meetings, it becomes almost embarrassing to show up in clothes that were worn before. Not only do people wear new clothes to impress other people, they also judge others by the clothes they wear in those occasions." From this example it appears that the clothes we wear affect us positively (through the confidence and status associated with new clothes), or negatively (through embarrassment of not portraying the expected image). Confidence and embarrassment are just as likely to be associated with an affective state brought on by the clothes we wear than just knowing we are inappropriately dressed.

Why this is Important for Retailers

Understanding how fashion communicates to others is important to retailers for three reasons. First the type of garments and the way they are displayed becomes a central part of the store's image. Even before a customer enters the store they notice and are influenced by displays of merchandise in store windows. Only if this portrayed image of the store, and the images portrayed by the merchandise is consistent with the customers self image does the store have a chance of the customer entering the store. Therefore, retail store image through the merchandise on offer is an important determinant of store patronage and even store success (Amirani and Gates, 1993; Newman and Patel, 2004). Customers understand that this merchandise, in the form of fashion garments, will continue to communicate the same symbols and meanings to others after the clothing has been purchased. Therefore, it is

important for the fashion retailer to display items in such a way as to represent the context for which the clothing is to be worn and to use colours to increase the positive emotional state of the customer. In atmospherics research liking for the store and colour in particular have been shown to induce positive emotions in the customer and increase their likelihood of purchase (Bellizzi and Hite 1992). Below are photos of store windows showing the difference between evoking positive and negative emotions in potential customers based on colour and vibrancy of the display. The store on the left displays bright vibrant colours both in the clothes and the bright red backdrops. The impression is that of fun and playfulness compared with the somber dark browns and blacks of the right. In the photo on the right projects an image of winter, grey days and depressing weather only lifted by the large poster in the middle.



Second, if the store image and the customer's self-image are consistent the customer is more likely to imagine themselves purchasing and wearing the clothing on display. Therefore the inherent emotions evoked in the customer by seeing those clothes may be the emotions the customer actually imagines they would feel if they were actually wearing them. In the customer's mind they are able to project themselves forward to an exciting or enjoyable situation in which they would wear these clothes. For example the customer might imagine themselves feeling sexy in a particular dress at a party, or confident and proud in a new business suit at a board meeting, or even feeling happy and optimistic when wearing bright summery clothing when on holiday.

Third, just as this displayed clothing communicates something about the potential self image and emotions they would experience should they be purchased and worn, they may also be seen as signaling to others that these people are feeling sexy, confident, proud, happy or optimistic. Therefore the occasion and the other people the customer is likely to meet will influence what and how these fashion garments are worn in order to convey something about how the customer feels.

Suggestions for Future Research

Given that store image plays such an important part in the success of the retailer and that fashion communicates both on a cognitive and emotional level it is surprising that so little empirical research has been conducted by marketing researchers. While there is a considerable body of research on the symbolic meanings that fashion portrays there is little research conducted on the emotional effects of fashion on the individual consumer and even less on how fashion can communicate these emotions felt by those who are wearing such garments. Clearly a great deal of research still needs to be carried out in order to understand the linkage between emotions and the purchase and consumption of fashion.

Future research should start by examining this linkage from both the consumer's and designer's perspective. The consumer's perspective should give insights into the emotional drivers and motivations for purchasing and consuming fashion. In other words why are people prepared to pay such a premium for fashion items when clearly a more functional garment could be bought for a fraction of the price? Conversely if fashion is designed to evoke emotions then it would be important to understand how designers are able to create an emotion evoking style into an arrangement of fabric and materials. How do people know how to design emotions into such an inanimate objects as clothing.

If, as proposed in this paper, emotions do play a major role in the purchase and consumption of fashion then we need to know what other factors are likely to enhance the emotions sufficiently to encourage more frequent purchases of clothing. Future research should look at consumption situations and the compatibility with the self image that is enhanced by wearing these garments. Does the presence of others (purchase pals or the mere presence of others) influence these emotions either when shopping for or consuming fashion? Banister and Hogg (2004) showed that for young adults their approach to self image and consumption changed considerably over their lifespan. It would therefore be interesting to see whether self-confidence and the feelings associated with this also changed with regards to the purchase and consumption of fashion.

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