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## Subject Area - Fashion

### For Individuals who work in the fashion industry, it is a profession in itself as well as a personal interest.

#### Topic

The importance of fashion in our daily lives is a given. For individuals who work in the fashion industry, it is a profession in itself as well as a personal interest. For those outside the industry, fashion still plays a very important role. However, many people do not realize that fashion is also a valuable tool for analyzing culture and for assessing the values of that culture. Our fashion choices tell people who we are and what our standing is in society; in addition, our choices have an impact on our ability to succeed - or to fail - in certain areas of our lives. The topic of research for this proposal is an analysis of the ways in which clothing functions as a reflection of our culture, as well as a tool that can enhance or hinder our success in life.

#### Rationale

People have been using clothing and accessories for centuries. In fact, as O'Neil has pointed out, clothing and accessories are not the only items used to decorate the body. Across the globe, the ways in which people present themselves vary widely. Items commonly used range from body and hair paint to decorative scarring, and from perfume to body deformation (O'Neil 2005: n.p.). Clothing is primarily worn, of course, for practical reasons, such as protection from the weather and outdoor elements. It is also worn to cover certain parts of the body, either out of modesty or cultural restrictions. The parts of the body that are covered may be different, depending upon the culture and location. Clothing may also be used as a sort of talisman to ward off evil, or a type of supernatural protection. In Christian populations, wearing a medal of St. Christopher is thought to protect the wearer from evil (O'Neil 2005: n.p.). In a similar vein, carrying a rabbit's foot or some other item associated with luck is a way of using supernatural assistance.

However, clothing is worn for more than the reasons stated above. O'Neil asserts that 'long before we are physically near enough to talk to people, their appearance announces their gender, age, economic class, and often even intentions' (2005: n.p.). Fashion is also a medium by which people communicate messages about gender, occupation, class, and wealth. This is something we learn to recognize when we are very young. We also come to recognize what O'Neil refers to as a 'vocabulary of dress'. In other words, in addition to the actual items of clothing we wear, there are other features that we have come to accept as part of 'dress'. Among these are hairstyles, makeup, and accessories such as jewelry. Additionally, body decoration such as tattoos and piercings have come to be considered part of the contemporary vocabulary of dress. According to Joanne Entwistle, 'in contemporary culture, the body has become the site of identity. We experience our bodies as separate from others and increasingly we identify with our bodies as containers of our identities and places of personal expression' (2000: 138).

An important aspect of fashion is its relationship to society at large. In recent years, this has become considerably more complex. The way we dress says a great deal more about us than many people realize. What we wear presents a statement to the world. It is another way of revealing certain information about ourselves to others: without saying a word, we give out clues about our social background, our economic status, and our images of ourselves. As Entwistle has suggested,

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'dress is tied up to social life in more than one way: it is produced out of economic, political, technological conditions as well as shaped by social., cultural, aesthetic ideas' (2000: 111).

The significance of clothing goes beyond what we wear. A pair of blue jeans is not just a pair of blue jeans. The brand is often just as - or more - important as the article of clothing. Brand recognition is a crucial factor in the world of fashion, especially for younger generations. Faedda asserts that 'for young people jeans have become a tool of social and political protest, of adherence and membership, symbol and emblem; for stylists jeans have become a trendy casual product, a refined prêt à porter article or quite a high fashion creation' (Faedda 2005:4).

Not only is clothing a key to who we are - it also plays a role in how far we can travel in certain circles. It has been said that 'the right clothing can grant us access to the right places and the right people' (Jones 2002: 21). Some scholars theorize that what we wear affects how we act, as well as how others react to us. According to O'Neil, 'putting on certain types of clothing can change your behavior and the behavior of others towards you' (2005:n.p.). He uses the example of uniforms, explaining that the message conveyed simply by wearing the clothing associated with a particular profession is both immediate and strong. One specific example O'Neil mentions is that of a study of Spanish policemen. Without their uniforms, they were seen as having little or no effect on people, even though they were in fact identified as policemen. With their uniforms on, however, they acted in a much more aggressive manner. In addition, the people who saw them in uniform were much more responsive to directions.

O'Neil also explains that uniforms are designed to elicit this kind of response: 'Most uniforms are consciously symbolic so that they can rapidly and conclusively communicate status...The ribbons and other insignias on the U.S. sailor's uniform can tell even a stranger about his status, authority, and military experience (2005: n.p.). And it is important to note that uniforms can include things beyond clothing, such as specific hairstyles that are commonly associated with certain groups of individuals. The 'uniform' hairstyle of 'punks' is one example of this. It is assumed by the wearers that the public will recognize these markers and make the connection to a certain group: 'it is necessary to know what these culturally defined symbols mean in the context that they are used in order to understand what is being communicated' (O'Neil 2005: n.p.). According to Faedda, the uniform as we know it has become a 'transgressive symbol' that is associated with 'the so-called "subcultures" or "antifashions", political and social movements, music, mass protests and juvenile cultural phenomena generally' (Faedda 2005: 4).

In addition to its many other uses, dress is also used as a form of camouflage. According to Faedda, 'dress covers, frames, hides and masks the body. In this sense it works to distinguish and, in the same time, to link oneself to the others: dress is our "filter" with the world' (2005: 4). This assertion that dress is often used to hide or mask the body suggests that there is something unpleasant, undesirable, or even shameful about the body. This in turn brings up a number of issues about clothing and about that which it disguises. According to some scholars, the role of the body has been evolving: 'in the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity' (Shilling 1993: 5).

The concept of the body as a 'project' suggests a dissociation of the self from the body This point is echoed by Entwistle, who asserts that 'fashion, dress and consumption provide ways of dealing with the problems of the modern world, characterized by increasing fragmentation and a sense of chaos. Fashion opens up possibilities for framing the self, however temporarily' (2000: 139). In this sense, fashion takes on seemingly therapeutic aspects: in response to an

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increasingly complex and chaotic world, the one thing we may feel we can control is our sense of self. Since that self is often expressed through fashion statements, the role of fashion takes on additional significance. As Gilman has commented, 'in a world in which we are judged by how we appear, the belief that we can change our appearance is liberating' (1999: 3). In fact, as Gilman elaborates,

To become someone else or to become a better version of ourselves in the eyes of the world is something we all want. Whether we do it with ornaments such as jewelry or through the wide range of physical alterations from hair dressing to tattoos to body piercing, we respond to the demand of seeing and being seen. (Gilman 1999: 3)

### Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of undertaking this research is to explore the intricate and complex messages that are revealed by the types of dress we choose. Our fashion choices say a great deal about us as individuals; on a broader level, fashion trends reflect important aspects of any given culture during a certain time frame. Questions that are driving the design of the project include:

What does fashion indicate about the wearer?  
How does fashion reflect the values and beliefs of different cultures?  
What is the significance of fashion trends?

By combining information from scholarly research, articles from contemporary fashion magazines, and data from internet sources, the final project will seek to answer the questions above and draw relevant conclusions about the complex relationship between fashion and identity.

### Proposed Methodology

Proposed methodology for this project will consist of a combination of quantitative and qualitative sources. A variety of print sources will be used, including books, scholarly journals, fashion magazines, and newspaper articles. Internet resources will also be an integral part of the research process. Current statistical information as well as the latest information on industry trends is more readily available on the internet. This makes the internet a valuable resource when studying an industry that is characterized by rapid change.

Additional methodology in the form of questionnaire administration is also proposed as part of this research project. Specifically, a questionnaire would be designed in order to collect data regarding key points that are speculated upon in the research. This questionnaire will be formulated to elicit a range of attitudes based on a series of multiple-choice questions. Although the target audience will be limited by time and resource constraints, participants will be selected at random. In this way, the data collected will reflect society at large.

Questionnaire administration will be executed through email and through direct contact with the public. Data collected from questionnaires will be organized and interpreted in terms of stratified clusters, in keeping with the original project format, and will be analyzed, and presented in conjunction with other findings. If discrepancies are discovered between the anticipated and actual results, possible explanations will be formulated and included in the analysis.

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As for modes of research: as indicated above, information will come from a variety of sources. This will include scholarly research, articles from contemporary fashion magazines, and data from internet sources. Information about research sources will be listed at the end of the paper in a reference list.

The reference list will consist of two parts. The first part of the reference list will include sources that are quoted or otherwise directly used in the body of the paper. The second part of the list will include sources that were consulted but which do not appear in the body of the paper. If a questionnaire is used, a copy will be included in a supplementary appendix, along with all additional relevant information that is not included in the body of the paper.

### Content

The content of the research will be organized in chapters and will include sub-headings within each chapter. A Table of Contents will be included to indicate the chapter divisions, Reference List, and Appendices (if used).

### References and Bibliography

All research sources will be listed at the end of the paper in a reference list. Sources that are quoted or otherwise directly used in the body of the paper will be indicated as part of the primary reference list. Sources that were consulted but which do not appear in the body of the paper will be included in a supplement to the primary reference list. Appendices, if found to be helpful, will also be included at the end of the paper.

### Critical Path

A proposed timetable will be formulated upon approval of topic, and will consist of goals and completion dates for each portion of the project. The timetable will be arranged to allow for research, data collection and interpretation, and writing of the paper itself. Time will be allotted for initial and final drafts, as well as proofreading and final revisions before submission.

### Reflective Statement

The complexity of the fashion industry lends itself to a broad choice of career trajectories. This research project will further elucidate the options available. One of the options that has a great deal of appeal is working as a Fashion Consultant, since preliminary research for this project indicates that this is a challenging and rapidly expanding profession in the industry. In addition, opportunities for further research on a more advanced level will be explored.

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