

Women and the change in their social identities in the 19th Century

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Introduction

People choose particular clothes to show others what they believe in and what they would like to represent. The direct physical interaction of the clothes with body creates a visible construction of social identity and gender. As one of the most visible form of consumption, clothing preforms a major role in social construction of identity (Crane 2001). They are not simple articles of garments we put on; they are the expression, attitude, and identity regarding how we think about our “self”. The body, as a tangible and visible outer presentation of orgasm, with collective experiences in mind, can extend the mediation between person’s consciousness and enteral environment, society and social relations.

“Our public and private selves are experienced on a daily base as inseparable from fashionable dress and adornment...Thus when one considers the formation and expression of social identities, fashionable appearance play a crucial role.” Fiona Anderson (2005), a Fashion Studies scholar, writes, “Self-fashioning also has the potential to help articulate more subtle, though equally important, aspects of ourselves.”

People change their way of dressing due to the change of their social position based on how society norms change. Internalization with society norms is presented through how people dress. In the 19th century society, women's identity is a crucial example to determine how social change reflects social identity in way of dressing. The connection between social identity and self-identity is also an example of how the change of selfhood depends on the outside environment from the sense philosophy and neuroscience.

Alva Noë

Alva Noë (2009), in his book *Out of our Heads*, suggests that consciousness is not only produced by brain but also achieved via the dynamic of life interacting with the environment. Consciousness is an achievement of the whole animal in its environmental context. He uses the term "consciousness" to mean experience, which is what we do when we interrelate to the world around us. He discusses evidence of how human activity both shapes and is shaped by the dynamic exchange between mind, body and world. Further, instead of merely extending the self from simply the brain to the whole embodied person, he claims that the mind incorporates part of the external environment as well. What Noë suggests is when studying "self" and "consciousness", we should not only think of feelings, minds, organisms, and bodies, rather, we should also take account of how the "environment" and "world around us" affect us. Environment is essential to shape *who we are* and our self-identity. One of the representational examples to apply Noë's opinion can be found from Fashion

Studies— dress or clothing, being as is an expression of self, changes along with social movements overtime.

Self, society, and appearance

George Mead, the founder of pragmatism who pioneered the development of symbolic interaction perspective, is well known for his theory of the social self. This theory is based on a central argument: the self is a social emergent. According to Mead (1934), a self, inasmuch as it takes the attitude of the other, acts in anticipation of the response from that other. The anticipation of response makes for a self that is dialectical, one that is both subjective (spontaneous) and objective (conventional).

As Mead states, self is an object that occurs via a multi-voiced inner dialogue through how we expect action, thought or desire of self. Unified conduct creates unified selves. As the demands of the others solidify into common goals, we generalize the internalized others into a generalized other. We do not imagine just any other person's judgment on our selves, but rather the judgment of the generalized other that can be understood as the social group or community giving the individual her sense of a complete self. Society is an organization of organized attitude. (Mead 1934) The different strands and values from the diverse spheres of cultural experiences to the self that have been exposed will cause the inner voices talk to each other: Whom do I wish to please, and in so doing whom am I likely to offend? What are the consequences of appearing as this kind of person as against

this kind? Does the image I think I convey of my self reflect my true innermost self or some specious version thereof? Do I wish to conceal or reveal?

We reshape the self as well as the attitudes while the society is developed. Mead's argument can help to explain that the "surrounding", "environment", and "world" that Noë uses in his argument. They can be referred as "society".

Charles Cooley is best known for his concept of "looking-glass self": a theory that self-image is formed largely by the messages we get from others, and an individual's interpretation of those messages. He maintained that self-concepts are formed from the reflected images that emanate from social relations; one's individual impression of self develops within and manifests through human interaction: "there is no sense of I without its associative aspects of we, they, or us (p.38)." Thus, who you are, and how you think of yourself, is intimately and inseparably bound up in relationships with the society. Human relations entail continual communications, where motive and meaning move back-and-forth in responsive dialogue. Self-concept is formed in the reflected images of an interactive mirror. How we think another person judges our appearance, and the positive or negative self-feeling is caused by the imagined effect of the individual's appearance on the other person. (Cooley 1984) Cooley's argument is the fundamental connection between appearance and society. One's individual impression of self develops within and manifests through human interaction and delivers through her or his appearance, which is mainly the clothes in this context.

Fashion and self-/social- identity

The ancestors of humans were covered with fur, like other animals. Since humans became hairless and moved from tropical to colder climates, they wrapped themselves in furs or skins for warmth. Anthropologists no longer believe that shame or modesty led to the development of clothes since there have been many culture without clothes and people decorate their bodies directly. Clothes, except being used for consideration of warmth, protection, and sexual modesty, are probably just another way of self-decoration. (Steele 1989)

As the technology of developing and making clothes progressed alongside that of civilization, clothes, in turn, began to have more meaning than just keeping people warm. It can be said to be a very large part of our identities because it is something that tells others about our gender, class, status and so on; as a visual metaphor, it is a self-communication device at our disposal, which can also be read and seen, such as our voices, body postures, facial expressions and the material objects we surround with, for example, as the wearer's reflexive awareness of what is being "said". However, since it cannot straightforwardly speak, sometimes, there would be misinterpretations.

Dress easily became to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for identity and immanent in appearance. This tension strongly appears in the modern city, where people fail to establish traditional patterns to recognize others. Clothes as a method of concealing of identity are used to impress crowds of strangers:

When we encounter a stranger as initially mysterious and inaccessible, we refer to clothing styles and physical appearance, in the absence of any other means, as a reliable sign of identity. Clothing is frequently seen as symbolic of the individual's status and morality, whether actual or contrived. (Finkelstein 1991:128)

Roland Barthes used Saussure's categories to analyze fashion as a veritable language in his well-known book *System in Fashion*. Clothing is analogous to language, and garments are speech. Costume is the social group's normative system of dress, while garments are the individuals' choices of dresses and a fait social total is a combination of social and individuals. (Barthes 1983)

As Finkelstein (1991) argues, there has been an on-going fundamental debate between appearance and identity: while we try to "read" through others by their appearances, we often want them read correctly. However, we also know that appearance can be misleading. This awareness does not stop us from attempting to control how we look. (Finkelstein 1991) We try harder to make our look show our best appearance and make a good impression upon others, even more importantly, deliver the right information of ourselves regarding social position, lifestyles, tastes, and so on.

A social identity is the product from interaction between the self and society. How we perform our identity and our self is associated with our position in the social world, being as a member of this particular group, class, and cultural communities. The importance of the body as the bearing of status and distinction is a theme explored by Pierre Bourdieu. In his analysis of class, status and power, he believes the body holds a crucial position as the mediator of social information through labels, taste and practices as the habitus. The battle for distinction, Bourdieu (1979) thinks, is mainly a battle for power that expresses in economic, social and symbolic ways. Within social classes, individuals compete for social distinction and cultural capital on the basis of their capacity to judge the suitability

of culture products according to class-based stands of tastes and manner. In the battle, elites have power to set their own terms through their definition of taste, morals, and social values and those terms shape elites themselves as well by being a part of this social class. Bourdieu's tension of how social structure interacts with individuals in the society is very similar to Mead and Cooley.

Simmel (1971), in his book, *On individuality and Social Forms*, states a familiar theme of "individual and social form". He accords the importance of fashion in some degree in modern society as a phenomenon, which exhibits the self-contradictory desires for social imitation and individual differences. Further, the theory points the social nature of dress as individuals are located within the boundaries of communities and the style of dress claims this belonging. (Simmel 1971)

The relationship between identity and fashioned body is about how fashion and dress coherently express group identities and how they are arrayed clears out the division between classes and groups of people. In order to gain better respect from society and maintain their desired social class, people have the intention to spend time and money on dress in order to decorate the body to create distances. The clothes we choose to wear are concessions between the demands of the social world, the background of where we belong, and our individual desires: fashions are pledges that link individuals in a mutual act of conformity to social conventions. Being as the symbol to claim the code, clothes also build the boundaries among classes. Clothes squeeze not only the desire to imitate others and claim similarity in commonality but also voices individuality. While dress signals our connections with

particular communities and shows the shared values, ideas and lifestyles, at the same time, we do not want to dress in identical fashion to our friends since we still want to have a space for our own self-identity to be express.

At one time, class was visible through particular uniforms or unified style of dress. However, when new social class developed and they pushed forward and compete for status, old and traditional ideas of class were crushed and broken. In contemporary western culture (Kidwell et al 1974), class is no longer obvious to distinguish through dress alone but it does not mean the social disunions in style of dress are no longer existing: dress can exhibit imitation as well as differentiation.

Women and dresses in the 19th Century

In sixteenth century, as the result of the increasing mobility of European people, money, the great equalizer, went to more hands of people who desired to give outward expression to their social ambitions due to the urbanization and the rise of the bourgeois. This unquestionably threatened people with established privilege, such as the rural and landed, the urban and corporate. Town life was more gregarious and more socially mobile. A person's social position was considered with greater weight. The exclusive use of fine cloth and luxuries, being as a cultural symbol in one social group, was one way to retain a visible position of their reputations and express wealth. The newly risen class used the same method to increase their social competition with noblemen. Clothing, being one of the most visible markers of social status and gender, and useful in maintaining symbolic boundaries, used as an indication of how people have perceived their position in

social structures and negotiated status boundaries since sixteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century.

Fashionable clothes are used to mark out differences of social class and social identity, but their elemental meanings are about in which way women and men perceive their gender roles or are expected to perceive them. In the nineteenth century, women at all social levels had few legal or political rights and class structures on women were different than for men. Upper-class women, who were not expected to work either inside or outside home, expressed their gender roles generally using fashionable clothes. (Crane 2001) Concern with one's appearance was particularly evident among upper class woman, *demi-mondaines* (kept women) and members of the artistic avant-garde (Negrin 2008). As Thorstein Veblen comments:

Prosperity required respectable women to abstain... from useful effort and to make more of a show of leisure than the men of the same social class... [The woman's] sphere [was] within the household, which she [was required to] 'beautify', and ... be the 'chief ornament' (1970, 126)

Upper-class women expressed not so much their own identity; instead, with their clothes, being as an expression their social identities, were the way to emphasize the leisure which their husbands' wealth had assigned to them. They denied opportunities for self-realization because of their exclusion from the public sphere, they resorted to one of the few areas available to them in which to exercise their creativity—namely, the beautification of themselves and their homes (Negrin 2008). A well-dressed woman was taken as a sign of wealth and high social standing of her husband and her family.

Willett Cunnington (1995) in her book *The Culture of Fashion* has very specific describes of dresses from 1820s to 1860s. For example, by the late 1820s, the high-waisted, soft neo-classical line was quite popular among the elite. Later on, in 1830, the angular changed to two padded triangles of skirt and wide-sleeved bodice meeting at tint belt waist. The dress was ankle-length, and the low shoulder line served to emphasis the egg-timer silhouette. It was companied with a wide-brimmed hat with ribbons and feathers in most places. By 1839, the style shifted to where the shoulders were drooping and narrow, the waist appearing much further down and the skit reaching the floor. During the end of the decade, technological innovation together with the redefinition of femininity was introduced to fashionable wardrobe. The waist rose, with the sleeves and bodice becoming loser, and the circumference of the skirt increased, reaching its widest diameter in early 1860s. These are only style examples. The colors in trend were changed every single season. The overelaborate dress of upper class women of the time was a conspicuous demonstration of the fact that they did not have to work for a living. Meanwhile, if they were told to focus on how to dress and follow the trends so much, they did not have time to work.

For women who were not from upper class and occupied different positions in social structure, fashionable clothing was problematic in various ways. In France, a young woman and her female relatives had to spent several years preparing their trousseau, including contained clothes and undergarments. They were an important resource for them to contribute future household. Fashionable clothes were unavailable for classes other than the upper class whom created fashion. If middle-

class wives wished to have a fashionable appearance, had to emulate clothes from upper class, but most of time, they did not have enough economic resources to do so. These work-class wives, who had even less budgets on clothes than their husbands', had to stay at home. (Crane 2001) Without enough interrelation with the society, they were truly the accessories of their husbands with bare realization of self-identity.

Because of the Revolution, the bourgeoisie, as a new social class, broke the traditional social structure. The wealth was redistributed and the social mobility waked people from the collapse of the old social order where social position had been determined by birth. The rising standards of living, combined with rising expectations and greater access to information, led working-class to participate more actively in public spheres and public spaces, especially for working-class single women, who earned their own financial dependence and had more manageable economic resources to spend. Meanwhile, clothing became less and less of a marker of ones social role or position and more of an indicator of ones personality due to the shedding of strict social class structure. Working class women were more conscious and able to know about fashion trends with the rise of department stores and visual decoration inside the store, such as big promotional sections for shop goods or society events. (Breward 1995) The trend was set by the material nature of consumer demand from women who were not limited by real needs and practical uses, but stimulated wants from their desires.

Daniel Roche, in his work of modern development of clothing, dates fashion revolution to the eighteenth century. In Roche's analysis, the story of changing

clothing habit was a reflection of the risen bourgeoisie fight against that luxury lifestyle and fetter of aristocracy from a sartorial and political perspective, as they produced the variability in clothing. Roche (1987) described fashion as an equilibrium point between social and individual choices. The sign of diversity and change was a form of freedom. The new social signs in clothing distinguished the bourgeoisies from the privilege and serving to identify being in the group of bourgeoisie. This idea influenced both women and men from bourgeoisie.

After 1860, a noticeable encouragement of the feminine sphere was conducted not only with the adoption of technological fashion but also through the emergence of practices that allowed women participate in consume. The Bon Marche and the Louvre were two shops that were well established in Paris by 1870 and advertised in English fashion press throughout the 1860s. They pioneered several customer services offering wide range of branded fashionable goods at low fixed prices. This differed them from other older smaller establishment and cultivated selection traditional shops. The rise of department store and expansion of woman fashion magazines invited all classes to engage with fashion, as well as transformed and modernized the culture and consumption of dress. And what the Bon Marche and the Louvre, as Borothy Davis (1966) notes, had broke the boundaries and allowed the white collar workers whose money could only be spared for few luxuries to shop in department stores. This gradually switched the emphasis of women's money spending diversity from food to other kinds of things. The rise of consumerism is a significant contributing factor to explain the centrality given to appearance as a means of defining identity.

Along with rise in awareness of the collapse of the rigid social order, individuals began to think of themselves having the ability to shape their own characters in the same way they shaped their social and economic destinies. Using fashionable items and commodities as devices to create a particular self-desired character and personal identity became an increasingly common poly. In fact, biological differences between men and women do not cause different social roles or lead to different forms of clothing. Both bodies and clothes have been interpreted in terms of gender stereotypes, (Steele 1989) which allowed women's clothes to be more complex and diversified. In respect of the old perspective of women and dresses, women were considered more capable with diversified clothes. Since the time when women considered more about their dressing and self-expression, debates of styles also appeared in late nineteenth century. Two strategies to deal with privacy lead to different directions in thinking of how women dress during that time. One idea is the character is immanent in clothes: searching the authenticity of the other and the truth behind appearance. Another one is the desire for artifice through fashion represented in appearance. The debate of these two ideas brings the attentions on the body and on dress as indicators to read the hidden meaning. (Entwistle, 2000)

The dandy style and the Romantic style are considered the representation between artifice and authenticity through style of dress. For scholar, such as Campbell (1989), the dandy style was an older aristocratic style of dress. It weighted the individual discrepancy and concern to appear distinguished. The Romantic style, on the other hand, stressed more on expressing the individual and

the idea of being “true to the self”. (Campbell 1989) Therefore, the dandy style was more focused on the artifice of appearance that self was preformed through the self-conscious by using dress and body, while the Romantic style was more about authenticity and the self in a natural way.

Being aware or not, women in late nineteenth century had started having the trend of dressing to express the self. Appearance was treated as an expression of individual identity, rather than of membership of social group.

The working classes and the petite bourgeoisie brought the consequence of invention of ready-made goods to the historical clothing scene in nineteenth century. These techniques were first used in men’s clothes, then women’s. In the last decade of century, ready-made goods became more diversified. They started having tailored suits for women, shirtwaists, and skirts. Women became the new motor to push forward garment industry. (Entwistle 2000) The increased demand brought up the supply; the price of ready-made goods became acceptable for more women.

The feminine engagement with the goods and styles had delineated the physical characteristics of women’s civilized life and self-realization. Because of the encouragement of femininity in commerce, women had realized their demands of private sphere, such as leisure and lifestyle. They started having their own choices in choosing goods as a way to express their own desires and feelings. And this is one performance of democratization of demand. Growing investment in the body as constitutive of self-identity is symptomatic of the decline of traditional meaning structure for women and their social identities. The increasing emphasis placed on the aestheticization of the self rejected the former thinking that an external system

of meaning and authority gave the direction to people's lives. The consumption of cultural goods, such as fashionable clothing, plays an important role in conducting personal identity. As Finkelstein (1991) describes:

Physical appearance has come to be seen as an important means for claiming a degree of social status...the pervasiveness of these goods and services indicates an ethos in which physical appearance is held to be of paramount importance. Indeed, appearance is often conflated with the more spiritual or abstract qualities of character. (p. 2)

By the 1980s, millions of baby-boomer career women were moving up in the workplace and the impact of their professional mobility was monumental. Working women took part in the revolution more actively rather than to make themselves become representational roles. As more women entered the paid labor market, industrious lower middle class of female employees and shopkeepers had more income and more needs to spend on clothes. Professional women, such as bank vice presidents, members of corporate boards, and partners at law firms, began to behave more like men in adopting their own uniforms: skirts and blazers and pantsuits that gave them an authoritative, polished, power look. The first women's ready-made garments were cloaks and coats, which were very close to masculine models. More tailors started making women's clothing and adjusted suits into female form.

Women happen to have lives both inside and outside house. They want to participate in lifestyle as compared with membership in a social class, as a higher level of agency on the part of individual. The variety of lifestyle choices available in society liberate the individual from traditional roles and enable her to make choices that create meaningful self-identity (Giddens 1991). As Bell (1976) argued, a person

has unparalleled freedom to new identities outside the economic and political areas. Social identities are not longer singly based on economic status. He also suggests people construct their identities differently in workplace as compared where they occupy their leisure time. By attending leisure activities, the desire of leisure clothes for women showed up as well.

Women and men seemed to adopt unisex uniforms—whether dress-for-success suits for work or jeans and T-shirts for leisure. Women's bodies became more muscular and more masculine. Women might have been imitating men's clothing and male physique. Even though there were still much criticism for women being less feminine, the long-term result became clear: the continued tendency of simplification in female clothing, which should also be more comfortable and practical. These changes were acquired when women grew in social equality with men (Steele 1989) and the wake from self-desire and self-identity due to economic independence and change of women's social position. If a woman views her personal appearance and personal identity as an developing project, the way she dresses is a complex form of understanding between social norms and her own idea of gender (Giddens 1991). Even further, the role of appearance for a woman is way to construct and negotiate a sense of self.

Conclusion

Clothing , being one of the most visible markers of social status and gender, and useful in maintaining symbolic boundaries, is an indication of how people in different eras (in this paper I have particularly focused around the 19th century) have perceived their position in social structures and negotiated status boundaries.

Appearance has always been an expression of social identity for women and clothing behavior is always socially motivated. In the nineteenth century, its identity was conservative based on a conception of women's role and widely shared. Women from upper scale classes had to dress up and follow the fashion trends due to the social position (environment) that men proposed to them. The social identity exhibited along with those beautiful and gorgeous appearances was purely the accessory of men and to hold their position in social hierarchy. Women were indoctrinated to be pretty and luxurious for the family, and the inner self was shaped as visible expression for the men. They wore heavy and complex dresses, which prevent them from working and earning economic independence. The realization of true self was buried by social expectation for women.

Along with the rise bourgeois and civil movements, women gradually gained social power from men. They started having the sense and feeling to purchase for personal needs and desires. Women dressed up according to their own tastes and expressed themselves through the appearance they picked. This consciousness could not be generated without social movements. By the 1980s, women moved up in the workplace. Both women and their clothing needed to dramatically change from what they were like in early nineteenth century, both at work and at home. A masculinized style was adopted in making women's wear, such as suits, pants, and jackets. The desire for and acceptance of simplification were heard, females were finally was able to dress up simple clothes like men to go work.

Coco Chanel furthered the trend toward simplification and masculinization. The straight-line look reflected how women wanted society to view and respect

them. The demand shifted from housedresses to slacks to jeans to jogging pants, the twentieth century has decidedly shifted away from nineteenth century dress dissymmetry. The social position of women has changed from being an accessory of men to working class women, this was caused by the transformation of society and reform of civilized life offered opportunities. In all societies, clothes serve to communicate meaning of wearers. The way women dress is considered an indicator of this social phenomenon, and is also an agency of the diversification of the self and self-identity.

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