

THE ROLE OF IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL COMMUNICATION – WRITTEN CLOTHES: THE GRAMMAR OF CLOTHING LANGUAGE

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Abstract: Analyzing the contemporary existential context, it is found that individual identity is under the threat of social manipulation mechanisms that determine, in favor of globalization, the uniformity and standardization of individuals at the level of behavior, concerns and clothing image. The concern for the individualization of the person in the contemporary standardized space leads to a more in-depth research of the inner human mechanisms that generate the forms of non-verbal communication, like the visual language.

Clothing choices are configured in relation to the concept of self-image and, at the same time, through the image of the person in the opinion of others. Clothing and fashion as a social phenomenon are means of permanent reconfiguration of the images in society, becoming, depending on the intentions, the mask of the wearer or the mirror of the authentic personality. In both ways, at formal level and through meanings of images, individuals use clothing to confirm their identity in social interactions, identifying the most suitable methods to reveal themselves to the world, whether they respect who they really are, whether, out of the need to camouflage a sensitive inner universe, they take on premeditated social roles, depending on the social situation in which they find themselves.

Keywords: fashion language, communication, contemporary society, trends, authenticity, social roles

Introduction

Appearance is the "aesthetics of the unavoidable" as the Danish philosopher Ossi Naukkarinen says, arguing that no one can avoid participating in the non-verbal, visual communication of the contemporary world, nor from the discourse based on the language of clothing¹. It is inevitable and would probably entail isolation from most forms of contemporary social interaction. The idea that individuals do not have the "possibility of not communicating" is also argued in the works of theorist Paul Watzlawick, who "considers communication to be an independent condition of human life and social order", where "any behavior is informative, ensuring through decoding, communication."².

Social reality and interpersonal relations are the natural environment of the person's development, this being influenced by social relations, its norms and rules, by new trends and new languages. Today, contemporary society shows more and more interest in the visual content of the world we live in, and the person's identity not only gives more importance to the image, sometimes to the detriment of a deeper level in communication, but the image and implicitly the clothing language becomes one of the main means of communication between people.

¹ Susan B.Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, Bloomsbury Academic, Londra, 2018, p. 30

² Monica Pop, *Dinamica limbajului vizual*, Editura Artes, Iași, 2013, p.14

The language of clothing, which could be perceived as an extension of the person, as another way of expression alongside verbal language, behavior, attitude, actions, occupies more and more space within contemporary social interactions, whether we refer to the actual communication that takes place in the physical space, or to that in the virtual space, through the lens of trending social networks.

Grammar of clothing language: *what do we communicate through clothes?*

Concern for clothing image is not part of the primary needs of individuals, but in contemporary society, defined by the supremacy of image and appearance, consumer needs are increasingly complex and sophisticated, and the role of image in social interactions becomes essential. Multiple authors, including Alison Lurie in the well-known work *The language of clothes*, analyze the communicative role of clothing and agree that there are many similarities between the way clothing language works and other types of language, such as verbal language. If the verbal language contains words, phrases, intonation, a medium of communication, a certain language or dialect, the clothing language includes shapes, images, colors, graphic symbols, dress codes and clothing styles, attitudes³.

In the analysis of the content communicated through clothing, we can structure the data transmitted into two categories, depending on the degree of individuality or generality of the factors that determine these contents:

Individual content – communicated through image and clothing language

- The psychological identity of the person – personality, temperament, attitude, talent, degree of adaptability, degree of influence, etc.
- Lifestyle – conservative, adventurous, quiet, chaotic, fast-paced, with an active social life, withdrawn, etc.
- Education level – aesthetic education, good manners, social behavior, attitude.
- Occupation – type of profession.
- Free time - concerns, desires, aspirations, passions.
- Age – although some authors believe that age is no longer one of the main factors that determine a certain behavior of the fashion consumer or a certain type of language, from certain points of view, age continues to be relevant. This generates different concerns, involves a greater degree of influence and risk in the case of young people than in the case of adults, sometimes determines the economic level. The language used, both verbal and visual, differs more and more in contemporary society according to age. Young people become familiar with new technologies and means of information much faster and thus their language is more heavily influenced by the latest contemporary trends.

Collective content – influenced by the individual's external environment, by his concrete life context.

³ LURIE, Alison, *The Language of clothes*, Editura Random House, New York, 1981

- Social (personal and collective) identity – which includes all aspects of identity determined by the society in which the individual lives.
- Cultural identity – cultural level and the influence of social groups of belonging - cultures and subcultures, traditions and customs.
- Geographical space – a relevant factor that has the ability to significantly influence the clothing language of individuals; aesthetic trends and traditional values differ depending on where individuals live;
- Economic level – the material potential of each individual also determines his behavior as a participant in non-verbal social communication;

Individual factors and those related to consumers' life context overlap and influence each other. We cannot consider certain factors strictly individual aspects and other factors strictly collective aspects. Fashion is a phenomenon related to the integration of the individual into society and cannot be analyzed outside of it.

Authenticity vs. social roles

The problem of decoding the language of clothing today is closely related to the level of authenticity of human clothing images that are so strongly influenced by mass culture. Thus we ask ourselves the questions: *How much of what people communicate today through the language of clothing reflects what they are and how much what society is at a collective level? What is the border between the individual and the collective, in a world where there are no longer any borders in the social exposure favored by the new media?*

The relationship between the affirmation of individuality and the need to identify with certain social groups implies a permanent search for the balance between individual identity and collective identity. The person is constantly concerned with differentiating himself from others and at the same time with the similarity with the group he belongs to. The status of a social being implies a complex relationship between the personal and the collective content of the person's identity. The balance or imbalance between the two aspects, uniqueness and integration in the collectivity, generates a multitude of facets of the person's identity manifested through **social roles**. *What happens when the social group becomes the whole world in the virtual environment? What is actually the level of standardization and uniformity of the clothing language and to what extent what people communicate can still represent something personal?*

Individuals seek to obtain a positive social identity, conforming to what society decides to be good, intelligent, beautiful, respectively conforming to its spiritual, cultural, aesthetic norms and ideals. Even if the need for collective identification characterizes any person, individualization seems to be the more strongly expressed and sought-after side, especially since contemporary society, marked by globalization and the fast pace of life, tends towards uniformity and standardization.

Today aesthetic trends capture so much people from different backgrounds and standardize their image so much even if the data mentioned above differ significantly, that the border between authentic and fake sometimes becomes impossible to establish.



Similar clothes, completely different information communicated - depending on wearer and social context

People end up being oversaturated with this standardization and only at a small level niche trends appear that combat this standardization and implicitly stop the negative effects of the "role" type social image that we are often forced to wear in order to integrate into society. Thus, recently some people choose to give up being active on social media platforms. Others consciously choose simple clothing images that do not communicate much but allow them to express deeper content through other types of language. For example, among contemporary visual artists, a tendency can be observed in which they "don't pay attention to their clothing image", adopting either impersonal styles, or classic, timeless styles, without extravagance or too much involvement, thus communicating precisely the concern for other contents of existence, deeper than what the clothing image has the ability to accurately communicate about us.



Anselm Kiefer, Adrian Ghenie, Antony Gormley, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mark Bradford, Olafur Eliasson
 – wearing the successful contemporary artist uniform

The American sociologist Erving Goffman argues that individuals have both a social identity and a personal identity, and that the two do not overlap, and there are often mismatches between them. The author distinguishes between "front-stage" and "back-stage" behavior of individuals, that is, between public behavior, on stage, and intimate behavior, behind the stage. The first instance refers to life situations in which the individual is involved in public activities, such as those at work or meetings within society. In this context, according to Goffman's theory, individuals tend to conform to the standardized definitions of these situations and roles, thus following patterns already existing in society, patterns of behavior and image originating from the outside and not from the depth of the self. In this context, the expressed identity is a controlled and less personal one.

The second instance, the one behind the scene, refers to the behavior in the private space of the individual, in his relationship with himself - an abstract space that gives him the opportunity to be more honest. Goffman claims that individuals in this comfortable context have a more authentic behavior, and also a more authentic image, closer to their true identity, manifesting their personal identity. Goffman's theory has been criticized by many authors because it ignores the importance of the spontaneity

factor that defines the daily life of individuals. The idea of the social actor and of the existence of a variety of roles that individuals approach in social life depending on the posture in which they are, also appears in the American sociologist Orrin Klapp, who believes that the main factor that determines that individuals develop multiple identities and roles is today's fragmented and industrialized society, dominated by media and mass culture, which offers individuals an infinite variety of possibilities⁴.

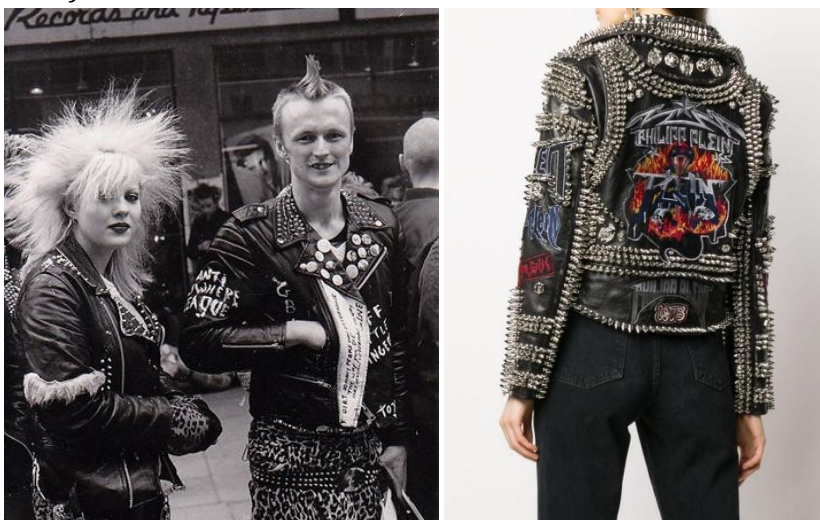
Regardless of the need to express a function or a job, the person sometimes chooses to become a character in everyday life, adopting a clothing style that more or less reveals his inner identity and casts doubt on the sincerity of the messages conveyed by his visual identity. The behavior of the individual in society and his belonging to the collective dimension by adapting to the rules, norms and models existing in the social space, determines the imitation of these models and implicitly generates the process of doubling the personality through clothing, conforming or not conforming to the generally accepted dress codes.

Social interactions assume a permanent exchange of information between individuals, determine symbolic transactions and the existence of some forms of non-verbal communication, social identification of people in particular situations or general situations, affirmation and signaling of these identities through clothing. Existence in society permanently puts individuals in front of a process of self-education, of understanding and appropriating the imposed models, but also of affirming individuality, of contributing to the general social universe through the individual meanings that belong to the personal universe. The relationship between individuality and collectivity in the doubling of personality, explains the permanent search of individuals to stand out as unique and at the same time to belong to the group of origin and general trends.

Eftrat Tseelon, British professor of fashion theory at the University of Leeds, addresses the issue of communication via clothing language in her research - *How successful is communication via clothing? Thoughts and evidence on an unexamined paradigm*. The author makes a clear distinction between the content that clothes themselves communicate in real social interactions and the stereotypes of interpretation of clothing developed by social studies of fashion. To demonstrate the stability that certain social conceptions, such as prejudices, have on certain clothing images to the detriment of a more authentic communication and a more precise interpretation, the author offers the example of pants worn without a belt, with the lap down and implicitly exposing the underwear: "The trend apparently originates in the US prison system, where the practice of taking away prisoners' belts to prevent them from hanging themselves forces them to walk around with sagging trousers. From there, it was borrowed as a trend by US rappers and those who traveled overseas to their fans and other disaffected or fashion-conscious youth. Jumping to conclusions about character and behavior, however, seems to be quite a leap. And yet it shows the depth of

⁴ Orrin Klapp, *Collective Search for Identity* in American Anthropologist Journal, Volumul 72, p. 718

credibility that sartorial stereotypes hold."⁵. The author claims that there are major differences between "reading" the language of clothing based on knowledge of fashion, dress codes, fashion theory, and reading the same visual message directly, in real social interactions, outside of homogeneous, predetermined ideas. Identifying two categories of meanings of clothing language, "*meaning as fixed*" and "*meaning as negotiated*", Efrat Tselon addresses the rhetorical question: "*How can meaning be perceived as so fixed and yet be so fluid?*"⁶.



Followers of the punk subculture – 1970//Philipp Pleinleather spiked biker jacket 2022

Examples of misinterpretation of messages communicated through clothing are multiple. Even verbal or written language does not have a single meaning and can be understood subjectively depending on many other data: the context of communication, the receiver of the information with his level of knowledge, education, cultural background, the time of communication, etc. In the case of clothing language, especially when you have information about what certain dress codes or styles signify in a certain social context, you can premeditatedly play with these meanings. On the other hand, another category is formed by individuals who do not have enough knowledge and can use the language of clothing without knowing what it is possible to communicate through what they wear. Thanks to my experience as a teacher at the Faculty of Arts and Design, in the Fashion Design department, I have noticed that young students are more interested in other aspects that clothes can communicate about them, namely the degree of originality, the integration into a current fashion, of the success, fame or material position that clothes can possibly express. Thus some young people, even those who study fashion, adopt certain clothing styles without even being aware of what their image can communicate.

In conclusion, as we have access to more and more information and to more diverse means of visual expression in social communication, the clarity of

⁵ Efrat Tselon, *How successful is communication via clothing? Thoughts and evidence on an unexamined paradigm* – in GONZALEZ, Ana Maria, BOVONE, Laura, *Identities through fashion: a multidisciplinary approach*, Editura Berg, Londra, 2012, p.112

⁶ Efrat Tselon, *op.cit.* p.114

communicated messages through clothing language and the degree of authenticity is more difficult to establish. The ease with which people now play social roles, especially through the prism of the clothing image, is increasing, and, unfortunately, a real mass trend in contemporary societies. The pace at which the meaning of dress codes should change is far too fast considering the speed with which new directions appear in contemporary fashion.

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