

Nicole Smith writes about how clothing establishes our identity.

- 1 Say the word "communication" and ask for associations. Most people are likely to focus on verbal expressions as the primary association with the communicative process and function. Our personal image, however, also communicates volumes about who we are, what we believe, what we consider important, and how we want others to view us. A woman wearing a hijab, for instance, is identifying herself as an adherent to particular religious and cultural norms. By negotiating these aspects of our identity by what we wear, we can either bring ourselves closer to others or distance ourselves from them. Looking back over the course of human history, one sees how important clothing has been, not only in the process of conveying important information about ourselves and the groups with which we associate, but also in the process of establishing certain cultural and social norms that provide both shape and structure to society. 5 10
- 2 The clothes of early human societies seem to have been more functional than fashionable, permitting hunter-gatherers a certain degree of protection from the elements while maintaining ease of movement. However, the transition from clothing as a purely functional object to one that also had expressive and communicative capacities was relatively quick. African and Native American tribes, for instance, have extensive and rich traditions of elaborate clothing, especially for ceremonial purposes. The degree and quality of decoration, as well as the materials used, signified the wearer's rank in the social order. Eagle feathers and elaborate headdresses were reserved for elders and important tribal leaders. Certain pieces of clothing were also reserved for wear during important ceremonies and rites, and were not part of everyday dress. Such clothing was believed to be imbued with special spiritual and protective powers. 15 20
- 3 Dress codes are often markers of a person's socio-economic status. In old England, students donned blue Tudor frock coats with yellow stockings. Blue was the cheapest available dye at the time, and was used to emphasise the low status of the children. Today, wealthier, more traditional schools often have dress codes that represent the privileged world they are a part of or their families aspire to attain. Many lower income schools have uniforms because it was assumed that students who come from low performing schools need uniforms for the students to take the learning environment seriously. Clothes and appearance have always been symbols of how an individual belongs within – or is excluded from – his or her community. 25
- 4 Standards of dress can also constitute a form of soft power. Western civilization, for example, set the standards of dress for colonisers and the locals. In cases where colonial rulers regarded indigenous dress as a potential focus of resistance to occupying power, suppression of local dress was rigidly enforced. For instance, when Korea was a Japanese colony, all markers of Korean cultural identity, including the use of the spoken and written Korean language and the wearing of the national *Hanbok* costume, were ruthlessly suppressed. 30
- 5 During World War II, as women began to work outside the home, helping with the war effort by working in factories, clothing became an important way in which identity and gender stereotypes were negotiated. The poster of Rosie the Riveter, a cultural icon representing American women during World War II, depicted a woman with a determined look on her face and a confident display of strength. Although the poster only depicted Rosie from the torso up, it was clear that she was not garbed in traditional female dress of the time. Instead, she was wearing a functional blue denim work shirt, not adorned with any decorations. She was not wearing earrings or other jewellery, and she had a covering on her head, a bandanna, that kept her hair out of her face. "We can do it!" was the slogan on the poster. The image of Rosie the Riveter was important because it diffused a whole new idea of women and their dress on a massive scale. Its 35 40

widespread dissemination, and its appeal and popularity ensured that women could be advocates for change. 45

- 6 The mid-20th century represented a dramatic shift in the way that clothing was both conceptualised and used. The locus of authority establishing norms of dress also began to shift. Social norms about dress began to relax somewhat, and there was a trend towards self-determination in the form of self-identity and self-representation. The power of institutions to dictate who could wear what and why became diluted. As a result, industries oriented around clothing became increasingly pervasive and visible in society. Clothing producers began creating, marketing, and disseminating more types, styles, and varieties of clothing than ever before, creating an almost endless array of possibilities for the wearer. 50
- 7 Just because there was a loosening of social norms about dress did not mean that it lost its power as a marker of social status. On the contrary, as designers and manufacturers increased the variety of styles and made them available on the market, clothing became a more powerful marker of status than it ever was. Innovation created demand, and demand spawned various sectors within the clothing industry: haute couture and budget clothing, to name just two segments of the market. For diehard fashionistas and the wealthy, collecting and wearing haute couture is the ultimate status symbol in the modern world. The made-by-hand clothing cannot be purchased in stores. Instead, buyers must have insider knowledge and connections to learn what is for sale. In some cases, they liaise directly with ateliers. The result? A one-of-a-kind piece created by specially-trained artisans. On the other hand, budget clothing shops are scattered across cities, with mass produced, low cost wears available for purchase. Moreover, the acceleration of technologies such as the Internet, digital photography, and online media such as blogs, YouTube, and the like have all had a significant impact on the spread of new fashion standards, which are either accepted or rejected by the buying public. These media serve to stimulate desire, inviting people who consider themselves trendsetters to adopt a product and bring it to the larger public. 60 65 70
- 8 Today, the clothing industry is a platform to raise awareness of world issues. When global retailer *H&M* launched their *Conscious* collection, they were committed to the ethical production of sustainable garments. Similarly, there are other brands that support and raise funds for a variety of issues throughout the world. American clothing retailer *Gap* was a partner of the *(PRODUCT)RED* campaign to help raise awareness and eliminate AIDS in Africa. *Gap's* campaign featured celebrities who wore a *Gap (PRODUCT)RED* item each. Thought-provoking questions, such as "Can the shirt off your back change the world?" and "Can the next generation change the world?" accompanied the images. So fashion is really more than meets the eye. Gone are the days when people just choose to wear something because it looks good. Of course, that is still very much a part of fashion choices. But these days, clothes and accessories stand for something. Fashion choice today is about making a statement. 75 80
- 9 We see, then, how clothing has evolved from a purely functional personal item to one of great creative significance, a tool we use to establish, express, and convey multiple aspects of our identity. Clothing does speak.