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Signs, Power, and the Body: A Communication Perspective on Fashion and Gender Identity

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Abstract. Fashion transcends personal aesthetics to function as a narrative tool in reconstructing gender identity and social discourse. In the contemporary globalized and digital-saturated world, trends like gender-neutral fashion and new interpretations of garments are challenging the traditional binary cultural norms. Against the backdrop of the rapid development of social media and the increasing diversity of fashion trends, this research applies communication theory to explore how fashion symbols interact symbolically, the process of encoding-decoding, and the representation in social media to redefine gender identity. The findings reveal that fashion can effectively convey complex gender messages and reshape gender perception of gender roles. By looking back at the relationship between designers and wearers, as well as traditional media and digital narratives, the study demonstrates fashion's ability to break through the power structure and broaden self-expression beyond binary gender. Through this research, the powerful role of fashion in shaping and reshaping individual and social discourse power can be better understood, the mediating role of fashion can be deeply explored, and the development of fashion communication as well as the fields of identity and gender recognition can be further promoted.

Keywords: Fashion communication; gender identity; power-dressing; media representation; feminist fashion.

1. Introduction

Fashion serves as not merely a medium of personal expression but also a constitutive force in shaping social discourse and gender identity [1]. In the contexts of rapid development of globalization and digital media proliferation, trends such as "gender fluidity" and the subversive reinterpretation of classical garments like the little black dress are gradually reshaping people's perception of fashion, challenging mainstream cultural norms of gender identity [2]. This significant transformation demands attention to the interplay between the power reconstruction in fashion, symbolic systems, and the passive and active interpretation in cultural discourse.

This essay addresses three interrelated research questions through the usage of communication theory:

1. Symbolic interaction theory: How does fashion shape gender identity?

2. Encoding/Decoding: How are fashion symbols reinterpreted by designers and wearers?

3. Media Representation: How do traditional and digital media shape gendered fashion narratives?

By analyzing these dynamics, this essay illustrates how fashion reflects and reconfigures societal power relations. Drawing on the theoretical framework from communication and fashion sociology, this research highlights fashion's function to simultaneously reinforce and challenge the existing social hierarchies.

2. Symbolic Interaction Theory

From the perspective of Symbolistic interactionism, clothing is not merely an external expression of individual style but also a form of self-recognition of gender and identity, which carries symbolistic meaning played through the social interaction [3]. The suit, traditionally associated with male-

dominated structures and patriarchal norms, has undergone significant reconstruction as women have entered the workplace.

In the 1960s, with the rise of the second wave of feminism, women began to challenge gender stereotypes in the workplace through their attire. As the French philosopher De Beauvoir argued in her feminist theory, women demanded equal rights and opportunities in the public sphere [4]. Achieving the same opportunities as men in the public domain and sexual freedom were some of the main goals of this new era and women embraced the suit as a symbol of the right to subvert traditional gender norms. Women in the workplace widely adopt the style of "power dressing, characterized by simple and tough-looking tailored suits, to project their image of being assertive and confident [5]. As Tidele notes, the popularity of suits helped to redefine the stereotypical office image of women (such as pencil skirts, high heels, etc.) [6]. A notable example is Margaret Thatcher, who successfully crafted her political image of the "Iron Lady." By pairing feminine elements like pearl necklaces with the strong lines of her suits, she achieved a delicate balance between authority and femininity [7]. Her power dressing style is not only a symbol of political status and authority but also a good example of how women interpret themselves through fashion language and how suits work as a form of symbolic communication.

As the symbolic interaction theory states, the meaning of symbolic interaction is not fixed [3]. It is continually reconstructed and reinterpreted through social interaction. The self and gender identity of the office lady are advanced with the time. As Sposito highlights that fashion is the mirror of the era, which reflects the ideology of the society [4]. Tidele further pointed out that the fourth wave of feminism has further integrated fashion with women's empowerment [6]. Today, suits are no longer merely a symbol of "masculinity" but have been redefined as an expression tool for women's power. For instance, women can choose colors, cuts, and accessories to blend personal style with a professional image, thereby breaking the stereotype that "suits = masculinity".

3. Encoding/Decoding Theory and the Little Black Dress

In the discourse of fashion communication, choosing attire is not merely a fashion choice but also a means of constructing a sociocultural system. Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory, the meaning of messages is interpreted by both the sender and the receiver [8]. This theory provides an indispensable perspective for fashion communication studies, further expanding our understanding of how garments are interpreted and reinterpreted across different cultural contexts. The evolution of the little black dress (LBD) serves as a classic case of the encoding-decoding process, illustrating how the designer's original philosophy has been reinterpreted by various groups, gradually transforming the LBD into a symbol of women's identity.

3.1. The Designer's Initial Intention for the Little Black Dress

In 1926, Coco Chanel revolutionized the symbolic meaning of black through the introduction of the little black dress. Prior to this, black in the West was primarily associated with themes such as mourning, religious piety, and power. For instance, although Philip I in the 15th century often wore black, it was to display luxury through expensive fabrics and decorations rather than a minimalist style. From the medieval era to the early 20th century, women's clothing was characterized by long gowns, cinched waists, corsets, boxed silhouettes, layers, and intricate necklines—designs that were impractical for the growing number of women entering the workforce in the 1930s. Black clothing for women was also frequently linked to modesty and restraint [9].

In her redesign of the little black dress, Chanel eliminated excessive decorations and trimmings, opting for a minimalist design that accentuated women's elegance and body curves while enhancing practicality for work. As Harply notes, Chanel dismantled the black's traditional association with mourning, liberating it from its conventional connotations of authority and male dominance within the patriarchal structure [2]. She redefined black as a symbol of independence and liberty. During this

period, the decoding purpose and process of the LBD were clear: it served as a declaration of feminist revolution, empowering women to reclaim their agency in both dress and the workplace.

3.2. The Diverse Interpretations of the Little Black Dress

According to Hall, the decoding process can be categorized into three types: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional interpretations [8]. Over time, the little black dress has undergone multiple reinterpretations across different historical periods and cultural contexts.

3.2.1. The Little Black Dress as a Symbol of Women's Power

In the 1960s, during the second wave of feminism, women actively challenged stereotypes and sought to reclaim bodily autonomy. By the 1980s, professional women used the little black dress to craft an image of professionalism, authority, intelligence, and sophistication [9]. During this era, the LBD was reinterpreted as a symbol of women's pursuit of workplace equality.

3.2.2. Japanese Designers and the Reinterpretation of Gender Fluidity

The little black dress has been imbued with diverse meanings across cultural contexts. Japanese designers Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo challenged Western fashion stereotypes through their "Black Shock" collections [10]. Yamamoto's designs strike a delicate balance between poetic imagery and spatial evocation, utilizing asymmetry, form-fitting silhouettes, unstructured layers, and precise tailoring to explore an androgynous aesthetic. He noted that black is no longer merely a color of elegance but one that invites exploration of its complexity and gender fluidity [11]. British design critic Devan Sudjic (1952–) argued that Kawakubo's work creates "clothing that allows wearers to freely explore their identities." As Hall's theory of negotiated interpretation suggests, Kawakubo's design philosophy redefines the concept of authorship in fashion, emphasizing a democratic collaboration between the wearer and the designer [8]. The final form of the garment depends on both the designer's vision and the wearer's interpretation [11].

3.2.3. Beauvoirian Criticism and Feminist Controversies

Although the little black dress has long been celebrated as a symbol of women's freedom, this view has not been universally accepted. Simone de Beauvoir critically examined the gendering of women's clothing in The Second Sex, arguing that women's choice of dresses might reflect an unconscious acceptance of the "sexual object" role imposed by societal conditioning. Her critique represents an oppositional interpretation, suggesting that the little black dress is not a true emblem of freedom but rather a disguised reinforcement of gender norms.

However, contemporary feminists have proposed alternative perspectives. Some scholars argue that wearing a dress can be an act of free expression rather than submission to the male gaze. The little black dress is not merely an article of clothing but a symbol of autonomous choice; women who wear it may be celebrating their femininity rather than conforming to patriarchal expectations.

The evolution of the little black dress exemplifies the applicability of Hall's encoding-decoding theory in fashion communication. This phenomenon not only underscores the semiotic nature of fashion but also highlights how women, within evolving social structures, continually shape and reshape their identities through clothing.

4. The Role of Media in Shaping Gender Images in Fashion

4.1. The Construction of Gender Identity in Conventional Media

Photography, as a powerful visual medium, plays a significant role in reinforcing gender stereotypes in fashion media.

In the process of conventional communication, fashion is not merely an external representation of personal identity but also a reflection of social power structures [1]. Through photography styles,

narrative language, and visual symbolism, fashion magazines construct and reinforce the mainstream media's understanding of gender norms.

4.1.1. Photography reinforces gender stereotypes

Drawing on Diana Crane, many fashion magazines (such as Vogue) use specific gestures to depict women's subordinate status [1]. For instance, women are often photographed in vulnerable poses, lying on the ground with their bodies contorted, which can be seen as a form of "Ritualization of Subordination." In these instances, women are portrayed as weak and submissive.

Moreover, racial stereotypes are often intertwined with gender stereotypes. For example, African American women are frequently depicted as sitting on the ground and wearing flashy clothing [1]. This posture is interpreted as a racially biased stereotype, suggesting that they are "foreign" or "primitive." This mode of representation not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also exacerbates racial stereotypes.

This diffusion process chronically constructs and solidifies stereotypes of gender and culture, instilling fixed sexual meanings into specific gender identities.

4.2. The Emergence of UGC Challenges Conventional Gender Narratives

4.2.1. Transformation of Communication Mode

Traditional fashion media have long relied on a "top-down" one-way communication model, with the audience primarily playing the role of passive recipients. However, with the rise of social media, the communication model has gradually shifted towards a decentralized "bottom-up" direction.

Social media platforms provide users with the space to freely express themselves and challenge traditional gender frameworks, breaking the monopoly of traditional fashion media on gender narratives. Marshall McLuhan defined clothing as "the extension of human skin" and regarded the adaptation to fashion as a creation of social media [12].

This theory provides an important theoretical basis for understanding how social media reconstructs the fashion communication model, emphasizing the profound influence of media technology on individual identity expression and social interaction.

4.2.2. Enhancement of the Audience's Initiative

In recent decades, research has shown that modern female readers no longer passively accept the gender images constructed by the media when reading fashion magazines. Instead, they screen and critique the content based on their own experiences. From the perspective of Diana Crane, in *Women's Interpretations of Fashion Photographs*, female respondents tend to support the modernist view of clothing, believing that clothing should consistently express personal identity rather than reshape identity through frequent style changes, as advocated by fashion magazines like Vogue [1]. This finding indicates that the attitudes of female readers towards fashion media are not entirely passive but rather possess significant critical and selective qualities. This critical interpretation behavior not only reflects the active participation of the audience in engaging with media content but also reveals the limitations of fashion media in gender narratives.

Furthermore, Arlene Oak and Julia Petrov point out that What Not To Wear (WNTW), a TV program, successfully combined the authority of traditional fashion reporting with the emotional resonance of new journalism [13]. By presenting real-life scenarios of individuals, the program enabled viewers not only to obtain practical fashion advice but also to experience the emotional process of identity transformation.

This research perspective provides new insights into understanding the diversity and complexity of fashion media and also reveals the significant influence of media forms on the audience's acceptance and interpretation of fashion information.

5. Conclusion

This essay applies the communication theory to systematically analyze the role of fashion plays in gender identity and power structure. The result proves the following points: Firstly, symbolic interaction indicates that a garment, rather than a statement decoration, serves as a symbol can be (re)defined by the social cultural contexts, thereby contributing to reconstruct the social power structure (like women break the male-dominant authority through the appropriation of the suit). Secondly, the decoding-encoding theory reveals the fashion fluidity in gender identity and self-expression. From the original little black dress (1926, Coco Chanel version) to Yohji Yamamoto's gender-neutral cuts of black skirts, it shows that a garment can be interpreted and reinterpreted into multiple forms, instilling it with diverse cultural connotations. Thirdly, drawing on the comparison between the conventional and modern media, the audiences have experienced a shift from passive acceptance to active participation. Through this process, the wearer challenges the fixed binary gender narrative. The study thus concludes that fashion functions not only as a mirror of social power but also as a vital force in driving the renewal of gender concepts. The symbolic meanings of fashion and its communication mechanisms interplay to shape the fluid expression of gender identities.

The value of this research can be categorized into 3 aspects: Firstly, at the theoretical level, the research constructs an interdisciplinary framework by integrating symbolic interaction, encoding/decoding, and media representation theory. Secondly, at the practical level, the research discloses the relationship of power transformation between designer and wearer, providing further suggestions for the fashion industry. Thirdly, at the social level, it demonstrates how fashion functions as a weapon to combat social inequality. Those findings solidify the theoretical and practical foundations for future study.

Future research can be furthered in the following directions: How AI-generated designs challenge traditional gender aesthetic paradigms; The Body expression and Material Culture in the Circular Economy; How to Quantify the Effectiveness of Fashion Communication through Calculation.

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