

# The Social Effect Of Clothing

People wear clothes in order to protect their bodies from natural conditions. Heat, extreme cold weather, humidity, and strong sunlight, are some of the reasons why people have begun wearing clothes in the first place. But human clothes have over the years evolved into a symbol in itself. Conveying a social message to a variety of decoders, clothes, accessories, and decorations, have become a reliable way to denote social status, occupation, economic situation, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation and religious affiliation. Thus, for different people around the globe, clothes have become one of the most crucial parts-if not the only one-of a person appearance.

But, to be able to interpret what one is trying to state with the specific selection of garment or accessories he or she has on, the other party has to be adequately trained to receive and translate the "hidden" messages. This is the reason why stereotypes and characterizations have found a fertile ground to grow, although most are falsely used by those who attempt to translate the message.

Focusing on generalities an individual may comprehend only one part of the story the clothes another man or woman wears are conveying. Finding out which is the correct meaning of one's wardrobe has evolved into a study discipline over the years, helping researchers identify and consciously construct the underlying messages of another culture.

Then again, fashion is one of those industries that is constantly experiencing tremendous changes. Sticking with one type of message and filtering every clothing attempt using such a lucid base is totally wrong. Since the manner and the rate at which fashion changes varies among cultures and historic moments, the modern global citizens have to be able to exercise constant restructuring of their fashion principles and devote the necessary time and effort to translating the clothing patterns of different generations.

# Social & Class

Display of wealth through dress became customary in Europe in the late thirteenth century. Therefore, a person's class affiliation could be assessed with relative ease. Because dress was recognized as an expressive and a potent means of social distinction, it was often exploited in class warfare to gain leverage. Dress was capable of signifying one's culture, propriety, moral standards, economic status, and social power, and so it became a powerful tool to negotiate and structure social relations as well as to enforce class differences.

For example, the sumptuary laws in Europe in the Middle Ages emerged as a way to monitor and maintain social hierarchy and order through clothes. People's visual representation was prescriptive, standardized, and regulated to the minutest detail. The types of dress, the length and width of the garment, the use of particular materials, the colors and decorative elements, and the number of layers in the garment, for instance, were confined to specific class categories. However, after society's lower-class groups relentlessly challenged the class structure and evaded the sumptuary laws' strictures, the laws were finally removed from statute books in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The sartorial expression of difference in social rank is also historically cross-cultural. For example, in China, a robe in yellow, which stood for the center and the earth, was to be used only by the emperor. In Africa among the Hausa community, members of the ruling aristocracy wore large turbans and layers of several gowns made of expensive imported cloth to increase their body size and thus set them apart from the rest of the society. In Japan, the colors of the kimono, its weave, the way it was worn, the size and stiffness of the obi (sash), and accoutrements gave away the wearer's social rank and gentility.

# The History and Substance of Social Class System

Social class is a system of multilayered hierarchy among people. Historically, social stratification emerged as the consequence of surplus production. This surplus created the basis for economic inequality, and in turn prompted a ceaseless striving for upward mobility among people in the lower strata of society. Those who possess or have access to scarce resources tend to form the higher social class. In every society this elite has more power, authority, prestige, and privileges than those in the lower echelons. Therefore, society's values and rules are usually dictated by the upper classes.

## Social Class Theories

Philosopher and economist Karl Marx argued that class membership is defined by one's relationship to the means of production. According to Marx, society can be divided into two main groups: people who own the means of production and those who do not. These groups are in a perpetual, antagonistic relationship with one another, attempting either to keep up or reverse the status quo. Sociologist Max Weber extended Marx's ideas by contending that social class refers to a group of people who occupy similar positions of power, prestige, and privileges and share a life style that is a result of their economic rank in society. Social class theories are problematic for a number of reasons. They often conceptualize all classes as homogenous entities and do not adequately account for the disparities among different strata within a particular social class. These theories also tend to gloss over geographic variants of class manifestations, such as urban and rural areas. A host of other factors, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and even age or sexuality, further complicate the theories.

# Social Class in the Twenty-First Century

In the twenty-first century, assessing one's social class is no longer a straightforward task because categories have become blurred and the boundaries are no longer well defined or fixed. Now one's social class would be decided by one's life-style choices, consumption practices, time spent on leisure, patterns of social interaction, occupation, political leanings, personal values, educational level, and/or health and nutritional standards.

Since, in global capitalism, inter-and intra-class mobility is not only socially acceptable but encouraged, people do not develop a singular class-consciousness or distinct class culture. Instead, they make an effort to achieve self-representation and vie for the acceptance of their chosen peer group. The progress of technology has also helped provide access to comparable and often identical status symbols to people of different class backgrounds across the globe. At the same time, however, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues in his treatise *Distinction* (1984), the dominant social classes tend to possess not only wealth but "cultural capital" as well. In matters of dress, this capital manifests itself in the possession of refined taste and sensibilities that are passed down from generation to generation or are acquired in educational establishments.