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Course: Surface Pattern and Textile

Module: ADAD5004 Research in Practice

Word Count: 2439 without bibliography and quotations ; 2596 including quotations

Tutor: Julia Lockheart

Three Keywords: Identity, Narrative, Detail

Introduction

Fashion is not merely a practical necessity but a complex system of signs and meanings. As suggested by Barthes (2010) clothing operates similarly to language, where each garment or accessory functions as a signifier within a cultural code. This semiotic understanding of fashion allows us to explore how what we wear constructs narratives, reflects identities, and sends messages in a more subtle way than spoken words.

Fred Davis (1992) expands this by emphasizing the communicative power of fashion. He argues that dress is a form of 'nonverbal communication' a symbolic medium through which individuals express their social roles, moods, affiliations, or aspirations. In this case, the person is both the one who chooses what to wear and the one who is being seen and understood through those clothes. This is important for understanding identity - what someone wears not only shows who they are but also helps shape who they become.

The idea of a story helps to understand how fashion can say something. These stories may not go in a straight line, but they appear through things like style, fabric, or shape - choices that can show that someone feels, believes, or where they come from. Whether intentional or unconscious, each outfit can serve as a visual narrative shaped by personal and cultural meaning (Davis, 1992).

Equally important are the details within clothing - elements that might seem minor but carry deep symbolic weight. A worn leather jacket, an inherited brooch, or a visibly hand-repaired patch can serve as anchors of memory or markers of group identity. Details show the link between someone's inner world and how they appear on the outside - they turn simple clothes into something more personal and meaningful (Barthes, 2010).

This essay will look at how fashion shape's identity, builds narratives and uses detail as a symbolic tool. All these elements have something in common - they help people express who they are through how they look.

Identity

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2025), identity is "the things that make one person or group of people different from others."

Identity can be thought of as something that a person is born with, however, it can be shaped in life every day. While identity is often described through personality, culture, or background, clothing also plays a role in how our identity is built and seen. The way people dress can highlight parts of their identity. Clothes do not portray who a person is, they can also help an individual become who they want to be (Reilly, 2020) (see image 1).



Image 1: Alyson Tabbitha's amazing Wonder Woman Costume

This photo effectively demonstrates the connection between clothing and identity. The act of dressing as Wonder Woman allows the individual to step into a new persona, showing how clothes can influence our behaviour, confidence, and the way we present ourselves to the world.

It can be said that often clothes are like a 'second skin' but they are more than that. They are a tool used to build, perform, and sometimes even hide parts of a person's identity. When a person dresses, they do not just cover their body, they decide about how they want to be seen, and how they want to see themselves. Even if this is not an intention it still has an effect (Allum, 2024).

According to a report ***Enclothed Cognition*** (2012), which suggests that what a person wears wear can change to the way think and feel. For example, putting on a suit or structured jacket might make someone feel more powerful or confident. On the other hand, wearing something oversized and soft might make us feel comfortable or hidden. Our reflection changes depending on the fabric, the cut, the colour. And we might act differently based on how we feel in that outfit (Hajo, Galinsky, 2012).

In daily life, many roles are played by individuals, and they use clothes to switch between them. Just like actors change costumes between scenes, people change outfits depending on the social situation. This is not about being a false identity it is about adapting to different situations of life. Think about it, people wear professional clothes to show competence and seriousness. Wear special outfits for important life events: weddings, galas, graduations; when we want to stand out or show respect. In moments of grief, they wear mourning clothes simple, dark, quiet to reflect sadness and empathy. At home, people wear comfortable clothes that allow to rest, be ourselves without pressure. When they go out, they might wear something more expressive or eye-catching, depending on mood or the situation (Breward, Evans, 2005).

An outfit can evoke a slightly different version on the wearer. On one person, that individual may behave more confidently; on another - more reserved, playful or distant. The same body can show different sides of a person, influenced not only by their feelings but also by the way they present themselves. Clothing does not merely alter how individuals are perceived; it actively influences their behaviour, posture, and interaction with others. As noted by Davis (1992, p. 8)

[...] some combinations of clothes or a certain style emphasis 'means' will vary tremendously depending upon the identity of the wearer, the occasion, the place, the company, and even something as vague and transient as the wearer's and the viewer's moods.

This dynamic highlight the performative dimension of fashion, in which garments function as catalysts for different manifestations of identity.

Narrative

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2025), narrative is "a story or a description of a series of events."

In a symbolic sense, narrative can also be understood as a form of communication expressed through clothing. While narratives are commonly associated with spoken or written language, fashion can function as a non-verbal form of storytelling. Clothing choices may not describe events directly, but they often convey identity, emotions, values, or intentions. As some scholars point out, fashion plays a crucial role not only in self-expression, but also in social positioning

[...] through clothing people communicate some things about their persons, and at the collective level this typically results in locating them symbolically in some structured universe of status claims and life-style attachments. (Davis, 1992, p. 4)

Even a simple outfit can represent themes such as confidence, nostalgia, rebellion, or belonging. Every fashion decision, whether intentional or subconscious, contributes to an ongoing personal narrative. In this context, clothing serves not only as a physical covering but also as a medium for expressing identity and individuality (Davis, 1992).

Clothing choices reflect emotional states, social positions, and cultural backgrounds. Through garments, individuals communicate aspects of themselves and relate to their surroundings. Fashion can therefore be understood as a tool for constructing and expressing narratives (Davis, 1992).

Subcultures provide clear examples of how narrative is embedded in fashion. Punk fashion, for instance, expresses rebellion and independence. The use of DIY (Do It Yourself) elements such as ripped clothing, safety pins, and leather jackets symbolizes rejection of societal norms and conveys messages of resistance and freedom. This style builds a narrative of protest through aesthetic rebellion (Morgan, 2015).

Hip-hop fashion, especially in the 1990s, conveyed urban identity, social status, and group belonging. Baggy trousers, oversized jackets, baseball caps, gold chains, and athletic footwear were used not only for style but to express cultural affiliation and resilience. Hip-hop fashion followed its own rules. No one asked for permission – people took clothes and made them their own. Customizing outfits had a soul; it was a way to express identity. They reshaped clothes, like

widening or tightening pants, and created something new. This style inspired people to take control and wear what they truly wanted (News, 2023).

LARP, or Live Action Role-Playing, is a form of interactive storytelling where participants physically act out their characters in real-world settings. In LARPing, clothing plays a crucial role in the transformation of players into characters. Participants engage in creating and wearing elaborate costumes to tell the story of a character. These costumes are not just for show; they are integral to the narrative being built in the role-play. Through fabric choices, colours, textures, and accessories like weapons, players construct a visual and emotional identity for the characters they embody. The clothing is an active participant in creating the narrative of transformation it's a costume for the character's journey, but also for the player's own immersion into that world.

However, clothing is not always used to express individuality or group belonging. It may also function as a mask or form of self-protection. Oversized clothing, for example, may provide physical and emotional comfort or concealment. Dark, simple colours can help the wearer avoid attention or express reservedness. In these cases, clothing plays a defensive role, enabling individuals to hide or manage aspects of their identity (Davis, 1992).

Clothing is much more than fabric and threads; it is a language that communicates our identity, emotions, and beliefs, see image 2. Whether consciously chosen or not, fashion decisions tell stories about who people are, what they value, or how they wish to be seen. Through subcultures, costuming, and expressive or protective fashion, it becomes clear that clothing is not only functional - it is a medium of communication, construction, and storytelling.



Image 2: Lady with Punk

This photo shows a young punk sitting next to an older woman dressed in a more classic way. The contrast between their outfits highlights how fashion can express values and attitude. The punk's look with muted colours, unusual hair, and alternative clothes sends a message of rebellion and individuality. In comparison, the older woman represents a more conventional approach to dressing, showing how age, culture, and personal history shape style. The photo captures how fashion becomes a visual conversation between different generations and ways of thinking.

Detail

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2025), a detail is "a piece of information about something".

In fashion, details are much more than just small additions to an outfit; they are the key to unlocking the story behind it. While garments may be considered as complete items, it is often the smaller, individual elements that carry the most personal and symbolic significance. These can be anything from a necklace or a unique fabric pattern to the way a piece of clothing is constructed, and they carry personal significance (Barthes, 2010).

A simple jewellery like chain might seem like a minimal accessory, but for many, it can be a symbol of connection a family heirloom, a gift from a loved one, or a piece representing a certain moment in life (Beaumont, 2023). Similarly, a brooch or a pin on a jacket can speak volumes about a person's beliefs or interests. Whether it is a pin for a social cause, a punk band's logo, or a vintage brooch passed down, these details convey who a person is and what matters to them (Levian, 2023). What may appear secondary in material presence often becomes primary in narrative or emotional intent. As Roland Barthes (2010, p.78) notes:

[...] hence we can see how a simple 'detail' can quite easily constitute the object aimed at, even if it is connected to a support materially more important than itself; in a bracelet—it is surely the bracelet to which we want to call attention, which is the object aimed at, even if a dress is more important than a bracelet.

In addition to accessories, the very fabric and structure of our clothes reveal so much. The texture of a garment whether it is a soft cashmere sweater or a leather jacket can evoke different feelings. Leather, for example, often carries connotations of rebellion (Hart, 2025), while silk may symbolize elegance or luxury (Rohan, 2024). The choice of material is not random it speaks to a person's personality, values, or even their aspirations.

Patterns too, are powerful tools in storytelling. Floral prints might evoke femininity and romance (Wilson, 2024), while geometric or plaid patterns can express a more structured, even intellectual identity. Some patterns hold cultural significance, such as traditional patterns in ethnic clothing, which can represent one's heritage or the pride in their roots (Lawrence, 2025). On the other hand, a bold, oversized print may reflect confidence and a sense of individuality (Oates, 2024).

Then, there is colour one of the most obvious yet often overlooked aspects of fashion. Colours have a profound psychological effect on both the wearer and the observer. Bright red may convey power, passion, and confidence, while soft pastels may suggest calm, creativity, or gentleness. Black, a staple in many wardrobes, can symbolize sophistication, mystery, or even mourning, depending on the context. By choosing certain colours, individuals are subtly communicating how they want to be perceived, or even how they feel inside (Olesen, N/A).

Personal additions, such as hand-sewn patches, custom embroidery, or distressed items, brings a unique touch to an outfit. These individual elements not only reflect the wearer's creativity but also their journey. For instance, a hand-embroidered jacket may carry personal memories, experiences, or values, while a patch added over time shows a connection to a specific community or cause. These small alterations allow people to make their clothes their own, adding a layer of intimacy to what they wear.

Fashion is a language of expression, and the details are the words. They give people the opportunity to communicate who they are without speaking. Through choices like jewellery, patterns, colours, and personal embellishments, individuals tell stories that might not be immediately obvious to others but hold deep personal meaning. These small, often unnoticed elements are what turn an outfit into a statement, making it unique to the person who wears it (Barthes, 2010) (see image 3).

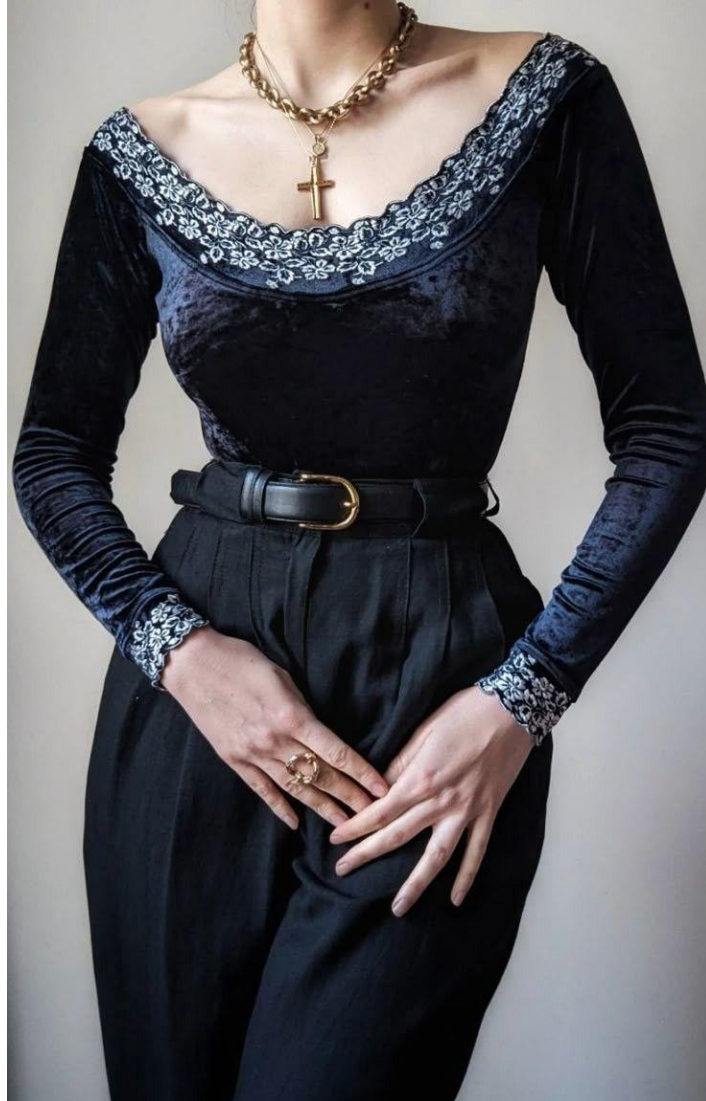


Image 3: Fashion details

This image shows an elegant outfit in dark navy tones, completed with trousers and a blouse with delicate details on the sleeves and collar. A large chain with a hanging cross, along with a ring on the hand, adds strong visual accents. These small elements, though subtle, bring depth to the outfit. They enrich the overall look, giving it personality and presence. The accessories do not only complete the clothes - they transform them, showing how detail can turn a simple outfit into something unique and expressive.

In conclusion, throughout the research on narrative, identity, and detail, it becomes clear how interconnected these concepts are. While they may initially appear as separate ideas, a closer examination reveals how they work together to form a cohesive whole.

In terms of clothing, narrative is not just about telling a story, but about how the clothes show something about the person wearing them at that moment. In subcultures like punk or hip-hop, or during LARP, clothing helps tell a story - showing emotions, beliefs, or rebellion. Detail plays a big part here, too. Things like jewellery or colours have meaning that is often understood within specific groups or cultures. This also affects identity. Clothing does not just reflect who someone is, it helps shape their sense of self.

The difference between these three concepts lies in their focus: narrative is about what is being told, identity is about who is telling it, and detail is about how it is being presented. Together, they form a unified system where clothing creates narrative through detail, and those details, in turn, construct or reveal identity.

Question:

“Are we what we wear, or are we what we want to tell through it?”

Sub-question:

“How does clothing influence identity?”

“Do we wear the clothes, or do the clothes wear us?”

“Do we choose clothes to fit in, or to stand out?”

“Can the way we dress change how others perceive us?”

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