

# Conspicuous Clothes Usage as a Semiotic Message

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate conspicuous clothes usage as a means of transmitting semiotic messages. The idea is further developed, dividing this usage into different sub-types, each sending a different message. The first to write on the topic of conspicuous consumption is the American economist Thorstein Veblen (1899). On his view, the consumption of certain goods is mostly based on the desire for showing a high social standard. The interest in conspicuous consumption has grown since the 1980's, which is also when brand image starts to increase in importance and companies begin to communicate through their brands a certain lifestyle and attitude towards life. If we consider the etymology of the word 'conspicuous' - "very noticeable or tending to attract attention", there we can already see the main message; namely, that (and how) clothes' users want to be perceived. In my view, conspicuous clothes' usage could be divided into two main groups – wearing branded clothes and wearing fashionable or trendy clothes. As branded are defined clothes labeled by a popular, well-known brand which, in addition, communicates a certain lifestyle and values since brand communication usually spreads far beyond the phenomenon of clothing and fashion. Fashionable clothes are defined according to Laver's law (1940) and wearing clothes that are trendy communicates a different message to the surrounding world from wearing branded ones. For, wearing clothes that are in line with the latest fashion is a sign that the person wants to stand out from the crowd. Individuals striving to wear fashionable clothes could be defined according to the theory of Everett M. Rogers for the Diffusion of Innovations (1962). His theory refers to innovations in general and the way different people adopt them but it could be fruitfully applied to the usage of fashionable clothes. These two types of conspicuous clothes usage could be visually presented as a coordination system, where the Y axis is the branded clothes usage, while the X axis is the fashionable clothes axis.

This paper attempts to investigate the conspicuous clothes usage as a means of transmitting semiotic messages. The term «conspicuous» refers to very noticeable or attracting attention, often in a way that is not wanted. The first to write on the topic of conspicuous consumption is the Norwegian-American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). He is also the first who introduced the term «conspicuous consumption» in the meaning it is used even today. On his view, the consumption of certain goods is not based on real need but is mostly based on the desire for showing a high social standard. He was among the first to claim that economic behavior is both socially and individually determined.

«Conspicuous consumption» is a term used to describe the lavish spending on goods and services acquired mainly for the purpose of displaying income or wealth. In the mind of a conspicuous consumer, such display serves as a means of attaining or maintaining social status. In the American English language tradition a very similar but more colloquial term is «keeping up with the Joneses».

«Conspicuous consumption» could refer to the purchase or usage of any good but the most common products that it is used for are clothes.

Clothes have been used from ancient times for denoting the social status or function of their wearer through the different elements, colors or design.

The interest in conspicuous consumption has grown since the 1980's. The main reason for that is this is the period when brand image starts to increase in importance.

In my view, conspicuous clothes' usage could be divided into two main groups — wearing branded clothes and wearing fashionable or trendy clothes.

As «branded» I define clothes labeled by a popular, well-known brand which, in addition, communicates a certain lifestyle and values since brand communication usually spreads far beyond the phenomenon of clothing and fashion.

«Brand» is a marketing term, which simple definition would be: «*a name or trademark connected with a product or producer*». However, different marketing and advertising specialists give different definitions to «brand». According to the website «BuildingBrands» there is no one accepted definition of «brand» and they propose several:

*...a name, sign or symbol used to identify items or services of the seller(s) and to differentiate them from goods of competitors. (The Dictionary of Business and Management)*

*Simply put, a brand is a promise. By identifying and authenticating a product or service it delivers a pledge of satisfaction and quality. (Walter Landor, advertising specialist)*

*A set of assets (or liabilities) linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds to (or subtracts from) the value provided by a product or service... (David Aaker, marketing specialist)*

*A brand is the most valuable real-estate in the world, a corner of the consumer's mind.*

*A brand is a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer.»*

For the purpose of this paper I would accept the last definition as giving the most comprehensive idea of «brand», as this term refers mostly to a mental construct in consumers mind, which is usually created through the means of advertising and marketing instruments.

With the development of brands of different products companies begin to communicate through these brands certain lifestyles and attitudes towards life

Fashionable or trendy clothes, on the other side, are clothes which are defined according to Laver's law (1940) and are the clothes that he calls also «smart».

James Laver (1899-1975) was an author, art historian, and museum curator who acted as Keeper of Prints, Drawings and Paintings for the Victoria and Albert Museum between 1938 and 1959. He was also among the first to write on fashion history (*Costume & Fashion. A Concise History*).

The so called Laver's Law was an attempt to compress the complex cycle of fashion change and the general attitude towards any certain style or period into a simple timeline. It first appeared in *Taste and Fashion* (1937):

Indecent	10 years before its time
Shameless	5 years before its time
Outré (Daring)	1 year before its time
Smart	'Current Fashion'
Dowdy	1 year after its time
Hideous	10 years after its time
Ridiculous	20 years after its time
Amusing	30 years after its time
Quaint	50 years after its time
Charming	70 years after its time
Romantic	100 years after its time
Beautiful	150 years after its time

In my view branded and trendy («smart») clothes communicate different semiotic messages to the outer world.

Wearing clothes that are in line with the latest fashion is a sign that the person wants to stand out from the crowd. Individuals striving to wear fashionable clothes could be defined according to the theory of Everett M. Rogers for the Diffusion of Innovations (1962). His theory refers to innovations in general and the way different people adopt them but it could be successfully applied to the usage of fashionable clothes. According to this theory people could be defined into five groups according to their proneness to adopt innovations — innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Here, the people wearing trendy clothes would be the innovators. Thus, the semiotic message of the smart clothes would be: «I want to be different; I want to stand out from the crowd».

On the other side, consumers who buy branded products do it not only because of their functional characteristics but also because they «recognise» in these products the lifestyles or the values that they would like to identify with. Thus, the message of the branded clothes is related to the type of lifestyle or values these brands communicate. Thus, the message of the branded clothes would be: «I want to show that this brand values and lifestyle match mine».

These two types of conspicuous clothes usage could be visually presented as a coordination system, where the Y axis is the branded clothes usage, while the X axis is the fashionable clothes axis. Thus, the clothings could be allocated on this coordination system and four different quadrants — branded and smart clothes; branded and old-fashioned; not branded and smart; not branded and old-fashioned.

Majority of the branded clothes are also smart, as most of the companies try to deliver to their customers «the latest fashion». As an example here could be taken United Colors of Benetton. Yet, there are popular brands, which are currently perceived as old-fashioned. There are also brands which are positioned in more specific way, as their products strive more for functional than for fashion excellence. As such brand could be defined the mountain climbing equipment company Patagonia.

There are also clothes, which are not produced by popular labels but are according to the latest fashion.



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