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Anth 234

7 November 2011

Clothing and Social Status

Traditionally, humans wore clothing to satisfy basic needs such as protection from the elements and comfort. Over time, society diverged from this path, moving steadily in a new direction and continues in this direction into the present. Currently, consumers spend hundreds and even thousands of extra dollars each year in purchasing expensive brand name items. They sport garments that offer zero fulfillments of basic needs, and that often restrict comfort levels and productivity. What motivates this seemingly senseless shift away from functional garb? The answer draws reference from a variety of fields other than anthropology, ranging from marketing to psychology. The circles of information these areas of study provide overlap to reveal an underlying nature of clothing that propels the shift characterized above. Clothing reflects what we want to display to the world. It speaks to our character and standing. As it turns out, clothing publicly illustrates to others who we are, and more importantly, divulges our social status. Therefore, the real mystery concerns just *how* the clothing we purchase communicates social status and why we buy into this construct from a neo-classical, social, and cultural perspective.

Throughout history, many people from various fields found themselves consumed with the relationship between dress and social status. Thorstein Veblen, author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, emerged as one of the most prominent

figures on this front claiming, “our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance”. Furthermore, he observes, “admitted expenditure for display is more obviously present, and is, perhaps, more universally practiced in the matter of dress than in any other line of consumption” (Veblen 1899). This meaning that the purchase, and ensuing display, of clothing constitutes the most commonly used method of exhibiting ones class membership. In addition, Veblen viewed the upper class, what he termed the “leisure class”, as a leading force in society. In his opinion, the remainder of the population attempts to emulate the leisure class, “at least in appearance” (Veblen 1899). This practice compares to modern day celebrities, as many people attempt to emulate their styles. Those belonging to Veblen’s leisure class practice what he refers to as “conspicuous consumption”. Conspicuous consumption composes a way for people to demonstrate their wealth, more specifically in this case, through what they wear. Proof of wealth manifests itself in the price of clothing we wear, as well as its functionality and durability. Clearly the adornment of more expensive garments demonstrates a higher level of wealth than cheaper apparel communicates. The functionality of clothing offers a more obvious level of affluence over price. The less productivity an article of clothing offers the better; for it illustrates belonging to the leisure class. The high heel symbolizes a classic example employed by Veblen to get this point across. As he puts it, “the women’s shoe adds the so called French heel to the evidence of enforced leisure afforded by its polish; because this heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work extremely difficult” (Veblen 1899). He also turns towards items such as women’s corsets and men’s ties to exemplify how restricted functionality

of attire points toward wealth. A woman can barely breathe while wearing a corset, let alone get any productive work done. Similarly, a man's necktie portrays an absence of blue-collar manufacturing jobs that usually yield lower incomes. The durability of clothing speaks to the financial standing of the wearer as well. Delicate garments, made of materials such as lace and silk, express the ability of their owners to replace them often through the purchase of additional goods. Not to mention the presence of an event to wear them to, or the cost necessary for cleaning them. Although the afore mentioned conditions seem backwards and nonsensical, Veblen uses the neo-classical model of utility to explain this odd trend present in society. The way he explains it, the utility we receive from buying clothing comes from the better light we expect to be seen in, not from the practical function of the good compared to its price. As Ken McCormick, author of *Veblen in Plain English*, purports, "conspicuous consumption alters how people perceive the value of goods. Instead of looking at a goods ability to satisfy a physical need, people begin to consider the goods ability to demonstrate wealth. Expensive goods come to be valued because they are expensive. A good that is the most expensive of its type is the best choice for displaying wealth. The habit of thinking along these lines leads to what Veblen calls 'pecuniary cannons of taste'. Expensive goods are preferred to cheaper ones because they are better at displaying pecuniary strength" (McCormick 2006). Thus, utility comes from how well the item can illustrate social status through conspicuous consumption.

Research in the form of observations, surveys, and personal interviews corroborate Veblen's claims that clothing demonstrates social class, as well as his idea of conspicuous consumption. For a broad range of data, observations were continuous.

I observed the clothing people wore in a variety of different situations and places. These included, but are not limited to; classes at multiple times throughout the day, different kinds of restaurants, and parties ranging from college, to engagement. Surveys provided much information that could be easily compared, but lacked the freedom to delve deeper into the topic at hand. Personal interviews proved able to make up in this department and offered interesting takes and opinions. I employed interview styles including structured, formal, and informal in order to evaluate the types of responses each would yield and be most useful. Later, I found myself evolving from structured, formal interviews into more informal interviews, because it allowed me to gather information specific and relevant to why people wear the clothes they do.

Another important factor in the equation revealed itself through the research as well; the influence of brand name apparel on our clothing choices. This aspect ties into Veblen's alleged conspicuous consumption; consumers want others to distinguish their garb as more expensive than others through brand recognition. Anonymous surveys produced much information to further expose this feature in society. When asked what types of clothing or stores they associated with wealthy people, participants in the survey produced a majority of answers not in the realm of *types* of clothing, but *brands* of clothing. A type of clothing would include items such as high heeled shoes, neckties, ball gowns, skirts, suits, etc. Although some of these appeared on survey responses, brands obviously overwhelmed the replies of participants. In accordance with Veblen's theories, these *types* of garments hold standing as well. As discussed earlier, clothing that restricts productivity shows wealth. Common brands the contributors to the survey related to wealth amassed to Louis Vuitton, Coach, Gucci, Polo Ralph Lauren, Calvin

Klein, and Armani. It does not require much digging to discover that these brands of clothing cost significantly more than others. The stores the participants identified in relation to wealth were comprised of department stores such as Bloomingdales. In other words, stores where exclusive brands reside until purchase. In addition to survey results, basic observations of the fashion in which people dress reveal the same prominence of brands. Almost every part of even the most ordinary of outfits possesses some sort of logo representing a certain brand. The backs of boots boast "Ugg". The corners of shirts host a variety of tiny pictures, a prominent example being a tiny athlete, polo stick in hand, atop a horse; a symbol most recognize as belonging to Ralph Lauren. Even apparel as basic of a pair of denim blue jeans identify with brands, the back pockets serve as a billboard for such information. Interestingly enough, when those included in the survey were asked to identify clothing and stores they thought those belonging to the middle class frequented, different results emerged. Stores and places to shop represented mainstream responses over the earlier brand name trend. Popular answers included stores such as JC Penny, Walmart, Target, Khol's, and Forever 21. Compared to the prices of the brand name items mentioned earlier, these stores sell clothing at a much lower price bracket. This brings up another interesting point related to Veblen. This idea of conspicuous leisure parallels that of conspicuous consumption, and conspicuous leisure is demonstrated through these differences in shopping patterns. Surveys revealed that those a part of upper classes buy brands, which requires shopping at stores specifically designated to those brands, or clothing in general. On the other hand, stores those partakers in the survey designated to the middle class were not specifically dedicated to clothing, but other consumer goods as

well. This exhibits conspicuous leisure because those that enjoy wealth also enjoy more time to spend doing unproductive things such as shopping, while those belonging to the middle class need to use their time more wisely and buy more than just one time of good when they go out (Belk 1999). However, if the participants in the survey perceived a difference in dress between the upper and middle class, how can it be true that all other classes seek to emulate the wealthy leisure class as Veblen asserts? Personal interviews delved further into this dilemma than surveys alone could. Although more expensive brands characterized the majority of wealthy people's wardrobes and stores that sell less pricy clothing characterized middle class people's wardrobes, some overlapping did occur. The true root of the difference was grounded in amount. Interviewees disclosed that the middle classes do try to imitate the upper classes through what they wear, but they possess far less of the clothes required to do so. They will also sacrifice things the upper classes do not need to in order to afford clothing they think will illustrate a high social class. Both marketing and psychology can delve deeper into explaining why brands prove so popular and demanded among consumers in regards to social status (Malefyt 2009).

Currently, media and advertising exists embedded in our culture. Everywhere we look we find ourselves prompted to buy something or some brand name item. Marketing ploys play on our emotions to persuade us to purchase things. Creators of advertisements are not ignorant of things like conspicuous consumption, but use them to their advantage to make profits (Hood 1966). Advertisements also play our fears and desires, mostly in the social structure. For example, advertisements featuring cigarettes or alcoholic beverages contain the subtext that says if the consumer does not purchase

the product, they will be marginalized in society. Similarly, breath mint, shampoo, and deodorant advertisements provide clear subtext that communicates without the product; we will surely be socially ostracized. Brands practice the same form of advertising with attire. The media and publicity they produce illustrates a type of lifestyle most of us aspire to, and at the same time supply the social ramifications of not purchasing the product (Danesi 2008). However, other sources of media such as television portray the so called leisure class that we aspire to in a negative light. But, “although some media frames show the rich and famous in a negative manner, they still glorify the material possessions and lifestyles of the upper classes” (Kendall 2005). This shows how marketing and advertisement architects use our desire to embody and identify with higher levels of social status to get us to purchase more expensive brand name products. This aspect applies mostly to the social perspective. As a society, we create distinguishable groups and identify them partly by the way they dress. A generic high school represents a classic microcosm of this phenomenon. Stereotypical groups that exist within a high school include preppy, jock, punk, and gothic. Explicit fashions become associated with these cliques. For example, collared, pastel colored shirts with preppy styles, and dark colored clothing with gothic students. Moreover, when participants in the survey and personal interviews faced questions concerning the times at which people in society change their clothing most of the provided answers could be categorized as social and cultural, rather than personal reasons. Specific answers to this question included special events and occasions, weddings, dances, and for “going out”. The first two common responses symbolize cultural reasons for shifting apparel. American culture dictates accepted garments for certain things, such a special events

and occasions that were mentioned in the interviews. A specific instance of this construct appeared through surveys and personal interviews as well; weddings. In American culture, it is common, and even expected, that guests attending a wedding dress in nicer clothes than on an average day. Also expected are certain types of clothing, including dresses, skirts, and heels for women, as well as suits and ties for men. In cases like this, it is important to dress a certain way to uphold social status, in addition to putting on display for others to observe. The third and fourth common responses to why people shift the way they dress of dances and “going out” represent more social anthropological perspectives. Institutions within society determine the way we dress, in addition to the social group we identify ourselves with. For example, those within a corporation are expected to dress a certain way depending on their status within the corporation, and reciprocally, the position of those within the corporation can be realized.

Another interesting point the research revealed about clothing and social status concerned the language the participants in the research used. As discussed earlier, language shifted when people were asked about styles the upper class wear over styles the middle class wear. When describing the upper class, people tended to mention brands, and while speaking to the attire of middle class, more stores came up. Language in regards to social status and clothing also tends to serve a reciprocal function. The more expensive something is, the more basically and negatively it is described. On the other hand, if something is less expensive is often spoken of in a more positive light. This is not done to off put conspicuous consumption, rather it is a social and cultural norm society follows to appear humble (Brooks 1979). Another

distinguishable feature that appeared during the research was between males and females. The males possessed a tendency to mention *types* of clothing, while women were more likely to produce name of brands and stores. The interviews and surveys brought the importance of language to center stage. A challenge in the research included finding words to use in information gathering that could get the appropriate question across without expressing bias or vagueness.

Structure and agency reared their heads in this study as well, and both proved present to clothing decisions. Observations and interviews revealed that sometimes structure ruled clothing choices. To be more specific, it became clear that some chose clothing to ascribe to their social status or social group. For example, one subject claimed, "I don't know why I wear what I do". When asked if her clothing looked similar to that of her friends, she replied "yes". On the other hand, agency appeared as well. Another interviewee stated she was proud to choose to wear clothes that made her stand out and look unique. She even said she created her own clothes on occasion to accomplish this goal. Clearly, structure and others influence some more by agency in choosing the clothes they sport.

All taken into account, the shift away from functionality as the derivative of utility to perceived social status is caused by what clothes mean and do in today's society. The information fields such as marketing in addition to anthropology reveals an underlying nature of clothing that propels the shift described above. Clothing reflects our social status. Although this may sound odd, it can be explained by looking at the issue from the neo-classical, social and cultural anthropological perspectives.

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