

Clothing and Style as Nonverbal Communication in the Society

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Abstract

In fashion, clothing and style is an important tool to evaluate one's significance in the society. Clothing and style have existed from ancient culture up to today's dressing style. The combination of clothing and style create a person's image that allows the wearer to feel comfortable and confident. In the olden days, dress codes were created and were responsible for depicting the social status of the wearer. The variation of clothes style in society became a tradition of symbolic differentiation amongst people in every ethnic all over the world. Today, in fashion, the language of clothes continues its importance as nonverbal communication to portray individuality, self-enhancement, and modernism.

Keywords - clothing, style, nonverbal communication, image, culture

1. Introduction

At the beginning of civilization, humans wore clothes intending to cover their bodies from cold weather and as a protection to their skin. Over time humans began to wear clothes for shelter and to cover certain parts of their bodies for modesty. During the Paleolithic period, humans covered their bodies using fur. Then, around 8000-3000 BC, humans began to use animal skins and between 3000-1000 BC, they began to use flax, hide, and woven material. Early clothing in the ancient world often reflected the social status of the wearer in a particular society. Cultural theorists outlined four practical functions of clothes: utility, modesty, immodesty (sexual attraction), and adornment. Later, Sproles (1979) added four more functions: symbolic differentiation, social affiliation, psychological self-enhancement, and modernism (Jones, 2011).

In traditional society, the meaning of clothing is a very important factor and often associated with a symbol of one's status, wealth, power, and personality. This signifies symbolic differentiation, which usually comes with rules. During the Malacca Sultanate in the Malay Archipelago, the ordinary Malay people were not allowed to wear white, yellow, and purple clothes. These colors were specific for the royals and those who disobeyed would be punished by the rulers. A yellow suit worn by the king signified his kingship, power, and sovereignty (Ismail, 2006). In regards to nonverbal communication, social affiliation carries the role and purpose of clothing practiced with certain dress codes to convey the message of the wearer to the mass. In traditional society, these dress codes helped them to protect their culture from foreign interference. In many countries today, modernism has changed their mindsets and very few people are left familiar with the dress codes. Today, clothing often gives an impression of the wearer's financial, educational, and professional status in the society that lingers around self-enhancement and modernism.

2. Style and Image

In general, clothes give a visual expression of the wearer to other people. The coordination of the items worn on a person's body creates style. Style creates image and identification of an individual. In fashion, one is free to wear any form of fashionable clothing to create a distinctive style and image of oneself. A person who is liked for his or her fashion style is fast becoming an influential consumer group (Kim, 2015). The design elements on fashion clothing such as colors, texture, and patterns on the fabric help a person to create the image they desire. These elements could portray whether the person is charming, romantic, intelligent, classy, modern, or even a conservative person.

Specific coordination of clothing style is called uniform. A uniform tells the public who a person is and his or her function in the community. The design of the uniform must function to the type of work performed; such as fire-resistant fabric is used in the making of a fireman's uniform to protect him from being burnt. Colors also may represent certain jobs, such as health workers, nurses, and clinical officers often wear white uniforms, surgeons wear green or blue uniforms, the police and security officers wear darker shades of blue or brown uniforms. The workers' position and ranks in the organization are symbolized by certain accessories and badges placed on the uniforms. Generally, the people working within the organizations know and understand the meaning of the accessories and badges used. The uniform also symbolizes the image of the organization represented by its wearer. Therefore, the workers are always expected to portray good conduct when wearing uniforms.

3. Social Affiliation

In a community, sometimes people dress alike to belong to a certain group. Saussure (1974) stated that semiotics is a science that studies the role of signs as a part of social life. The sign of an image is represented in the cognitive structure of the observer in the form of volume, colour, texture, shape, and so on. The signs give definitions to the mental concept, which is the meaning of the signs. For example, a person wearing a suit with a closed collar shirt and tie always reflects a formal situation that implies a professional character. In fashion, a perfect fit suit shows success, masculinity, power, and confidence. Ill-fitting suits denote the opposites and give a poor impression of the wearer. Black suits are always associated with a classic and formal manner, even sometimes regarded as very traditional. While people in navy and grey suits are seen as dependable and honest. People in unique colours and or patterned suits are regarded as creative and daring. They are seen as having a unique personality, dare to be different, and think outside the box (Breward, 2016).

In fashion, social groups create their own style and image to identify their resemblance. Usually, the style is defined as an expression of an individual or a group of people bearing a certain message to politicians or the mass. One of the popular ones is punk fashion. Punk started in the middle of the 1970s in London as an anarchic and aggressive movement that protests unemployment and social inequalities. This group defined themselves as anti-fashion urban youth street culture. They cut up old clothes from thrift shops, destroyed the fabrics, and refashioned the outfits in such a way to attract attention (Thomas, 2021). Then the style was picked up by fashion people in the industry and became exclusive.

Another example is the street fashion in Japan. The Japanese are known for their strict cultural values and dress codes. In Japan, Harajuku street fashion started as a cultural revolution against the country's lack of self-expression and individuality. Harajuku style disarrays the traditional values with western fashion. One of the most popular Harajuku styles is Lolita, which was inspired by the Victorian, Rococo, and Romantic periods. Lolita itself consists of many styles such as Goth Lolita, Guro Lolita, and Sweet Lolita (McKay, 2019). In general, dressing as Lolita is about expressing a person's feelings whether to show modesty and innocence (pastel colours) or grief and unhappiness (dark colours), to create personality and individuality.

4. Nonverbal Communication in Malay Culture

Today, the Malay community in Malaysia hardly practice dress codes in their traditional attire. Unlike the Japanese, the Malay community is more open to receiving foreign influences in their lifestyle. Although the form and shape of the Malay traditional attire are preserved, certain dress codes are no longer practiced. In the traditional Malay community, a sarong that has 'kepala kain' tells people of the wearer's social status by its placement on the body (Figure 1).

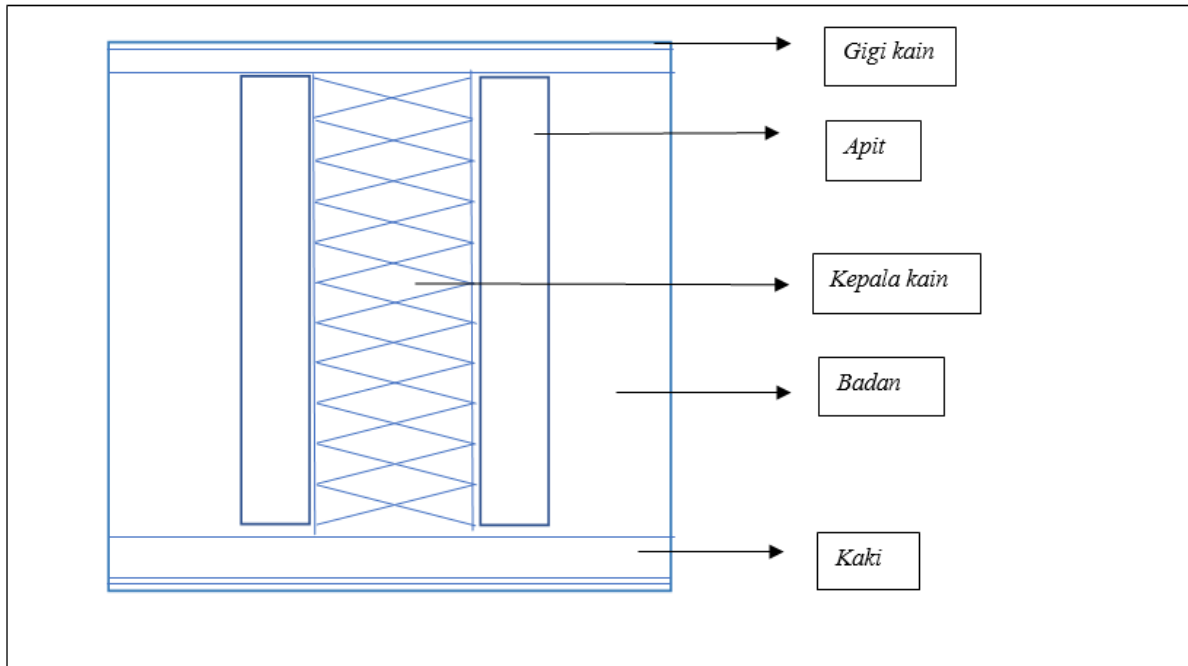


Figure 1. The structure of a sarong with kepala kain (Aris, A. 2020)

The Malay-Riau practiced the method of positioning the *kepala kain* of a sarong on the women's body to suggest a guideline for good integrity in public. If the center panel is positioned in front, the sign means unmarried woman while a married woman should place the center panel at the back of the body. The wife of a high-ranked officer should place the *kepala kain* in front, on the right side of the body while widows wore it on the left. According to the Malay-Riau tradition, the girls wear the *kepala kain* in front of their sarong to signify their responsibility to carry out and prolong the culture of the Malay community. On the other hand, mothers that wear their *kepala kain* at the back of their sarong signify that they are the ones responsible to uphold and deliver the culture to younger generations through life experience (Effendy, 2004).

As for men, they wear a shorter version of sarong, called *kain sampung*. *Kain sampung* (waist cloth) is worn outside the men's traditional costume, hanging waist down to the knee like a skirt. The purpose of wearing a waist cloth on top of the trousers is to signify modesty (Ismail, 2006). According to the Malay-Riau custom, the style of *kain sampung* (waist cloth) worn by a man could also identify his social position. In Johor, similar customs were also practiced a long time ago (Effendy, 2004). Young and unmarried men wear their *kain sampung* short, with two fingers or a palm width above the knee. Married men wear the *kain sampung* on their knees. Elder men or officers of high rank wear the *kain sampung* a palm width below the knee while religious officers, two palms size below the knee. As for ordinary people, the *kepala kain* is usually placed at the back of the body. However, the *kepala kain* would be placed on the left side of the body for the royal family and ministers. The king and queen wear their *kepala kain* on the right side of the body (Aziz, 2009).

There are also other items of the Malay traditional attire that carry significant meanings in their styling (Table 1). *Baju Kurung* is one of the very important garments in the Malay community. The garment has existed for more than 500 years and is still being used in the community. *Baju Kurung* is worn by Malay man and woman but with different coordination and style. *Baju Kurung* is also the main garment worn with *kain sarong* or styled with trousers, for the men. The *Baju Kurung* has two collar styles, one is a rounded neckline finished with

intricate handwork called *tulang belut* (eel's spine). This particular *Baju Kurung* is called *Baju Kurung Teluk Belanga* and the other has a standing collar closed with 5 to 7 stud buttons on its placket. This *Baju Kurung* is named *Baju Kurung Cekak Musang* (Aris. A., 2014).

Table 1. The summary of the indicator and meaning of dress codes in the Malay traditional attire is based on Malay culture (Aris, A. 2021).

Type of garment	Item	Person/Place	Indicator	Meaning
<i>Kain sarong</i>	Kepala kain	Woman	Front: unmarried Back: married Front, right side of the body: wife to a minister & aristocrats Front, left side of the body: widow	To practice good conduct in society.
		Palace	Back: ordinary people Right side of the body: King & Queen Left side of the body: royals	To differentiate rank and status.
<i>Kain sampung</i>	Length of kain sampung	Man	Above knees: unmarried men On the knees: married, ministers & aristocrats Below the knees: pious	To practice good conduct in society.
<i>Baju Kurung Cekak Musang</i>	Buttons	Woman	9 pieces – queen 7 pieces – royal family 5 pieces – princess	To differentiate rank and status.
		Man	5 pieces - general 7 pieces - aristocrats	To differentiate rank and status.
<i>Baju Kurung Leher Bulan & Baju kurung Teluk Belanga</i>	Button	Man & woman	1 piece	<i>Tauhid</i> , the oneness of Allah.
	Pockets	Man	3 pockets	<i>Islam, Iman & Ihsan</i> Islam, faith & compassion.

The practice of dress codes in the Malay traditional attire shows the importance of good conduct and ethics in society. The style signals and gives a message to the society of a person's social status embedded with their Islamic values. Today, not many people in the Malay community practice or realize the knowledge of Malay dress codes. The new generation wears traditional clothes in appreciation of their form and function and as national attire for formal events. The use of modern clothing among the Malay community is also one of the factors that cause the younger generation to lose interest in wearing traditional attire as everyday clothing.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, clothing and style speak on behalf of the wearer in both traditional and modern settings. The difference is, in traditional attire the clothing speaks using specific codes and specific messages to convey to other people. Whereas, in today's situation the communication depends on peoples' interpretation of the clothing based on how it is styled and the elements that accompany the garment. Traditional attire focuses on conveying ethics and moral values through its styling. Modern and fashionable clothing prioritize political issues, social problems, and individuality in the messages to be conveyed to the public. In both situations, clothing and style are important as self-enhancement and image building to the individual. It creates self-confidence and allows the clothes to speak for what the wearer believes in.

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