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Julia Twigg writes about Clothing and Identity

- 1 Clothes display, express and shape identity, imbuing it with a directly material reality. They thus offer a useful lens to explore the ways in which identities are constituted in modern culture. The links between clothing and identity have been understood in a number of ways. Historically, the most prominent has been in terms of social class, whereby clothing operates as a form of cultural capital, with fashions diffusing down the social hierarchy as they are adopted and abandoned by elites, and as lower groups take up the style. Competitive class emulation is thus the engine of fashion. 5
- 2 More recently, other aspects of identity have been increasingly emphasised. Of these, gender has been rather significant. Clothes have long been used to reproduce social and cultural notions of gender. Feminists tended to be critical of this system and its malignant impact on women's lives as it was seen as imposing oppressive forms of gender identity, embodying practices designed to objectify women, locking them into inauthentic forms of presentation, and reinforcing their cultural association with triviality. More recently, feminists influenced by postmodernism, have taken a less negative view. They now see fashion as part of a distinctive women's culture, an area of pleasure and expressivity that goes beyond the reproduction of patriarchy and capitalism. 10 15
- 3 The third major way in which clothing and identity has been theorised is in symbolic terms, whereby clothing is presented as a linguistic code. But if clothing is a code, like other cultural goods, such meanings are not always fixed or shared.
- 4 Clothing and identity have also been studied in terms of its role in self-realisation and presentation. These accounts reflect the postmodern themes of expressivity, choice and agency, and they chime well with the way in which contemporary fashion is presented with the emphasis on individual differentiation through consumption goods. However, these themes are greatly overstated. It is notable in modern society how similar people in fact appear. This is partly because individuals shop in a market that is shaped by mass production and the Fashion System, but it also reflects the principles of conformity and order. Wearing the right or appropriate clothes, fitting in rather than standing out – these are the dominant concerns of most people. Ironically, the increasing emphasis on individuality does not encourage us to create uniquely beautiful looks for ourselves. In fact, postmodern fluidity and optionality produce anxiety, with the wish to choose the right clothes and fear of choosing the wrong dominating many of our shopping choices. 20 25 30
- 5 Lastly, clothes allow us to explore the cultural constitution of age. Age is one of the key modes of self-identity: how we are perceived, who we socialise with, how we are ordered socially is crucially determined by our age, or what is often known as age ordering. This is perhaps easiest to see in relation to children, where children have worn distinctive forms of dress that reflect their position in the age order. For older people, there are current fashion styles that have an age association – for example the bright, loose resort wear that characterises the dress of, particularly American, elders. These leisure styles draw on the meanings of being at play, of being no longer constrained by the norms of business dress, with its emphasis on the sober, dark and structured. They are about comfort, with easy cut and integral spandex to allow for expanding figures. But at times they suggest a second childhood, with their toddler-like shapes and colours, easy clean fabrics; and in doing so point to another future, for these clothes are also common in care settings where there is a pervasive use of jogging bottoms and other forms of babywear. 35 40

- 6 Clothing forms the 'envelope' that contains the body and 'sends' it to the modern social world. 45
Clothing emphasises the plasticity of the body, the capacity of individuals and cultures to alter, mould, and reformulate it through cultural practices and through techniques like plastic surgery, implants, and technological extensions. These have implications for how we understand ageing and identity. Ultimately aging is not optional. There is a limit to the plasticity of the body. 50
Despite all the efforts of surgery, anti-ageing medicine, cosmetics and exercise, bodies still age and die. We thus need to understand ageing as both a physiological and cultural phenomenon. Some of the features of age-associated clothing arise from physiological changes. For example, the cut of clothes for older people is looser, designed to accommodate thickening waists and heavier busts. In terms of colour, the toned down palette associated with age does largely seem to be cultural, no longer making claims for attention, particularly sexual attention. 55
Colours such as scarlet are commonly described as unsuitable for older women, and their condemnation clearly draws in wider ideas of the meaning of scarlet as showy, blatant, sexual.
- 7 This brings to mind the two ways in which ageing relates to consumption culture. The first is broadly favourable. By this account, consumption forms a basis for building a cohesive society and is a source of pleasure and identity fashioning, so its extension to later years acts to 60
integrate older people into the mainstream. It means the end of the old culture of age ordering, of drab and frumpy dress: there is no reason why older people should not wear the same clothes, shop at the same fashion conscious shops as younger people. For women in particular it offers liberation from what is a very negative set of messages around appearance. The development of consumer culture means extending to older people the same access to self- 65
expression and identity formation that is solely enjoyed – it is asserted – by the young. The democratisation of fashion has produced a shift toward greater freedom in the self-construction in age. Fluidity, playfulness, optionality are thus extended to older people also. For women, in particular, consumption culture offers the possibility of continuity with an earlier self in the form of the women's culture of pleasure in dress. 70
- 8 Yet, exposure to consumption culture with its heavy emphasis on appearance and presentation sets up a set of demands in terms of which older people can only fail. Consumption culture is profoundly youth oriented, therefore undermining their confidence and well-being. The spread of consumption values and expectations may thus be oppressive rather than life-enhancing. This is particularly so for women on the account of the double standard in ageing whereby 75
women suffer disproportionately from the valuation of them in terms of their appearance, in contrast to men who are able to draw on more continuing sources of esteem.
- 9 Clothes are shaped by and reflect social and cultural concerns. The democratisation of fashion has allowed the increasing involvement of older people in consumption. We now have an extended plateau of late middle years, broken only by the onset of serious disability or illness, 80
in which there is continuity with earlier stages. Dress is part of this.