

Unit 4: Fashion and Personal Identity

Key Concepts:

- Students will identify why we wear clothing (protection, adornment, identification, modesty, and status).
- What is our own personal belief system about beauty, and where does it come from? How does the concept of modesty vary from culture to culture and over time?

Essential Questions:

- What do our clothes say about our values?
- What does our society say about beauty?



Student illustration of clothing worn for protection

Activity 1: What Are The Practical and Social Purposes of Clothing?

Essential Questions:

- What are the purposes and reasons we wear the clothes we choose to wear?
- How does our culture, community, and social group affect our fashion choices?

1. Read about the five reasons we wear clothing and discuss with the class. Split the class into five small groups to represent each category, and come up with lists of what the social and practical purposes of clothing are. Then come back together and share their lists with the class. Write them on the board, add more examples as brainstorming continues.

They are:

- Adornment- People add decoration or ornamentation on their bodies to feel more attractive and to give them a higher self-esteem. Examples would be: earrings, bracelets, neck chains, makeup, nail polish, tattoos.
- Protection- Clothing that provides protection from physical harm or injury to the body, from climate and environment. Examples would be:
 - Protection from weather- i.e. umbrellas, sunglasses, sweaters, hats, coats, gloves,
 - Protection from environment- i.e. shoes, sterile gloves, masks, spacesuit,
 - Protection from occupational hazards- i.e. hard hats, safety goggles, athletic equipment, contamination suits.
 - Protection from enemies-i.e. body shields, armor, camouflage, bullet-proof vests.
- Identification- Establishing who someone is or what they do.
Group identity is shown with fashion in uniforms which show a profession, a team, a heritage, or a social group. Examples would be uniforms for soldiers, waiters, clergy, hospital workers, employees of certain companies, etc. This uniformity is thought to decrease racial and religious barriers. Identification can also be signified in badges, class rings, and other jewelry. Psychological unity can be felt by uniforms identifying someone with a group such as: athletic uniforms, nuns habits, Scottish Highlanders tartan plaids for certain clans, Irish sweaters for different families. Ceremonial garments such as cap & gown, wedding gown, or tuxedoes signify identity with a certain group as well.
- Modesty- Covering the body according to the code of decency established by society. It differs from culture to culture and over time. Compare differences in swimsuits over time. Consider the custom and purposes of burkas in middle eastern countries, and the difference in what is considered modest there in comparison to here.
- Status- Some fashions are worn to gain higher rank in one's position in society or to gain peer approval. People pay more for designer labels or logos for this reason. Furs, diamond jewelry, and expensive clothing examples of clothing that makes people feel important. They show achievement with military stripes, merit badges on a scout, letters on a school jacket. In ancient societies, hunters wore pelts or other signs of their prey to impress others with their achievements and prowess.

(Source: See full lesson and handouts by Robin Lewis at <http://www.uen.org>)

1. Show images or PowerPoint to the class of various types of clothing purposes above. Have students identify what type is depicted as you show them. Alternative: Each student will find examples in magazines of the above reasons we wear clothes and collage onto paper, or put on pages in their journal.

Activity 2: Issues of Power in Fashion

1. Show students various images of people in a variety of clothing that could possibly show assumptions of different social classes. Ask students to write a description of each person as you show the images. Then discuss: How do we differentiate between social classes in our clothing?
2. Females giving up control to others- Dressing for helplessness, is male dominance implied? See the article [Women in Heels: Power and Helplessness](#)
 Note: Teachers should review this interesting article first on the history and social meanings of the high heeled shoe. You can decide if it will be appropriate or not for your students, and if not summarize the key points for the students in your own words.
 Examples: super high heels, extremely long fingernails, outfits/items that fasten in back such as corsets.
3. The reason for similarities in [Massachusetts State Police Uniforms](#) and [why they look like Nazi Uniforms](#).



Massachusetts State Police March in Parade

Activity 3: What is Beautiful and At What Price?



Venus De Milo 200-100 BC

- **Group Activity-** Discuss: What is considered beautiful in our society? (Show PowerPoint, slide show about the Golden Proportion, or You Tube video of historical ideals of beauty like in [Greek sculpture](#) , and [beauty ideals renaissance paintings](#) .

[The Math Behind Beauty](#)

- Name celebrities that are considered by many to be “beautiful”. Ask if they know someone who looks beautiful on the outside, but who is mean or angry on the inside. Ask if they know someone beautiful on the inside, and if that changed how they felt about them.

Alternate Group Activity: Watch the excellent documentary with host John Cleese entitled The Human Face. It was a TLC special in four 30 min. parts, but it can be purchased on DVD as a two-hour movie as well. Click here to see the summary of [The Human Face](#).

Activity 4: Body Image & Self Esteem

Look at one or all of the articles below:

- Body Image program [Campaign For Real Beauty](#) by Dove- or a video which shows the [effect of magazine photography and makeup on models](#), and what they look like without it.
- Alternate: [The Skin You're In](#) is a lesson plan which educates girls in how to have a positive body image.
- Teen Body Image / [fashion and the media](#)
- Seventeen- [Body Peace Project](#)
- [Girl Scouts Body Image Survey](#)
- [Toddlers and Tiaras and sexualizing 3-year olds](#)
- [Sexualized messages in advertising](#)
- American Psychological Association on the [Sexualization of Girls](#)
- Discuss inner beauty as opposed to outer beauty.
The [controversy about anorexic models](#):
- [Fashion Anorexia-Are Models Too Thin?](#)
- [Too Thin is Out](#)
- [Fashion As Communication](#) is a great article
- Visual Culture [Aesthetics of Fashion](#) and how it was influenced by classical female portraiture

Students contemplate what they personally consider beautiful. Respond in journals visually and with text about their own body image, what people have said to them, or what they have said to themselves about their body. Think about what other outside forces have influenced how you feel about your body? Can they think of someone who is a good influence on women for fashion? Here is one example- [Political fashion icons- Michelle Obama](#) .

Activity 5: How Far Would You Go For Fashion?

Read the article: [How Far Would You Go for Fashion?](#) By Daniel Slotnik. With a peer or the class, students discuss the article, and then list other ways that people sacrifice or suffer to be in fashion (i.e. girdles, heels, painful piercings, plastic surgery). Have them do a journal entry or a written response to consider some of the following questions:

- What are some concessions you've made to fashion, style or beauty, at any point in your life?
- Whether you're male or female, what have you done to fit in with, or go beyond, a current trend or to achieve a particular style or look?
- Do you think it's worth being uncomfortable to look good?

Activity 6: Homework or Individual Activity

After reading a passage from the book [Love, Loss, and What I Wore](#) by Ilene Beckerman , think about what clothing memories you may have. It may be a certain outfit you were wearing on a special occasion, or a favorite childhood outfit, or a special occasion or holiday. Write a 2 page paper on your personal fashion history, including a special memorable outfit. Include a visual journal page to go with it, using your choice of media.

Assessment:

How well did the student explore their personal values and convey messages and meaning about beauty and fashion in their work?