Identity and style:
Fashionable, collective, and personal

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Abstract: In this paper, I consider the relationship between fashion styles, with a focus on clothing and accessories, and identity. Specifically, I investigate the role played by fashion in three distinct, but often intertwined instances. First, I consider the relation between the choice of a given style and the establishment of collective identity. I then move to the analysis and comparison between what is implied by the possession of a "fashionable style" and by what is instead regarded as "personal style". The goal is to show both how fashionable styles emerge and gain popularity and how personal styles affect the notion of personal identity. Importantly, I argue for the active role of fashion: a personal style does not simply underline character traits, it is constitutive of identity and can effectively shape who we are.

Keywords: aesthetics; fashion; style; identity; narrative.

That there is a relationship between identity and fashion is not a novelty. Fashion choices, broadly construed, can be seen as ways of displaying and emphasizing a sense of identity, be it personal or connected to group and class identity. But fashion choices can also hinder a sense of identity; they can act as masks or as the representation of an identity one can wear, but does not own: it is the dual nature of fashion, for fashion is often seen as a blend of opposites, if not clashing categories (Shusterman 2017).

The contrasts, difficulties, and even incongruities that a reflection on identity and fashion can lead to are vast and hard to keep track of as changes in fashion unfold in tandem with the economic, social, and political developments of contemporary society. Such developments are fast, as we know, and fashion is not unaware of the importance of speed: the velocity of fashion is embodied by its intimate relation with the "new," a point, after all, that was made clear since early analyses of fashion as the ones provided by Walter Benjamin (1982) and Georg Simmel (1957).

This paper contributes to the literature on identity and fashion by introducing a third component: style. Specifically, I am persuaded that the relationship

between identity and fashion can be greatly clarified if analyzed in connection to three ways of thinking about style: collective styles, fashionable styles, and personal styles. The three are, as I will show, intertwined, but their differences are significant, especially when gauged in light of their contribution to the notion of identity.

With respect to the first categorization of style, collective style, I will focus on the role it plays in connection to gender and racial identity as well as in the creation of novel collective identities, as the ones fueled by social media. Attention will be given, in this latter case, to the intricate mechanism of inclusion/exclusion that is typically enacted in these instances, and, more narrowly, on what I like to refer to as a sense of "inclusion through exclusion".

The second manifestation of style, fashionable style, is interesting because, quite frankly, it is not always easy to define what counts as fashionable. Expensive and trendy clothes can be highly unfashionable, even crass, if not properly worn – money is not enough. Nor is it enough to rely uncritically on the choices of fashion trendsetters. Such choices are indeed important, but pointing to their relevancy is insufficient without an explanation of why and how certain aesthetic choices – such as picking a garment or a pattern – are made. Differently put, the understanding of what a fashionable style may be is dependent on an assessment of the ways in which trendsetters make aesthetic choices and promote new items.

A reflection on both collective and fashionable styles paves the way for the consideration of personal styles. Components of both inform my definition of personal style, a definition that is, in turn, linked to a specific view of identity where fashion is not simply a vehicle for the expression of one's personality, but something constitutive of it. For fashion to be a mode of agency is not enough to act as a mirror of one's perceived sense of self; fashion has instead to be seen as performing a certain act, one that is capable of discovering and perfecting a sense of self.

To ground my considerations on collective, fashionable, and personal styles in connection to identity is necessary to first outline what I take to be the preferred way of thinking about fashion. I, therefore, begin this paper by advocating the idea of fashion as a performance, and by introducing different ways, and reasons, for thinking of fashion in such a way. I will then move to the notion of style and work my way to the synergy between personal style and identity. To conclude, I will briefly reflect on what sense of identity can ultimately be afforded by the adoption and understanding of the proposed definition of personal style.

Before moving to the notion of fashion as a performance, it is important to specify that, while my arguments traffic mainly in the aesthetic of fashion, they

are not devoid, or outright ignoring, the interdisciplinary nature of any discussion on fashion. Not only are other branches of philosophy to be invoked, but also other fields: prominently sociology and fashion studies. I cannot claim expertise in all these areas. My modest goal is to introduce a novel, and hopefully compelling avenue of research with the hope that scholars in other fields will join the debate and correct me when needed.

1. *Fashion as a Performance*

Fashion is not just about items. It is not, differently put, about objects we acquire and store in our closets and apartments. This is not only because fashion is not limited to clothing and accessories, but also because even if the focus remains on clothing, it would be mistaken to reduce the understanding of clothing to static objects (Di Summa forthcoming). I am not committed, in this paper, to a comprehensive definition of fashion; I will therefore use fashion in a looser sense, where fashion is mostly, and simply, the idea of fashioning oneself.

Thinking of fashion as fashioning oneself is a step towards the idea of fashion as a performance, an aspect that is essential to the use of fashion, but also to an understanding of the fabrics and materiality of fashion. Multiple facets of fashion inspire a connection with movement, diachronicity, and performative acts. Movement and performance are quintessential features of fashion, ones that, in the present age of runways, adventurous fashion shows, and Instagram celebrities cannot be ignored. Allow me to list a number of reasons underscoring such a connection.

To begin with, for fashion to be what it is, it must be worn. Clothes can, of course, be collected, but they are designed to move and to move with us. They are intrinsically connected to the body. Elisabeth Wilson has claimed that fashion is an appendix of the body, a component of it (Wilson 1985). We can justify this statement by looking at ways in which fashion restricts the body, as in corsets or stiletto heels, but also enhances its performance, as in the case of athletic wear. Enhancing and impeding are both equally effective ways for fashion to make us aware of our corporeality and, in turn, of the connection between our bodies, gender, and identity (Bruzzi 1997: 35-66).

Less discussed is the importance of movement and performative elements in the displaying of clothes. Museum exhibits focusing on fashion such as the ones hosted by the Metropolitan Museum in New York face this obstacle: the staging of mannequins is supposed to distance the modality in which fashion is displayed from the ones adopted for, for example, sculpture. Museum visitors are given the impression of *encountering* the outfits, thus simulating the

interactivity that characterizes clothing and our daily experience with them.

The same is true of window displays. Bergdorf Goodman's ones are exemplary because of their ability to evoke narratives; suggesting imaginary worlds, they are far from constricting boxes for lifeless objects. Another peculiar, and compelling, example of window displays are Demna Gvasalia's installations for Harrods during the winter of 2018. The creative director of Balenciaga and founder of Vetements, a much spoken of, if not entirely sensational "design collective," Gvasalia filled the windows with clothes belonging to the store's employees and further invited the public to donate their clothes to the installation. The message here is twofold: on the one hand, the installation reminds us that clothes move in parallel with our lives, they age with it, from being purchased to being discarded; on the other hand, the work delivers a criticism of fast fashion and the speed with which high-end stores such as Harrods move from collection to collection.

The performative nature of clothes is also the backbone of fashion shows, and it is embodied in the runaway. It is hard not to think of the outrageously ambitious shows put in together in the 1990s. Designers such as Alexander McQueen – who does not remember his Spring 1999 show, where supermodel Shalom Harlow stood on a rotating platform while being spray-painted in neon yellow and black by a programmed robot? – Martin Margiela and his subversions of the rules of the catwalk (and in part of its commercial function), and Rei Kawakubu's irreverent *Sleep* are all examples of the so-called "radical catwalk," a hybrid between fashion, performance art, and socio-political commentary (Khan 2000: 114).

More recent examples follow, if not accentuate this trend. Fashion houses are increasingly being led, especially in the past couple of years, by extremely young designers who are both rethinking the commercialization of their product (Instagram is better than Vogue) and interrogating and problematizing the space represented by the runway. Daniel Roseberry, appointed by Schiaparelli at only 33 years old, was on the runway of the 2019-2020 Fall/Winter show in Paris, sitting and sketching as models walked past and around him. The runway is about movement and walking, but it is also the product of a lengthy performance that goes from the ideation and conceptualization of a garment to sketching, tailoring, and wearing: runways are more than simple displays. The thirty minutes allocated to each designer or fashion house are trackers of social, political, and cultural movements, with the past two years focusing on the #metoo movement and, in 2019/2020, on sustainable fashion (Friedman 2020).

The spectacle of the runway is matched by another one: collections. Collections confirm the importance of emphasizing the performative nature of fashion because they can be prime examples of movements within the his-

tory of fashion itself. Fashion has been accused of imposing commercialism through the repetition of styles and the surge of fast-fashion; as Lars Svedsen claims, fashion is based on a logic of supplementation "by which all trends are recyclable and a new fashion hardly aims at replacing all those that have gone before, but rather contents itself with supplementing them. […] the old and the new – or rather, perhaps, the old and the old – exist side by side." (Svendsen 2006: 33).

 While not entirely incorrect, this statement overlooks the ability of fashion to play and experiment. At times, even repeating a style is a way of experimenting. The already mentioned Martin Margiela has notoriously included second-hand clothing with collections incorporating previously seen items. The rise of vintage is, ultimately, about the creative use of repetition – one that, in its best examples, is based on a critical understanding of the history of fashion. Experimentation in repetition is also the foundation of iconic styles: from the little black dress, first conceived by Christian Dior, to Marlon Brando and James Dean's simple white T-shirt.

New trends in fashion also depend on "knowing" what to repeat. Batsheva Hay has reinterpreted the modest sartorial look of Victorian dresses (Russell 2018), athleisure repeats the "gym/disco culture" of the 1980s, and street style echoes geographical and cultural urban realities across the globe. Repetition can lead to novelty: it is still movement, forward movement.

The emphasis I am giving to repetition does not imply, however, that movement ought not to be associated with sheer creativity. Charles James' gowns, Hussein Chalayan's "Table-dress," and more recently Iris Van Herpen's "hi-tech couture" are wildly innovative and highlight the transformative, experimental, and creative essence of fashion, independently to its reliance on repetition (Mead 2017).

Another relevant standpoint from which to observe, and defend, the necessity of thinking of fashion as a performance is the relation between fashion, moving pictures, and, more broadly, the entertainment industry. Fashion studies scholar Stella Bruzzi has written extensively on the topic: on how the film industry has affected the fashion industry and vice versa, and on how costumes are important in themselves and not just in relation to the film's narrative (1997). It is also, in this respect, essential not to forget the work of costume designers, which is often, and sadly, ignored by the literature. Costumes do not have tags, and their creators are often left in the shadows, but they are essential. Costumes embody the personality of a character. As Deborah Nadoolman Landis, a costume designer, historian, and founding director and chair of the David C. Copley Center for Costume Design at UCLA, claims, costume designers, while working within the limits imposed by the director, create a

person, and a person wakes up and go to work every day. When thinking of a costume one is supposed to think of an entire wardrobe: from items that might have been passed over by a relative, to mundane ones, to the ones that can steal a look (Landis 2012). Not only is then fashion in film related to the kind of performance we see enacted in a movie, it is also about the kind of performance that life ultimately is.[1]

One concluding thought, immediately connected to the relation between fashion and life itself, further cements the performative nature of fashion, its undissolvable relation to movement: it is the very bond between fashion and daily and life experience. Clothes are associated with stages of life, from baby clothes to school uniforms; as we grow past those phases we grow past those clothes. We move with them, and with them we age.

2. *Fashion as a performance and the performative identities*

In the previous section, I provided several reasons, and examples, advocating for a conception of fashion as a performance, as something intrinsically related to movement, change, and, as in the case of a number of fashion designers and fashion houses, as a locus for creativity and experimentation.

However, the purpose of this paper is to investigate a different angle in the dynamics of fashion: its relation to identity and the notion of style. As mentioned in my introduction, a better understanding of this synergy can be obtained by focusing on the distinction between collective, fashionable, and personal styles and their connection to the development, of a sense of identity.

The goal, in light of the analysis of collective and fashionable styles, is to illustrate what a notion of personal style implies and why it is directly related to identity. My account of what a personal style is, as the reader will realize, rather narrow, but it is nonetheless significant. The connection between fashion and identity has been made before, but the boundaries have always been loose and poorly sketched. A narrower and more focused analysis is thus necessary, especially for those, such as myself, who do believe in the ability of fashion to exercise a strong role in the development of identity. Fashion, I argue, can be agent in the disclosure and discovery of who we are: determining how it can "act" is not necessarily an easy task, but it is a central concern of this paper.

2.1. *Style and Collective Identities*

It is inevitable, when discussing collective identity and fashion, to look at the sort of collective identity that is individuated by discussions on gender and

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[1]   From a private conversation with Dr. Landis, whom I thank.

race. Fashion is tied to what it means to be a woman, to belong to a specific class, race, etc., and while it is a crucial component in the establishment of collective identity, it is also a problematic one. As Marjorie Jolles & Shira Tarrant, the editors of *Fashion Talks*, a collection of essays aiming at the re-positioning of fashion within feminist theory, state: "[Fashion] enables and constrains expression in ways that are uniquely raced, gendered, classed, sexed, and bound to national and cultural histories" (Jolles & Tarrant 2012: 1).

When looking at hindrances and limitations, both aesthetic and moral, imposed by fashion and its standards: multiple examples show how fashion can mask identity and/or produce fictive, limiting, and segregating identities.

I do not need to iterate, in the context of this paper, that women feel societal pressure to conform to "feminine" standards, and that they are virtually forced to pursue unnatural (and often unhealthy) fitness and beauty standards based on sexual desirability. Sadly, this is old news. For women of color, issues are exacerbated. Black feminist scholars, as well as Paul Taylor in his seminal work on black aesthetics, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics (Taylor 2016) discuss*, among other issues, natural hair and straightening which, as a practice, cruelly points to how African-American women who do not have what in intimate circles is defined as "good hair" (hair that is mostly straight and easy to comb and style) have to conform to the standards followed by white women in order to achieve "acceptable" standards of beauty.

However, and without playing down the pervasiveness and problematics of these issues, we are also, with a glimpse of hope, finally noticing potential changes, changes that are made possible by fashion. It is worth mentioning examples such as the Quann sisters, prominent Brooklyn-based fashion bloggers, who are vocal advocates of natural hair and black beauty. They are using fashion – and the choice not to follow white women's beauty standards – to express their identity and the sense of pride and recognition that follows from its assertion.

Similarly, strands of feminist and queer literature are beginning to point to a more critically engaging and engaged dimension of fashion. Samantha Brennan, for example, has written eloquently on the relation between fashion and recognition in the communication and display of sexual identity (Brennan 2011). In her attempt to challenge a certain feminist disdain for fashion, she re-interprets the "personal is political" slogan in light of the fashion choices that can help the expression of sexuality within the LGBTQ community, thus echoing, in a way, Judith Butler's notion of gender as a series of performances (Butler 1980: 134).

Madison Moore, writing on the connection between "fabulous" outfits and queer and brown identity, has also amply, and convincingly, defended the im-

portance of fashion as a form of self-expression. To be fabulous is to go beyond gender; it is the creation of a space that is social as well as political, and that allows for creativity, imagination, and acts of radical transformation (Moore 2018).

Any discussion of fashion and collective identity inevitably includes, as already stated, a reflection on gender and race. But, nowadays, it is necessary also to include the complex role played by social media in the establishment, construction, and framing of collective identity. Moore, whom I mentioned above, is keenly aware of this phenomenon. He notes, for example, how while Instagram videos and pictures can be the means through which a community is given expression and support, they can also prove somewhat shallow for, in the end, media presence is not *always* presence. In his interview with Alok Vaid-Menon, a transfeminine multimedia performance artist, this component becomes apparent (Moore 2018: 47-58). After all, Vaid-Menon remarks, where are the people "loving" images in a world in which being a (fabulous) queer and brown person is to be subjected to daily hatred, bigotry, and harassment?

Online platforms are also interesting because of how they are shaping the very world of fashion. I have mentioned, in the previous section, how fashion houses are today privileging online to magazine exposure. Social media offer the opportunity to build a sense of collective identity, which, while more volatile and harder to pin down, is central to the very success of the fashion industry. Several examples can be provided, but two appear, today, particularly compelling: Off White, the fashion started by Virgil Abloh, director of Louis Vuitton's Menswear, and Outdoor Voices, started by Tyler Haney, a Parsons' graduate.

Outdoor voices sells pastel colored leggings, sweatshirts, and other kinds of athletic wear. It is what people have come to refer to as "athleisure" (even though Haney dislikes the term), athletic clothing that can be worn around the clock. It is comfortable, beautiful, and it is supposed to make one feel better, fitter, but also overall more connected, engaged, and present. Under the hashtag #doingthings, OV has put together an army of young women – nobody appears older than forty – who photograph themselves in all sorts of active, and cheery, settings. There's plenty of carefree outdoor life, sweat-free yoga lessons, and traveling. Branding strategies are different from the ones often adopted by major sports retailers: there are no famous athletes, and while models are beautiful, they do not always conform to standardized and oppressive beauty standards. OV wants to be a lifestyle, it aligns itself with a more "correct" understanding of the world; one can almost feel its attachment to certain ethical principles: from diversity to natural fibers, to a healthy and environmentally friendly lifestyle.

Off-White tells a different story. The brand was founded in 2012. Its guid-

ing principle is "everything in quotes." A scarf has the word "scarf" written on it in quotes, boots say "for walking". Off-White deploys irony and, in its irony, is reminiscent of a certain kind of irreverent conceptual art. Irreverent also because the boots have a price-tag of over $1,000. And yet, Off-White, despite its cost, is one of the most wanted brands across the world, and quite among Millenials. Abloh's eclectic figure contributes to its success; accustomed to haute couture, street style, music, and art, Abloh's designs shows that are simultaneously spectacular and odd. They are a summary of what Off-White is, or, it's tempting to say, of what it is not for no label seems to adequately describe what he is doing.

Off-White and Outdoor Voices both target a young audience, an audience that often has a social media presence or at least largely relies upon, and cares about what a social media presence implies. They are also, in many ways, different. Outdoor Voices is relatively affordable, Off-White isn't, and the lifestyle they embody can feel different, one entrenched in city life, the other enamored with nature and outdoor activities; the first is somewhat brainy, the latter opts for simplicity. But what matters is that they both invoke a feeling of belonging, in a rather complex way. Because for one to belong, for one to feel included, part of a newborn collective identity, requires the implicit bracketing of another reality, a form of distancing and exclusion. Outdoor Voices is not for older adults; it is not for those who don't have the time or means to exercise, follow a healthy lifestyle, and relentlessly post on Instagram. It is also not for the "gym buff" and, at least if we are to follow the way it is advertised, for those who privilege high end and manicured gym classes (even though a very high percentage of those taking SoulCycle or barre classes in large and affluent city centers seems to own a pair).

Similarly, Off- White is a form of high-fashion which ridicules what high-fashion may be; it is the cool kid in town, the irreverent one, but also one of the most creative. But here too, being included in the Off-White circle means excluding something else: from those who cannot afford its prohibitive cost to those who may not relate to its sardonic, art-driven, and iconoclast style. If you are not cool enough, you won't be buying Off-White or Outdoor Voices, not even if you can afford it. With these and other brands, fashion has created, with the help of social media, new collective identities. It's generating inclusion through exclusion.

2.2. *Identity and Fashionable Styles*

In part, it can be argued that wearing Off-White or Outdoor Voices may count as being fashionable. After all, they are "in-fashion," with fashionistas sporting and advertising them (more social media presence). Yet, to buy some-

thing that is *in* fashion does not necessarily mean to *be* fashionable. In "What Makes Something Fashionable," Jesse Prinz and Anya Farennikova tackle this issue through the identification of a series of conditions that need to be met for something to be fashionable and for someone to have a fashionable style (Farennikova and Prinz 2011). Such conditions are: "First, a look is fashionable only if many people are wearing it. Second, individuals regarded as experts, though not necessarily fashion professionals, must endorse the look. Third, those who wear the look must intend to conform to the trend. Fourth, they must also regard the look as having aesthetic value, and this may involve deference to the expert" (2011: 29-30).

The proposal has advantages, specifically because it excludes those who simply buy something because it is supposed to be fashionable without manifesting an actual appreciation for it. However, I believe more needs to be added, especially given the desire to build a connection between fashion and identity. For while the presence of experts (fashionistas, fashion bloggers, style icons, influencers, and, sometimes, professionals in the fashion industry) guarantees the emergence of a fashionable style, it is unclear, when looking at the conditions above, how such experts build an appreciation for the aesthetic value of a chosen style. When is, in other words, that fashion assumes aesthetic value? How is a style to become fashionable? What kind of criteria guide appreciative aesthetic judgments on fashion?

A response to these questions, or at least a proposal identifying the criteria guiding such judgments, can be derived, I argue, from some of the points already made in this paper. To begin with, it is worth recalling the presence, in fashion narratives, of a combination of novelty and repetition, where repetition can be seen as the standpoint for experimentation. We can see the dynamic of repetition and innovation at work in the choices made by trendsetters.

In order for something to become fashionable, a garment needs to possess something intrinsic to that garment, something making it easily identifiable, and something making it conform to pre-existing styles while also introducing a vein of novelty, which is likely facilitated by socio-cultural and economic changes in the milieu in which the garment emerges. We can see this at play in the examples mentioned in the previous section: Outdoor Voices and Off-White. Streetstyle and athletic clothes have been around for a long time, but they are now promoted in entirely different ways. Streetstyle was embraced by so-called heroin chic movement in the 1990s; it has seen multiple incarnations targeting different groups of people, etc., but it has never utilized the abundant dose of irony and sarcasm we see today, and it has hardly ever been associated with the kind of conceptual-art aura we find in Off-White. With Outdoor Voices, the novelty is that athletic clothing is now something you wear no mat-

ter what, from the gym to dinner. You wear it because you are "doing things" and because wearing it is a testament to a sense of "activity" that merges physical exercise with broader forms of active commitment: to life, to the environment, to what it is like to be a woman, etc.

Additionally, a trendsetter understands the revolutionary nature of such innovations because she understands the contexts in which they take place. Outdoor Voices and Off-White could not have emerged in the 1970s – they are a product of now. Their emergence is based on the combination of several factors. First, as seen, these brands depend on social media platforms such as Instagram, platforms that attract a younger audience which prioritizes visibility; pictures and videos on Instagram are often directed at self-promotion, and by self-promoting themselves, users advertise the brands they wear. Secondly, both Off-White and Outdoor Voices downplay traditional standards of beauty and fitness: they resonate with a diverse audience and, more broadly, with an audience that is conscious of the importance of diversity and that is not willing to tolerate the rigid and standardized conceptions of beauty that have inundated fashion for decades. These brands embody values – respect for diversity and the environment, a more comprehensive understanding of gender and race – that are much more widespread in younger generations than they have ever been. Differently put, they give a voice (and an image) to a generation that is profoundly dissatisfied with the current political environment, and that is also tired of the endless criticisms that typically accompany the description of contemporary youth: listless, obsessed with technological devices, unable to socially interact, doomed to economic failure, etc. The online presence of these two brands builds solidarity, but, importantly, it also delivers a further message: that fashion can change the person you are, for embracing a particular fashionable style can reveal a better version of you, a sense of self-awareness and thoughtful engagement.

But, it is legitimate to ask, to what extent is this true? There are at least two problems with such a statement. The first is that some people may outfit themselves in these styles solely for the need to conform. The second is that even when the choice is voluntary, and even when the understanding of the message and theoretical underpinning of a fashionable style is indeed present, to regard it as a personal style may be too much.

2.3. *Identity and Personal Style*

The question I aim to address in this section is whether a fashionable style can count as a personal style, or, better, as a style that can be said to be truly representative of one's identity. Is a fashionable style capable of becoming a mode of agency? The goal, in other words, is to inquiry over the ability of a

style to disclose something about the self, to enable both self-awareness and self-discovery. Can fashion lead to a better understanding of who we are? Does it matter in establishing the contours of the self?

My answer, as I will show, is that fashion can indeed exercise such a function. Still, a number of rather narrow conditions must be met, and most of these conditions are hardly met by collective and fashionable styles, the two I have so far analyzed.

This is not to say that they are to be regarded as frivolous. Embracing a collective style can be highly significant and socially progressive. It can become a testament to one's social and cultural identity. Similarly, a fashionable style can be indicative, in some instances, of a real commitment to fashion narratives and their complex relationship with society, politics, and the economy.

However, in several situations, the connection between collective and fashionable styles and identity may be weak. While trendsetters may have a more personal investment in a look, they can also be divorced from it. For example, a trendsetter may be into a look for purely commercial purposes – think of Instagram influencers - or may see the wearing of a fashionable style as a job – as it may happen to professionals in the fashion field. Additionally, as already mentioned, styles that qualify as both fashionable and collective can be chosen irresponsibly. While it is true that both Off-White and Outdoor Voices situate themselves within a discussion on complex issues such as ethical concerns, socio-cultural criticism, etc., those who buy them need not participate in it as no active interest in a more nuanced understanding of the product is required by either.

It is because of these difficulties that it is necessary to reformulate the relationship between fashion, style, and identity. A personal style ought to be a style in which fashion is constitutive of identity: a style where fashion *matters*.

In the broadest sense, for a personal style to relate to identity requires an understanding of aesthetic choices *per se*. In aesthetics, discussions on personal styles – broadly construed – have developed in light, but also in opposition to discussions of artistic styles, styles that, as Arthur Danto has famously argued, display "the man himself" (Danto 1981). Starting from this definition, but also criticizing its indeterminacy (after all, style and personality, from psychological traits to habits, may radically differ), Nick Riggle develops an account of personal style that prioritizes "ideals" we commit ourselves to (Riggle 2015). Ideals are far from perfect goals, but they inspire and trigger action and expression, an expressiveness that, in turn, becomes apparent ourselves – thus triggering self-reflection – and others, thus reinforcing community bonds.

There's much I agree with in this definition. I am sympathetic with the constructive and expressive characterization given to personal style. Personal

styles are not simply renderings of who we are – at least of character traits we recognize as prominent – they manifest intentions, goals, and as Riggle says, ideals. I am also concord with Riggle that the expressions of ideals need to be perfect; goals and dispositions can change, they can be embraced more or less fully, and interact with one's existing personality.

However, I suggest that, in the case of fashion, a personal style can be defined more radically. Allow me to explain.

To begin with, and before outlining crucial differences between my account of personal style in fashion and Riggle's account of what counts as a personal style, we must emphasize the importance of an actual curiosity, and engagement, with the aesthetic choices that guide the fashion world. Attention to the narratives underlying the fashion industry, care for patterns, sartorial cuts, and fabrics, together with a sensibility for the multiple "performative" aspects of fashion explored in the first section of this paper, from when and how to wear a certain garment, to the ways it moves with the body, etc. are required components. For a personal style to connect to one's identity, there needs to be an objective appreciation for what fashion is, for its history, for fashion culture, and for its present and future unfolding.

Secondly, it is crucial to recognize the ability of aesthetic choices to affect other value areas. Specifically, fashion relates to identity and results in the affirmation of a personal style that can affect who one is when fashion is understood as an agent, and often a powerful one. Fashion has socio-cultural power, it can be progressive, and it can be political. To understand that fashion can make our moral compass shift is to give fashion a lot more than a decorative role. This requires attention, and sensibility, towards what fashion can do, but also towards potential hindrances as when fashion reifies moral codes as opposed to engaging with them in fruitful discussion.

Lastly, and moving from an objective understanding of what fashion is and an understanding of its role in society as a whole, it is important to see fashion not just as a vehicle for the expression of one's personality but as something constitutive of it: because for fashion to be a mode of agency is not enough for it to reflect the basic traits of one's personality – as conservative clothing may reflect a conservative nature, or flamboyant colors an exuberant one. Just as in Riggle's account of personal style, fashion is not just an expression of one's personality, it expresses more, it is performative. But something else needs to be added. For fashion, in addition to expressing "ideals" we may have, can trigger actual discovery. A personal style in fashion allows for the very discovery of aspects within oneself; it not only plays an active role in expressing dispositions and ideals, it can be transformative. A personal style can emerge as a surprise to the wearer; it is an experiment with oneself that leads to a deeper discovery

of the self.

To be clear, developing a personal style is not mandatory, nor is it the only or the privileged way to investigate, question, reveal, and display one's identity. But in some cases, for some people, the possession of a personal style, the elaboration of a personal style abiding by the three conditions mentioned above, is indeed a primary avenue of self-investigation and discovery. It need not be a fashionable style, nor does it have to aim at being embraced by many, as in the case of collective styles. Personal styles change as the self changes, and, I maintain, the self is changed by the style itself – garments can have an active role in revealing something, and often something unexpected about who we are. But how? Broadly, what kind of identity can be revealed through fashion? And why do fashion choices in personal style exercise such a transformative power on who we are?

3. *Personal style and the self*

Identity theories tend to focus, for the most part, on the notion of the narrative self. Narrative conceptions of the self emphasize the importance of "weaving," to borrow James Olney's expression, experiences together (Olney 1998). Marya Schechtman's "Narrative Self Constitution View," which champions this approach, argues, for example, that the expression of identity requires narrative and diachronic connections to fulfill the four essential features for personal existence: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation (Schechtman 1996).[2] Narrative accounts of identity differ from each other, with stronger positions such as Schechtman's and more moderate accounts, as Peter Goldie's "narrative thinking" (Goldie 2012), but despite their differences, they all tend to highlight the importance of connecting the events of a life into a whole, whether in virtue of causal or emotional connections, or both. These approaches look for cohesiveness and continuity, where meaning is given by the careful connections that can be established among different events in one's life.

The kind of identity that a personal style can help us discover does not necessarily follow such constraints. A more compelling understanding of the relation between fashion, style, and identity is closer to an episodic, rather than a narrative understanding of the self. The notion of the episodic self has been defended by Galen Strawson, to much criticism (2005 and 2015). But to see it

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²   Schechtman has published several versions of her argument. In her most recent book, *Staying Alive*, she sees the need for building our lives as a narrative as being mostly implicit, but she maintains the importance of seeing our lives as diachronic wholes.

in the context of fashion can be instructive and revamp the popularity of such a notion.

The "episodes" afforded thanks and through fashion, from outfits picked for particular occasions, to choices of style, pattern, and cut, to clothes worn for performance purposes, to the garments we learn to love and identify with, can be seen as experiments, as ways of playing with identity. The construction and discovery of who we are *can* be tentative, experimental in quality, and playful. It is, in many ways, an ongoing process that remains open to the possibility of change. A personal style can reflect the fluid and performative nature of identity; it offers the opportunity of change for personal styles and identity share a common boundary: they are both performances.

These performances are significant both on their own and in relation to the unfolding of one's life. They allow for mistakes, missteps, but also for the building of who we are. To think of identity only in terms of tightly connected events, in terms of narrative and continuity, covers only a portion of who we are sadly forgets about the centrality of tentativeness. It also forgets the importance of play and experimentation. Authenticity, as a mark of identity, can be found in narratives as well as episodes – it derives, and it is built on both.

Two important observations follow from such considerations on the importance of allowing for an episodic and experimental understanding of identity (or at least from the importance of considering such an understanding of identity *together with* a more traditional narrative conception). The first is that it contributes to the burgeoning literature on aesthetic choice and its specificities. Kevin Melchionne's work on the topic (2017) and Nguyen's work on autonomy in aesthetic engagement (2019) both emphasize the more malleable, experimental, and ongoing quality of such decisions. Choosing a personal style in fashion is a matter of aesthetic autonomy, and it is open to less traditional and more experimental and subjective heuristics.

Secondly, allowing for an episodic conception of identity is a more promising starting point for a style that does not simply express ideals – to again use Riggle's term – but opens the possibility for actual discovery. "Trying on" something is not as hard as recognizing something as an ideal we may want to follow, but it can have surprising consequences. Finding oneself embracing a style that was earlier just regarded as a remote option, a mere "let me just try it on," can lead to seeing oneself as different, changed, multifaceted: it can be revelatory. It can lead us evaluate ourselves differently.

To conclude, a personal thought, and an observation. I have always been enamored with fashion, not its logos, but its charm. My own identity has been undoubtedly affected by it. In many ways, what I communicate about myself is filtered through my fashion choices. Within my groups of friends and close

acquaintances, I am repeatedly identified and re-identified thanks to what my fashion choices are, and *do.* As I put on a pair of green and gold sequin pants, a friend goes: "That's so you!". It is me, I have just learned.

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