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## Expression in Fashion as Visual Communication Among Students

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### Abstract

*This study explores the ways in which university students employ fashion as a medium of expression and visual communication within the campus environment. Using a qualitative research framework with a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to understand students' lived experiences and the meanings they construct through their everyday fashion choices. The analysis focuses on how clothing functions beyond its practical purpose and becomes a visual form of communication in social contexts. The findings reveal that fashion operates as a symbolic language through which students express identity, personal values, emotions, and individual preferences. Students actively balance self-expression with institutional norms by adapting their fashion styles to campus regulations while maintaining distinctive personal characteristics. This negotiation process positions fashion as a dynamic and strategic form of visual communication that enables nonverbal interaction among students. The study further indicates that fashion contributes significantly to the construction of identity and self-representation, allowing students to communicate aspects of themselves without relying solely on spoken language. Overall, fashion emerges as an adaptive visual communication practice that reflects both personal creativity and the social dynamics of the academic environment.*

**Keywords**– Expression, Fashion, Visual Communication



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## **1. Introduction**

Fashion among college students has undergone a significant shift in meaning. Clothing is no longer understood only as a basic need, but has developed into a means of self-expression and a visual communication medium that represents identity, values, and personal image. Restrictions on individuals often take place due to strong social stigma and a lack of education-oriented communication efforts, a condition that is in line with the expression of student fashion as a form of visual communication that is still under the influence of social and cultural norms (Wahyuningsih et al., 2025). Fashion as a form of self-expression and communication media makes the wearer able to convey values, status, personality, identity, and emotions to others (Yulia Trisnawati, 2011).

The attention of the younger generation to fashion is increasing and making it an important part of building confidence. GoodStats survey data shows that most young Indonesians place fashion as an important aspect of their lives; as many as 58.2% of respondents consider fashion very important, 40.2% consider it important, and only 1.4% think that fashion is not important (Fadhilah, 2024). In the student phase, the use of fashion is closely related to the process of finding and strengthening self-identity. Fashion as a medium of conveying visual messages in academic life. At this stage, fashion does not solely play a role as a complement to appearance, but also as a means of forming self-meaning through interaction and social relationships.

Fashion can be understood as a system of signs that contain symbolic and social meanings. The meaning of clothing is formed through cultural interpretation, so that the visual appearance of an individual can be read as a nonverbal message (Barthes, 1983). In visual communication, elements of color, shape, and style play a role as symbols that build certain social perceptions (Sumbo Tinarbuko, 2003). Fashion functions as an active communication medium in shaping students' interactions and self-image. Students' visual appearance can be understood as a form of nonverbal communication that takes place continuously in the social space of the campus.

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Identity is formed through life experiences, social relationships, and internalized values from the environment. Identity is seen as a psychosocial dynamic that continues to develop throughout a person's life, along with the interaction that takes place between the individual and the surrounding environment (Erikson, 1968). Fashion doesn't just serve as a cover body, but also as a means of nonverbal communication that contains certain messages and images that individuals consciously want to display to others (Abisya & Mutiah, 2022). Fashion is understood as a distinguishing element that distinguishes one group from another. Through distinctive visual features, fashion is able to clearly represent the social identity of an organization (Bisyri et al., 2023).

Expression is an individual's way of displaying feelings and emotions that arise from within, both verbally and nonverbally (Hurlock, 1978). Expression reflects aspects of personality that are seen through a person's attitude, speaking style, and outward appearance (Chaplin, 1989). Expression is not just an overflow of emotions, but a symbolic process that creates a visually meaningful form (Langer, 1953). The concept of expression has direct relevance to this research because fashion is used by students as a way to visually show their inner state and self-identity. Expression is understood as a symbolic action that allows students to show their personal values and beliefs through visual elements in clothing (Tauhid et al., 2024).

The concept of fashion is understood as a style of dress that reflects trends, personalities, and social values embraced by individuals. Fashion is not just clothing, but a sign system that has symbolic and social meaning (Barnard, 1996). Clothing does not only function as a body covering, but as a symbol that carries social and personal messages (Barthes, 1990). Fashion is understood as a process of meaning-making, in which individuals constantly negotiate their self-identity and social position through their clothing choices (Kaiser, 2012).

Visual communication is the process of conveying messages that can be seen with the sense of sight. Visual communication through clothing is a form of nonverbal conveying meaning that allows individuals to express their identity, attitudes, and social positions without having to say them directly (Tijana et al.,

2014). As part of the visual artifact, clothes are interpreted as symbols that are able to represent the personality and character of individuals.

A number of previous studies have shown that fashion plays a role as a medium of communication and identity formation in various contexts, such as social media, digital representation, and alternative consumption practices. For example, in the journal "Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis on the Fashion of Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (Ahy)", fashion is used as a medium of nonverbal communication in a political context (Rahmawati, 2020). In the journal *The Use of Fashion as a Form of Student Expression and Identity on Social Media*, it aims to explore how students express their identity through the clothes they display on Instagram (Salma & Falah, 2023). In the journal "The Construction of the Meaning of Fashion in Sage Green as Part of Identity Communication (Phenomenological Study on Women in Jakarta)", examines how the color sage green is interpreted by women in Jakarta as a form of self-representation in the fashion realm (Hutasuhut et al., 2025).

The journal "Fashion as an Urban Identity on Yoshiolo's YouTube Content", discusses how urban people use fashion as a symbol of identity through video content on the YouTube platform (Benedicta & Paramita, 2022). The journal "The Meaning of Thrift Fashion as Communication (Case Study of Thrift Store Customers Seventysix.Store Tangerang)" discusses how thrift store customers understand and use fashion as a means of communication and self-expression (Nurapriyanti & Hartono, 2023). However, these studies tend to focus fashion on the realm of digital representation, so that students' experiences in direct interaction in the campus environment are still not comprehensively discussed. This gap underscores the importance of research that positions fashion as a visual communication practice in face-to-face interactions among students.

This research is positioned to complement and strengthen the previous findings by presenting the context of campus social space as an arena for the formation of visual meaning. Based on these findings, this study aims to understand how Trunojoyo Madura University students interpret and use fashion as a form of visual communication. The novelty of this research lies in the

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approach that interprets student fashion as a visual experience that is lived directly through social interaction in the campus environment. This research is expected to make a conceptual contribution to the study of visual communication, especially related to the expression of student identity through fashion symbols in the academic environment.

## **2. Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research emphasizes understanding of processes, experiences, and meanings, so that the theories used serve as a conceptual foundation to help researchers understand real conditions in the field without changing the facts found (Sugiyono, 2022). The research paradigm uses interpretive that sees social reality as something subjective, shaped through experience, interaction, and the construction of individual meaning (Mulyana, 2008). The focus of the research is directed at the meaning, subjective experience, and social dynamics of students, not on the measurement of variables. Theory is used as a conceptual foundation to interpret empirical findings without affecting the reality found in the field (Sugiyono, 2018).

The type of research applied is phenomenology, with the aim of exploring students' subjective experiences in interpreting fashion as a form of self-expression and visual communication media. The phenomenological approach emphasizes understanding the essential meaning of the participants' life experiences (Creswell, 2013). Through this approach, the researcher seeks to understand how students interpret the practice of dress in daily life in the campus environment.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, observations, and visual documentation. Interviews aim to obtain subjective narratives related to the meaning of fashion, while observation and visual documentation are used to observe appearance, color selection, accessories, dress styles, and social responses from the campus environment, in accordance with the observation guidelines that have been prepared. The data obtained was analyzed in stages following phenomenological analysis procedures, starting from data organization, repeated

text reading, marginal note making, initial code development, identification of meaning units, to synthesis of the essence of experience and presentation of visual narratives.

The research subjects consisted of 7 (seven) students of Trunojoyo Madura University from different faculties using purposive sampling techniques. This technique is used to obtain informants who have characteristics relevant to the research purpose, such as consistency of clothing style, interest in fashion, and the ability to reflect the personal meaning of the clothes worn (Moeloeng, 2017). The diversity of informant backgrounds allowed researchers to capture variations in visual meanings and symbols in student fashion practices . Cultural representations allow individuals to display their identities and values through symbolic practices, including the use of visual signs in everyday life (Hall, 1997).

The determination of informants in this study was carried out by applying the purposive sampling technique, which is the deliberate selection of participants based on certain considerations and criteria relevant to the purpose of the research. This selection is carried out consciously, by assessing the ability of prospective informants to provide in-depth data and relevant insights into the phenomenon being researched (Creswell, 2013).

The selection of data collection techniques must be adjusted to the research objectives and the characteristics of the subject being studied. In-depth and relevant data can be obtained through methods that allow researchers to understand subjective experiences, meanings, and social interactions of subjects (Sugiyono, 2017). The importance of combining multiple data sources to improve validity through triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The data analysis technique in this study uses the source triangulation approach and triangulation techniques to increase the credibility of the data. Triangulation was chosen because it is able to check the consistency of information through various points of view, so that the research findings become stronger. Triangulation is a method to ensure the validity of data by comparing or cross-checking information from various sources, techniques, or perspectives.

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This approach helps researchers assess the consistency of findings and reduce the possibility of bias (Mulyana, 2008).

### 3. Result and Discussion

This research involved seven students of Trunojoyo Madura University who came from various study programs, faculties, and batches. The research informants include Mahadewi Trihatsari or Mahadewi (Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Cultural Sciences, 2025), Muhammad Dicky or Dicky (Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, 2024), Hayuning Gurit Budisetoyo or Gurit (Law, Faculty of Law, 2024), Nur Sri Wahyuningsih or Yuni (Science Education, Faculty of Education class of 2023), Aisyah Selvia Maulidiyah or Aisyah (Sharia Economics, Faculty of Islam, 2024), Hilala (Agricultural Industrial Technology, Faculty of Agriculture, 2023), and Ilham Ainur Rozak or Iham (Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, 2024). The diversity of study programs, faculties, and the batch of informants provides a variety of perspectives that enrich research data in understanding student experiences related to fashion as a form of self-expression and visual communication in the campus environment.

#### *Fashion as Visual Communication*

Fashion is understood by students as a visual communication medium that is present in daily activities in the campus environment. The informants realize that their appearance will be observed and interpreted by others. How to dress is a form of nonverbal communication that conveys a certain message without the need to say it directly. Students build initial impressions related to character, attitude, and self-identity.



**Figure 1.** Mahadewi's fashion

Source : Researcher



A neat and structured appearance becomes a visual message that is considered important by some informants. Mahadewi and Gurit view the formal and clean style of dress as a representation of discipline and respect for others and social situations. Aisyah also showed a similar view by emphasizing that a neat appearance reflects the values of politeness and ethics. Fashion serves as a means of visual communication to show seriousness and responsibility as a student.



**Figure 2.** Gurit's fashion

*Source : Researcher*

Yuni displays a neat but still fashionable and cheerful style of dressing as a way to convey positive feelings to the surrounding environment. The selection of colors and accessories is used to strengthen the impression. This shows that fashion is not only concerned with outward appearance, but also a medium of emotional expression. Visual appearance also plays a role in conveying the psychological condition of the wearer.

Fashion is also understood as a form of communication that adjusts to the social context. Ilham arranges the style of dress based on the place and situation you are facing, from neat to neat and relaxed. These adjustments are made to maintain conformity with the environment without sacrificing personal comfort. Through this way of dressing, the message conveyed is the ability to adapt in various conditions. This confirms that fashion functions flexibly in the process of visual communication.

The meaning conveyed through fashion is not always accepted according to the intention of the wearer. Hilala experienced an experience where a closed style of dressing often led to misunderstandings from others. In fact, the choice is more based on comfort and the desire to cover the body shape. This situation shows that fashion as visual communication is subjective and open to various interpretations. Differences in perception are part of the nonverbal communication process.



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Dicky views that although fashion is able to form a certain impression, appearance should not be the main benchmark in judging a person. He realized that formal dress styles often give rise to certain perceptions of the social environment. However, he emphasized the importance of being wise and not forcing yourself to follow fashion trends. The message that he wants to convey through his appearance emphasizes more on simplicity and fulfillment of needs.

Fashion acts as a visual sign system in student life. Students of Trunojoyo Madura University use performance as a nonverbal communication medium to convey their identity, values, and social attitudes. Fashion is a tool to build an impression, express yourself, and adjust to the campus environment. Therefore, fashion not only functions functionally, but also has a communicative meaning in the social interaction of students.

### ***Fashion as Self-Expression***

Fashion is interpreted by students as the main means to express themselves within the limits of the campus environment. The seven informants both view that the way of dressing does not just cover the body, but represents each other's personalities. Despite the faculty rules and social norms, students still find space to express their identity through the choice of styles, colors, and fashion details. Thus, fashion becomes a medium of self-expression that is adaptive and personal.

The choice of dress style shows how students communicate character and self-comfort. Yuni uses bright colors such as pastel, peach, and beige to maintain a cheerful impression, especially when she is tired or pressured by academic assignments. Meanwhile, Mahadewi and Gurit displayed a clean look and semi-formal style as a form of self-expression that reflects order, simplicity, and a sense of security for personal identity. The style of dress was chosen because it was considered to be the most appropriate for them and was able to represent the character consistently.



**Figure 3.** Dicky's fashion

*Source : Researcher*

Some informants also express themselves through simple but firm fashion choices. Dicky, for example, chose a formal look with slimfit fabric pants and a neat top as a reflection of the demands of social roles as well as personal comfort. Ilham displays a neat and relaxed style that is adapted to the situation and place, so that self-expression is not rigid. This adjustment shows that self-expression through fashion does not always have to be flashy, but can be realized through the alignment between self, context, and needs.

Self-expression through fashion is also related to personal values and self-perception. Aisyah emphasized the importance of a neat and harmonious appearance as a form of appreciation for herself and others. He views that the way of dressing is able to convey identity without having to be expressed verbally. This shows that fashion serves as a visual language that represents values, attitudes, and the way individuals perceive themselves in social spaces.



**Figure 4.** Hilala's fashion

*Source : Researcher*

Hilala points out that self-expression through fashion does not always follow certain trends or styles. The choice of wearing a robe is based more on comfort and personal preference, although it often gives rise to certain perceptions from others. Nevertheless, these choices are still considered to reflect themselves authentically. These findings confirm that fashion as a means of self-expression is subjective, where each individual has a unique way of displaying their identity through appearance.

#### ***Internal Factors of Fashion Selection***

The choice of student fashion is influenced by various internal factors related to the psychological condition and personal value of each individual. All informants showed that mood was the dominant factor in determining how to dress daily. When in a good mood, students tend to pay more attention to their

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appearance and prepare outfits to the maximum. On the contrary, when the mood is not good, fashion choices become simpler and as is.

Personal values also shape students' fashion preferences. Aisyah and Dicky emphasized that fashion is not just about following trends, but a means to show character and self-principles. Both view that following trends excessively can actually cause a burden and is not always in accordance with needs. This view shows that awareness of self-identity and comfort are the main considerations in choosing clothes. Fashion is understood as a reflection of personal values that are internal.

The comfort and security factors also play a role in the choice of clothing style. Yuni adjusts her fashion choices to the rules of the campus, but still tries to maintain a cheerful atmosphere through a combination of colors and fashion details. This approach shows a negotiation process between external regulation and the internal need to express oneself. Students do not completely ignore the rules, but cultivate them to keep them in harmony with their personal character. This shows that internal factors work side by side with the environmental context.



**Figure 5.** Yuni's fashion

*Source : Researcher*

The choice of color is one of the strong indicators of internal factors in student fashion. Pastel colors such as peach, beige, and other soft colors were chosen by Yuni and Mahadewi because they are able to improve the mood and give a clean and bright impression. Aisyah also tends to choose soft colors that are considered to represent the feminine side and personal comfort. The preference for these colors shows the relationship between emotional states, personality, and visual choices in appearance.

Some informants prefer neutral, dark, or simple colors as a reflection of a calm and practical character. Gurit and Ilham chose dark or black colors because they are considered easy to combine, give a neat impression, and do not require much consideration. Hilala also shows certain color preferences such as pink and milk brown chosen based on personal convenience, without considering trends.

These findings confirm that the choice of color in student fashion is more influenced by internal factors than external impulses.

The results of this study show that internal factors such as mood, personal values, comfort, and self-perception have a big role in determining students' fashion choices. Students of Trunojoyo Madura University tend to place psychological aspects and self-identity as the main basis in appearance. Fashion is not chosen solely to follow trends, but as a means of adjusting the inner state and affirming personal character.

### ***Fashion and Social Impact***

Appearance has an important role in shaping social impressions in the campus environment, although the level of importance is different for each student. They view appearance as a factor that affects their confidence and readiness in undergoing campus activities. For them, a neat appearance that is in accordance with their personal character can increase enthusiasm and comfort in interacting. On the contrary, Dicky and Hilala consider appearance not to be a top priority, especially because of their academic and organizational busyness. This difference of view shows that the meaning of appearance depends heavily on the experiences and needs of each individual.



**Figure 6.** Aisyah's fashion

*Source : Researcher*

Appearance also serves as a medium to form the initial impression received by the social environment. Yuni is often perceived as a neat, fashionable, and cheerful education student, while Mahadewi and Gurit are often seen as formal and structured figures. Aisyah is perceived as a neat and pleasing person, reflecting an attitude of respect for herself and others. On the other hand, Dicky and Ilham realize that their style of dressing also gives rise to certain judgments, although they emphasize that these impressions do not fully reflect their

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personality. This confirms that fashion is a visual communication tool that shapes social perception.

The social impression formed through fashion is not always in line with the intention of the wearer. Yuni has experienced a situation where her flower accessories and makeup are misinterpreted by friends and lecturers. Mahadewi and Gurit also received comments because of the style of dressing that was considered too formal and consistent. Dicky experienced a similar thing, where the choice of slimfit pants often caused certain assumptions from other people. These experiences show that fashion as visual communication is open to various interpretations.

Some informants experienced misunderstandings related to their background and dress habits. Hilala, often associated with certain religious identities because of his habit of wearing robes, although it is more influenced by past experience and personal comfort. Ilham has also received comments due to the choice of clothes he wears in certain situations. This situation shows that appearance can give rise to social judgments that do not always correspond to the individual's context or intentions.



**Figure 7.** Ilham's fashion

*Source : Researcher*

The results of this study confirm that fashion has a significant role in forming social impressions among students. Appearance becomes a means of nonverbal communication that affects the way a person is perceived, accepted, and judged by the surrounding environment. Although not all students make appearance a top priority, social impressions are still formed through the visuals displayed. Fashion is an important element in the dynamics of student social interaction in the campus environment.

## Discussion

**Table 1.**Phenomenological Analysis

Theme	Core Statement	Unit of Meaning	Essence
<b>Fashion as Visual Communication</b>	Students view clothing as a nonverbal message that creates a neat, formal, or cheerful impression.	Visual messages	Fashion is a means of nonverbal communication.
<b>Fashion as Self-Expression</b>	Dress style is used to show one's identity within the confines of campus rules.	Expression of identity	Fashion as a medium of self-expression.
<b>Internal Factors of Fashion Selection</b>	Fashion choices are influenced by mood, personal values, and comfort.	Internal factors	Fashion reflects personal circumstances.
<b>Fashion and Social Impact</b>	Appearance affects the confidence and perception of others.	Social impact	Fashion formed an early social image.

*Source; Processed Researcher*

Phenomenological analysis shows that fashion is interpreted by students as a visual communication medium that functions to convey messages to the campus environment. Based on the results of observations and interviews, students do not view clothes solely as a functional need, but as a means to build an initial impression such as neat, professional, relaxed, or cheerful. The choice of clothing worn on a daily basis becomes a nonverbal message that is indirectly communicated to others. These findings are in line with the concept of visual communication which emphasizes that visual elements, shapes, and styles have the ability to convey meaning quickly and symbolically. In this context, fashion serves as a visual language that allows students to interact socially without having to verbally reveal their identity.

Students use fashion as a manifestation of their inner state and personal identity. Observations show that color choices and clothing styles are often tailored to mood, personal values, and comfort. Students who want to look confident tend to choose clothes that make them feel comfortable and in accordance with their character. This reflects the concept of expression as stated (Hurlock, 1978) that expression is a manifestation of the psychological state and personality of the individual as seen through external symbols. Fashion in this

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case is a form of symbolic expression that allows students to display who they are and how they want to be perceived in the social space of the campus.

Students' fashion choices also show a close relationship with the process of forming self-identity. Based on the interviews, students realized that their style of dress is part of how they build their self-image and assert their social position in the campus environment. These findings are in line with Self Identity Theory which views identity as a psychosocial process that continues to evolve through social experiences and interactions. Fashion is one of the mediums used by students to answer questions about who they are and how they want to be known by others (Erikson, 1968). Identity is not understood as something static, but rather dynamic and continuously negotiated through the visual display that is displayed on a daily basis.

Accessories and consistency of dress style play an important role in strengthening students' visual identities. The use of accessories serves not only as an aesthetic complement, but also as a marker of character and personal preferences. Consistency in the style of dress shows the students' efforts to maintain the continuity of the self-image they want to display. This reinforces the view of fashion as a sign system in which each element of fashion contains a symbolic meaning that can be read by the social environment (Barthes, 1983). Fashion is a means for students to negotiate personal and social identities.

Fashion has been shown to influence the response and treatment of others towards students. Based on the results of the interviews, students experienced various social responses such as receiving praise, attention, and questions related to their style of dress. This suggests that visual appearance plays a role in shaping early social impressions. These findings are relevant to Goffman's concept of self-presentation, which views identity as the result of social performance (Goffman, 1959). Fashion serves as a "costume" that students use in the campus social stage to manage impressions and build a certain image according to environmental norms and expectations.

The attitude and body language of the students seemed to be in harmony with the fashion they wore. Observations show that students who feel comfortable with their appearance tend to appear more confident, expressive, and open in social interactions. This emphasizes that fashion does not stand alone, but interacts with gestures, postures, and facial expressions as a unit of visual communication. Fashion contributes to increasing self-confidence, which ultimately influences the way students present themselves in campus public spaces.

This phenomenological study shows that fashion among students of Trunojoyo Madura University cannot be seen only as an activity of choosing



clothes, but as a symbolic practice that contains various social meanings. Fashion functions as a medium that connects self-expression, identity formation processes, and visual communication in the campus environment. Through the style of dress, students consciously or unconsciously represent personal values, social backgrounds, cultural tendencies, and attitudes towards the social environment in which they interact.

The connection between empirical findings and theoretical frameworks confirms that fashion has an important role in the psychosocial process of forming student self-identity. Fashion is not solely related to aesthetic aspects or trends, but also becomes a means of self-affirmation, the search for social recognition, and the affirmation of the individual's position in the social structure of the campus. Thus, fashion becomes an integral part of students' daily experiences that reflect the dynamics of identity, social relations, and the process of constructing meaning in the campus life of Trunojoyo Madura University.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Fashion among students of Trunojoyo Madura University not only functions as a support for appearance, but also as a means of visual communication and self-expression that reflects identity, values, and personal character. Students use their choice of clothing, colors, and accessories to express their psychological state and the way they want to be perceived in the campus environment. Internal factors such as mood, personal values, and comfort are the main considerations in determining the style of dress, which is also adjusted to social norms and contexts. Fashion acts as a symbolic medium that forms early social impressions and facilitates nonverbal interactions, although interpretations can vary. These findings confirm that fashion is part of the process of self-identity, where students negotiate their personal image and values through their daily dress practices.

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