



Exploring the Relationship Between Fashion Choices and Self-Identity among Female Students at Marist International University College

Mukarugwiza Xavera and Joyzy Pius Egunjobi

Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.6.0625.22125>

ABSTRACT

Fashion plays a significant role in shaping self-identity, especially among university students. [Fashion](#) choices can reflect personal tastes, beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds, making fashion a powerful tool for expressing one's identity. This study aimed to explore how fashion choices contribute to the construction and expression of self-identity among students at Marist International University College. Phenomenological design was used as an appropriate qualitative method that describes a phenomenon of self-identity. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 8 Students from the target population of 198 female students who study at Marist International University College. Individual interviews were used to collect data which was analysed by thematic analysis. The findings showed that there is a close relationship between fashion choices and self-identity. The results also revealed that fashion choices are linked to self-confidence and mood. Fashion is sometimes used to navigate stress and emotional challenges. Family, personal values, peer pressure, social media, and cultural expectations were identified as influences that shape fashion choices.

Keywords: Fashion, self-identity, university students.

Background

Fashion has always been a crucial aspect of human existence, influencing how individuals present themselves to the world and communicate their identities (Das, 2023). Fashion has been taken as the most powerful form of self-expression in the everyday life of human beings. This is simply because fashion goes beyond simple clothing since the way individuals dress reflects their personalities, beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and even social status. Thus, throughout history, fashion has been instrument enabling people to express who they are or who they strive to become individually or collectively (Nengsi & Azhar, 2025).

Likewise Black (2021) argued that [fashion choices](#) can reflect personal tastes, beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds, making fashion a powerful tool for expressing one's identity. As Liao and Huang (2024) agree, fashion is not just about clothing but is deeply embedded in social practices, power structures, and bodily experiences. In this contemporary society, where self-representation is more important than ever, fashion serves as a medium for individuals to express themselves, whether through personal style, subcultural affiliations, or resistance against societal norms (Kaiser, 2019).

Fashion encompasses the prevailing styles in clothing, accessories, and personal appearance that are popular during a particular time or within a specific context. It reflects cultural, social, economic, and aesthetic influences, serving as a medium through which individuals and groups convey identity, values, and societal norms (Kaiser, 2019). Clothing, one of the basic needs of human beings, plays a very significant role in the world of fashion. In fact, the first aspect of a person that is noticed is clothing. According to Mulaudzi (2005), clothes are one of the basic human needs that complete human personality.

Self-identity on the other hand refers to the complex interplay of personal, social, and cultural factors that shape an individual's sense of self. Self-identity is a dynamic and evolving construct influenced by internal self-concept, external social interactions, and cultural narratives. It encompasses aspects such as personal values, beliefs, emotions, roles, and affiliations (Oyserman et al., 2012). From a psychological standpoint, self-identity is linked to self-concept and self-esteem. According to Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, identity formation is a key developmental task, particularly in adolescence. He posited that individuals undergo an identity crisis before achieving a stable sense of self.

Thus, fashion is one of the most powerful aspects of self-expression and identity, particularly among young adults in university settings. For university students, the period of higher education represents a critical phase of self-development and identity formation. As students transition into adulthood, their fashion choices reflect their evolving personalities, social affiliations, and self-concept (Bernard, 2020). The relationship between fashion and self-identity provides insight into how external appearance influences confidence and personal development. Fashion clothing says about what the individuals are like. A good appearance brings about a good impression (Mulaudzi, 2005). As opined by Hayden (2008), clothes can change the mood of the wearer, and affect how others will treat them. Everyone has a style and is judged by the get-up he or she adopts. Our clothing reflects us in many

ways, which means that it is the reflection of our personality. The way individuals dress says something about them; clothes carry certain messages or inferences that mark an individual (Mulaudzi, 2005).

Also, it is worth noting that the relationship between fashion choices and self-identity among female university students has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years. This interest stems from the understanding that clothing serves not only as a functional necessity but also as a medium for self-expression and identity formation. According to Tiggemann and Slater (2004), for female university students, fashion often becomes a tool for signaling belonging to a particular social group, whether that is through following popular trends or differentiating themselves from others through more unique or niche styles. Many studies highlight the role of clothing as a symbolic medium through which individuals communicate their personal identity, status, and values. Adam and Galinsky (2012) exploring the concept of "enclothed cognition", posit that the clothes individuals wear can influence their psychological processes, affecting emotions, self-evaluations, and interpersonal interactions.

Fashion choices are shaped by multiple influences, including personal preferences, social dynamics, cultural traditions, economic conditions, and psychological factors. For instance, Solomon (2009) argues that personal taste, comfort, and lifestyle play a significant role in clothing choices. Fashion choices are also influenced by social and cultural factors such as peer influence and social groups, cultural and religious beliefs where cultural traditions, religious practices, and societal norms influence attire, such as modest dressing in conservative societies (Barnard, 2014).

Some scholars have demonstrated that media representations significantly shape body image perceptions and clothing preferences. For instance, Nguchara, Serem, and Were (2018) investigated the perceptions of university students in Kenya regarding the "ideal" body image portrayed by the media and its influence on their clothing choices. The study revealed that exposure to media ideals led to student body dissatisfaction, prompting them to select clothing that they believed would align their appearance more closely with these ideals. This finding underscores the pervasive impact of media on self-image and fashion decisions.

Additionally, social comparison processes further exacerbate the pressure to conform to certain fashion standards. In this regard, Wang, Guo, and Wang (2018) examined how social comparison influences dressing pressure among female college students, with body image serving as a mediating factor. The research indicated that students who engaged in frequent social comparisons experienced heightened body image concerns, leading to increased pressure to dress in ways that would garner social approval. This dynamic suggests that fashion choices are often motivated by a desire to mitigate negative self-perceptions and achieve social acceptance.

The interplay between self-esteem and clothing interests has also been a focal point of research. Liao and Huang (2024) explored the impact of social physique anxiety on clothing choices among female university students. Their findings showed that students with higher levels of social physique anxiety tended to choose clothing that concealed their bodies, aiming to alleviate discomfort associated with negative body evaluations. Conversely, students with lower anxiety levels were more inclined to select attire that expressed individuality and confidence. This suggests that self-perception significantly influences fashion preferences, with clothing serving as a tool for managing self-image.

Cultural and societal contexts also can shape the relationship between fashion choices and self-image. In certain environments, adherence to traditional or conservative dress codes may impact students' self-expression and self-perception. For instance, research has highlighted that Black students often face discrimination based on their hair choices, which are integral to their cultural identity (Oliver & Asamoah, 2024). Such discriminatory practices can adversely affect self-esteem and body image, influencing fashion choices as students navigate the tension between cultural expression and societal acceptance.

In a nutshell, the relationship between fashion choices and self-image among female university students is multifaceted, influenced by media portrayals, social comparison, self-esteem, and cultural contexts. Understanding this interplay is crucial for developing interventions that promote positive self-identity and empower students to make fashion choices that reflect their authentic selves. Thus, this work explores the relationship between fashion and self-identity. The work seeks to explore the connection between fashion choices and self-identity among female students at Marist University College. It aims to determine how students perceive their fashion choices, the factors influencing these choices, and the impact of societal influence on their style, to examine how female students at Marist University College use fashion as a tool for self-expression and identity formation as well as to identify the challenges or conflicts female students experience in balancing personal identity with institutional expectations related to fashion. By addressing this issue, the research will contribute to a broader understanding of the role of fashion in identity construction among female students at Marist University College.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore how fashion choices contribute to the construction and expression of self-identity among students at Marist International University College.

Research Methodology

This study adopted qualitative research to explore the relationship between fashion and self-identity among female students at Marist University College. A phenomenological approach was used to understand students' lived experiences, perceptions, and personal interpretations of fashion as a means of self-expression and identity formation. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 8 participants for in-depth Semi-Structured Interviews from the target population of about 198 female students at Marist International University College. Data was analyzed using Thematic analysis whereby it

was transcribed and coded into themes such as “fashion as self-expression,” impact of fashion choices on self-confidence and mood, “fashion as a coping mechanism for stress and difficult emotions,” and “influences on fashion choices.”

Demography

Table 1: *Demographic Information of Respondents*

Respondents	Age	Department	Year of Study
Participant 01	22	Education	Year 3
Participant 02	24	Business	Year 4
Participant 03	21	Business	Year 3
Participant 04	21	Education	Year 4
Participant 05	20	Education	Year 2
Participant 06	24	Business	Year 2
Participant 07	24	Education	Year 4
Participant 08	22	Education	Year 4

Findings

The findings of the study were presented according to themes that arose from the data analysis. Themes including self-confidence, self-expression, personal values, were recurrent during data analysis.

Fashion Choices as a Form of Self-Expression

A majority of the participants expressed that their fashion choices reflect their personality, upbringing and individual values. Several respondents mentioned that clothing allows them to communicate aspects of their identity that words cannot fully capture. Fashion choices that relate to the theme of self-expression were described by participants as follows:

I would say that personal values play a significant role in how I choose what to wear because the clothes I wear represent both me and my family. I choose my clothing based on the values I uphold. For example, I cannot wear revealing clothes because it might lead to misunderstandings about my identity. I want to be seen for who I truly am, not mistaken for something I am not. For instance, if I wear clothes that expose my body, I might be confused with street girls which I am not. As a young girl, I value self-respect, modesty, and dressing in a way that reflects those principles. (Participant 01, Personal Communication, 10/3/2025)

Another participant said, *“I value personal dignity and therefore when I choose what to wear, I always ask myself if it will bring out a dignified person in me and if not then I won’t wear it.”* (Participant 02, Personal Communication, 10/3/2025).

Likewise, Participant 3 added,

My decision on what to wear each day is based on the occasion and the environment I will be in. Take for instance, if I have a school presentation, I dress appropriately for that. If it’s club’s day and I am dancing, I choose an outfit suited for performing; something expressive but still within my comfort level. I am also mindful of who I will be around. Since I won’t be interacting with teachers, I feel more freedom in my dance outfit. But I also consider how others might perceive me, so I bring a change of clothes for before and after the performance. Generally, my approach is practical and thoughtful, balancing self-expression with social awareness. (Participant 03, Personal Communication, 10/3/2025)

On the same, Participant 4 reported,

To me fashion explains a lot in terms of my personality. For instance, I love simplicity and therefore I try as much as possible to dress in clothes which are not flashy to maintain my simple personality. On the other hand, from my dressing most of my fellow students perceive me as a serious student even when in reality I can be a joker sometimes. (Participant 04, Personal Communication, 9/3/2025)

Similarly, another participant shared that,

I consider myself a reserved person, and my clothing reflects that. I prefer not to reveal parts of my body, as I express myself through long and loose-fitting dressing. Being reserved also means that I am not an outgoing person. (Participant 06, Personal Communication, 12/3/2025)

Also, Participant 7 added,

I express my identity by staying true to myself in any occasion. The way I dress for any occasion reflects my values. For example, as a trained teacher, I wear professional attire at school, sometimes opting for a smart look. However, when I am at home, I prefer dressing casually. (Participant 07, Personal Communication, 12/3/2025)

Impact of Fashion Choices on Confidence and Mood

Fashion choices were also linked to self-confidence and mood. Several interviewees mentioned that wearing outfits that align with their personal style boosts their self-confidence and makes them feel more comfortable in social settings. Conversely, wearing outfits that do not resonate with their identity often leads to feelings of discomfort and anxiety. Participants who had these experiences describe them as follows:

Most of the time, I prefer wearing clothes that provide full coverage because it makes me feel more confident. On the rare occasions when I wear something that doesn't fully cover me, I feel insecure and have the urge to cover up. Dressing decently gives me a sense of comfort and confidence; it even makes me feel more at ease as a woman. (Participant 06, Personal Communication, 12/3/2025)

Similarly, another student reported,

When it comes to fashion, my confidence and mood are often influenced by my outfit and my weight. When I feel like I'm gaining weight and my clothes don't fit the way I want, it affects me emotionally and makes me feel somehow uncomfortable. However, there are certain outfits that make me feel happy and comfortable. Even if someone were to say I don't look good, I know within myself that I feel fine, I fit in, and I am okay. (Participant 08, Personal Communication, 9/3/2025)

Likewise, another expressed that,

I believe that when I dress in a way that feels decent and smart to me, my confidence is high. Since I don't dress to please others, my self-assurance comes from my own comfort. What may seem short to others might not feel that way to me, and as long as I feel good in what I wear, my confidence remains strong. (Participant 02, Personal Communication, 9/3/2025)

In the same line, Participant 05 expressed that,

When I feel well-dressed, my mood improves, and my confidence increases. For example, if I have a presentation in class on that day, I perform at my best because my confidence is boosted by how I feel in my outfit. (Personal Communication, 9/3/2025)

Another shared her experience that,

When I am dressed decently, my confidence is high. But sometimes, I don't feel good and don't have the energy to choose an outfit. On those days, I simply pick any clothes without much thought because I'm not in the mood to decide. What I mean is that when I'm happy, I enjoy selecting nice clothes to wear, but when I'm not in the mood, I just grab whatever is available almost as if I'm going somewhere reluctantly. (Participant 07, Personal Communication, 9/3/2025)

Fashion as a Coping Mechanism for Stress and Difficult Emotions

Several students reported using fashion to navigate stress and emotional challenges. Participant 06 emphatically stated that,

Yes, sometimes when I'm sick, the stress and low emotions that come with it affect me. But when I wake up feeling unwell, taking a shower and dressing decently makes a difference; I feel stronger, like I can conquer the day. It really helps boost my mood. This is very different from staying in pajamas all day, which doesn't help relieve the stress. (Participant 06, Personal Communication, 12/3/2025)

Additionally, Participant 04 affirmed that, *"Sometimes when I feel stressed, I choose to wear bright clothing as a reminder of the brighter side of life."* (Personal Communication, 9/3/2025)

In contrast, Participant 01 stated that, *"When I'm stressed, I don't pay much attention to what I wear. I simply put on whatever is available, whether it's loose or oversized I just don't care."* (Personal Communication, 10/3/2025)

Influences on Fashion Choices

Students identified a range of influences that shape their fashion choices. The following influences emerged:

1. Personal values
2. Family values
3. Cultural expectations
4. Social media
5. Peer influences.

Discussions

The findings from this study provide significant insights into the relationship between fashion choices and self-identity among female students at Marist International University College (MIUC). These findings align with existing studies that explore fashion as a medium for self-representation, emotional regulation, and social belonging.

According to the study, participants express their personalities, values, and beliefs through fashion. This is in line with the research by McNeill (2018) which posits that self-concept and fashion innovativeness are linked suggesting that those with high levels of fashion innovativeness are also those with a strong sense of self. A person's clothes are a kind of nonverbal communication that expresses their sense of self. A number of participants mentioned that their personal values impact the clothes they wear, with modesty and dignity emerging as common themes. In this context, clothing becomes more than just a textile, but a representation of values, personality and even social position (Nengsi & Azhar, 2025)

The study also highlighted the significant impact of fashion choices on self-confidence and emotional well-being. Participants indicated that wearing outfits aligned with their style and comfort levels positively influenced their confidence. This finding is supported by research from Adam and Galinsky (2012) on "enclothed cognition," which suggests that clothing has a psychological impact on an individual's confidence and behavior.

As stated by McNeill (2018), clothing influences an individual's mood and self-esteem. Participants in the current study reinforced this perspective, with several stating that dressing well improves their mood and enhances their social interactions. Conversely, wearing ill-fitting or inappropriate outfits led to feelings of insecurity and self-consciousness. These findings suggest that fashion is not merely aesthetic but also plays a psychological role in shaping one's self-perception and emotional state.

The study also revealed how fashion choices have a significant influence on emotional well-being and self-confidence. Participants reported feeling more confident when they wore clothes matching with their personal style and comfort level. A study by Adam and Galinsky's (2012) on "enclothed cognition," contends that attire affects a person's behavior and self-esteem.

Several respondents identified factors that influence their fashion choices, including family, culture, social media, and peer groups. These findings correspond with the research by Kaiser and Green (2021), who noted that fashion is a social phenomenon shaped by cultural norms and social expectations. Family upbringing was a key influence, with many participants stating that their fashion choices were guided by values instilled during childhood. This supports the notion that fashion is an extension of cultural identity (Barnard, 2020).

Another significant influence was social media, as some participants mentioned that they follow trends they come across online. This reflects the research by McQuarrie et al. (2013), which discovered that fashion choices, particularly those of young adults, are significantly influenced by digital platforms. In addition to this, some respondents mentioned that they base their clothing purchases on group decisions and common fashion interests, demonstrating the influence of peer groups. According to Park and Cho (2012), fashion is a tool for social integration and group identity formation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reinforce the notion that fashion is deeply intertwined with self-identity, confidence, emotional regulation, and social influences. Female students at MIUC use fashion as a medium for self-expression, an avenue to boost their confidence, and a coping mechanism for stress. Additionally, their clothing choices are shaped by family values, cultural norms, peer influence, and social media. These findings align with existing literature and highlight the dynamic interplay between individual identity and social constructs in shaping fashion choices.

References

- Adam, H., & Galinsky, A. D. (2012). Enclothed cognition. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(4), 918-925.
- Barnard, M. (2020). *Fashion as Communication*. Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Black, S. (2021). *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook*. Bloomsbury
- Das, A. (2023). Fashion and Identity: An Exploration of Clothing's Role in Shaping Personal and Cultural Identities.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton Company
- Kaiser, S. B. (2019). *Fashion and cultural studies* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- Kaiser, S. B., Green, D. N. (2021). *Fashion and cultural studies*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191-208.
- Liao, Y. M., & Huang, J.-W. (2024). The impact of social physique anxiety on clothing choices among female university students. *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, 11(3), 283-298.
- McNeill, L.S. (2018). "Fashion and women's self-concept: a typology for self-fashioning using clothing", *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 22(1), 82-98.
- McQuarrie, E. F., Miller, J., & Phillips, B. J. (2013). The megaphone effect: Taste and audience in fashion blogging. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(1), 136-158.
- Nengsi, E. G., Azhar, A. (2025). "Fashion as a form of self-identity: A semiotic analysis of Millennials' dress style", *Paraplu Journal*, 2 (1), 182-186.
- Nguchara, N., Serem, D. J., & Were, G. M. (2018). University students' perception on the influence of the "ideal" media body image on their choice of clothing in Kenya. *African Journal of Education, Science and Technology*, 4(4), 169-180.

-
- Oliver, D., & Asamoah, A. B. (2024). Why are Black students still being punished for their hair choices? *PopSugar*. <https://www.popsugar.com/beauty/black-students-hair-discrimination-49379472>.
- Oyserman, D., Elmore, K., & Smith, G. (2012). Self, self-concept, and identity. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (2nd ed., pp. 69–104). The Guilford Press.
- Park, J., & Cho, H. J. (2012). Social network influence on brand preference among teenagers. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(5), 686-692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.04.002>
- Solomon, M. R., & Rabolt, N. J. (2009). *Consumer Behavior in Fashion*. Pearson.
- Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2004). Net Girls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concerns in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 35(1), 53-61.
- Wang, Z., Guo, Y., & Wang, R. (2018). How female college students' social comparison influence dressing pressure: Mediating effect of body image. *Advances in Psychology*, 8(5), 591-600.