

Historical Registry of Our Families Through Textiles

Cathy L. Starr¹, Sandra L. Bailey¹, Sheryl Brahnam^{2(✉)},
and Jenifer J. Roberts¹

¹ Fashion and Interior Design, Missouri State University, Springfield, USA
{CStarr, SBailey, JeniferRoberts}@missouriState.edu
² Computer Information Systems, Missouri State University, Springfield, USA
Sbrahnam@missouriState.edu

Abstract. Dress provides an insight into a person's value system, as well into the state of the socioeconomic environment of the time. The purpose of this paper is to describe the design of a mobile application and website where users of all walks-of-life can document their heritage by capturing photographs of family members' clothing throughout their lifetimes. Dress evokes memories, feelings of nostalgia, and speaks volumes about a person's personal history and heritage. This application will allow each and every person who logs on and participates to document their lives and the important role dress plays in their lives, whether they are rich and famous or not. This will enable the creation of a large archive of information representing all of the populace, not just the rich and famous, for future research based on the subjects' own words and visuals.

Keywords: Historical costume · Social media applications · Meanings of dress · Textile · Sociocultural environment

1 Introduction

In his seminal work, George P. Fox, states, "*Fashion is, has been, and will be through all ages the outward form through which the mind speaks to the universe.*" [9 p. xx]. Eicher and Evenson define dress as both a product and a process that people use to distinguish themselves [1], while Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton describe fashion as a social process [4]. For all intents and purpose of this paper, dress and fashion will be limited to the sense of sight, as opposed to other sensory experiences of dress, and will include make-up, hairstyles, and other body modifications, as well as individual pieces of clothing, jewelry, and accessories [2].

The purpose of this paper is to describe the design of a social media application that will document family history for people by capturing photos of a person's clothing through his or her lifetime. This application has the means to make the ordinary person as visible as their wealthy and famous counterparts. Users will upload photographs from their family archives and by taking photographs of their clothing using their phones and other digital equipment. These photographs will be uploaded to a website where they can tell stories about the meaning of their dress: for example, special occasion clothing for christenings, weddings, newborns, holidays, dances, and

graduations. Users can also add photographs of family members and talk about their clothes and other pertinent information. This documentation will be processed through the sharing of photographs of clothing, textiles worn, and used by an individual, family member, or friend used during a specified time period. Along with sharing the photograph and noting the specified time, the website would provide documentation of the geographic location, style name (current at that specific time), specification of function for which this textile was worn or used, designation of whether this garment was handmade or purchased and where purchased and fiber content if known. This application would allow each and every person to have the opportunity to add their personal thread and tell their personal story, a virtual “Tapestry of Your Life.”

How and why people choose to dress themselves has significance and is as varied and as diverse as each individual is, and in turn, the choices these same individuals make about dress affect society [6]. Dress can be an extraordinarily powerful symbolic representation of the relationship between nature, man, and his sociocultural environment, and, as such, should be studied [3, 7, 11]. A primary reason to document and study dress and fashion is to provide the students with a sense of understanding the societal expectations associated with dress, as well as to understand how and why modern fashion and dress have evolved [5, 6]. This application has the potential to retrieve and expose more information and to garner more in-depth insights into families and the specific meanings of dress to individuals and their families over the years. Historical facts, personal stories, folklore (oral history) and pictures of everyday people living during a specified timeframe will create a large database of information that has not been previously available for study.

2 Why Document Dress

Although anthropological research indicates that life histories and folklore have the potential of aiding the understanding of history and human complexities, the lack of sound methodology for this type of research results in a prolific source of knowledge being under-utilized [7]. Life histories serve as a supplemental source of data and instill the ability to infer cultural patterns [7]. Material artifacts, such as photographs, jewelry, and textiles create a small but strong sense of family and heritage. The connection to this heritage through these artifacts is brought to life by written notations, reminisced stories, and recollected memories projecting an idealized version of the time and events. According to Lillios [10], “If identified, heirlooms have the potential to provide a richer and finer-grained understanding of the human past” (p. 235). Heirlooms provide an insight into a person’s value system, as well as into his or her personal preferences and style. The documentation of clothing provides insight into the artistic, economic, political, and technological environment of a specific time and how an individual reacts and lives his life affects these same environments [8].

Researchers historically have had to rely on the technology available at the time to document a former society’s existence and daily movements. For example, studies focusing on prehistorical man rely on durable artifacts found at archeological digs along with available depictions of the local populace and their clothing found on artifacts [8]. As technology advanced, documentation of fashion also advanced with the

dissemination of fashion being communicated using fashion dolls, fashion sketches, fashion plates, letters and diaries, as well as records of purchase or inheritance. Until the development of cameras and the more precise depictions of clothing by photograph, representations of costumes from the 18th century and earlier relied on an artist's rendition of an individual or family that could afford this luxury [8]. In other words, such portraits were rarely accurate, limited in types of dress, captive to the preferences of the artist, and limited in viewpoints of the upper classes.

Even with the advent of cameras, photography was expensive given the costs of camera, film, and development. Photographs did not become readily available for the ordinary person until recent technical developments. As a result, the fashion of the masses has not been documented nearly as well as the fashion of the wealthy, famous and notable. From the christening gown to the death shroud, certain garments hold ceremonial status and memories of times past. These garments are replete with symbolic meaning. For instance, in the West a "white" wedding gown symbolizes "purity" and is often the focus of dreams.

As often as the rich and famous are in the public eye, they actually represent a small amount of the population. Statistics indicate that in the United States, the rich form 1 % of the population, yet they capture the attention of the masses, as demonstrated by the prevalence of celebrities featured in the media [13]. Paparazzi frantically attempt to catch every moment of the rich and famous on camera, documenting fashion in all forms of life for these few, while the masses are doing most of the "living, loving, and dying," as so succinctly stated by George Bailey in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. An example of the heightened attention focused on celebrities would be the documentation of the fashion of individuals like the Kardashians, famous actors, popular monarchy, or political figures like Jackie Kennedy, Princess Diana, and today Princess Kate and the young princes.

The purpose of the application "Threads of Your Life," proposed in this paper, is to reverse this trend and make visible the fashion of the masses while creating an in-depth database of information on the meanings and importance of dress for people today. Documentation of the general public and the local nobility is minimal even today compared to the documentation of the rich and famous. This results in the general public's dress being limited in visibility and a dearth of local information about the general population being available for research. Because of recent technological advancements (computers, cameras, the internet, communications technology, and social media) documenting clothing today is easier than it was historically. Technology today allows more focus on the ordinary individual, which is evidenced by the prolific posting of the extremely popular 'selfie.'

3 Social and Personal Meanings of Clothing

Dress serves as a symbolic form of language that reflects societal norms of beauty, modesty, and fashion, as well as occupational, marital, and socioeconomic status, group membership, and other social roles [4, 8, 9]. For instance, a uniform is used to establish differences as well as to depict occupation and is able to document status as evidenced with a pair of captain's bars. Throughout history, dress serves as a social

prop providing a way to protect the body, cover the body to preserve modesty, decorate the body to differentiate individuals, and establish or portray status [8]. Tortura & Eubanks state that researchers agree that the primary reason for dress is decoration [8]. Even with minimal dress, prehistoric man was able to differentiate himself with scarring and other body modifications that could add a sense of mystery and fashion to one's appearance or tell stories about an individual. Researchers agree that the study of historical fashion and the meaning of dress often use core themes such as social, historical, cross-cultural, geographic, and dress as an art form. The social context includes social life, class structure, and social roles, which are aided by the knowledge of gender, age, status, identification of group membership, and ceremonial use of clothing. While the historical context is made up of politics, economics, technology and communication, the cross-cultural influences are through a process known as cultural authentication. This phenomenon is seen when designs from one culture are mixed with designs from different culture(s) creating unique designs known as a mixture. Geography plays a vital role with the human need to adapt to the natural environment and ecological conditions. Dress as an art form acts as a titillating construct that includes the relationship between costumes of a particular era, development of fine and applied arts, individual costume designers, and a revival of interest in earlier fashion styles [1, 8, 12]. For example, the wearing of a wedding ring designates marriage and acts as a symbol of status. Another example would be the wearing of a business suit to work indicating that the wearer is not a blue-collar worker and may serve as an indicator of status. Dress provides silent and symbolic cues to others.

Another source of personal choice of clothing has to do with what the German's call, *Zeitgeist*, meaning "the spirit of the times" [8]. Political, social and economic conditions affect a person's emotions and choices. In turn, the thoughts of people and their reactions to surrounding conditions affect the conditions of the time, leading to a common thread and trend of thought and feeling, in other words, "*Zeitgeist*." With reflection over the past periods of history and the change of popular dress over time, the spirit of the time becomes visible [8]. Even though these choices may be made consciously or subconsciously, when a person chooses their form of dress their choices reflect who and how they want others to perceive them [1, 8]. For example, a person dressing to go to work chooses different clothing than s/he would dressing for a favorite past time.

4 "Threads of Your Life" Application

The basic structure of "Threads of Your Life" can be described as a modification and combination of several popular social media applications, such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Ancestry.com. As illustrated in Fig. 1, this application will be similar to Pinterest in that a variety of individuals will be able to build a database filled with photographs, stories, traditions, poignant nostalgic memories, even letters and newspaper articles depicting life from the viewpoint of the local population through the sharing of their memoirs about a chosen time period, clothing style, geographical location, or accessory.

sharethetreads.com

search

"Tapestry of Your Life"



1980

Above you will find a picture of my Aunt Lori (extreme right). I can imagine that she was only 18 years old in this photograph. As you can see by her style, this picture was taken in the mid-eighties where big hair and bold style thrived. She is adorned with a faux hawk, a slouchy trench coat, acid washed jeans, red high top sneakers and lastly, a bolo tie. This photo was just taken outside of my grandmas single home and if you look closely, you will find a dated Chevy.

I am also going to point out what my uncle is wearing (child) and what my grandma is wearing (middle). My Grammy is wearing a very slouchy button-up, which was the style back then and the trend is now repeating itself. My uncle is wearing red bold pants and a graphic t-shirt. Graphic design was starting to become very popular in this era. Lastly I am going to point out that this photo is extremely dated by my dad's (pictured far left) PT shirt from the military. The current PT shirts are light brown to match today's fatigues.

Candace Elliot





Wedding

This is a photo of my great-grandparents, WA and Lorraine Laney. This was taken in the year 1940, which would make my grandpa 20 and my grandmother was 14. This is the year that they got married, and considered to be their "wedding picture" even though it was taken a few days after their wedding. My grandmother is wearing a dress with a necklace and shoes with a low heel. My grandpa is wearing his Sunday best that consists of nice pants, a tie, and a suiting jacket. He also has on dress shoes as well. My grandmother's hair is curled and pinned back, and my grandfathers is combed nicely to the side. With this photo being black and white, it is hard to tell exactly what make up my grandmother has on, but I appears that she has some eye make up on and lipstick. My great-grandparents were farmers. They lived in the same home from the day they got married until the day my grandpa died. They were not wealthy, but they never struggled. So, I cannot pinpoint a way that they display their wealth in this picture. They were young and just married, so they

Madison McKinney





**Class of 45
McKinley HS**

The person in this photo is my grandma, Charmaine, on the day of her high school graduation in 1945. She was seventeen years old, on the verge of turning eighteen. My grandma grew up in South St. Louis City and went to McKinley High School. She was sporting a floral dress with a belt around her waist. Her hair was cut short and pinned in ringlet curls. Other than her dramatic lip, it does not seem like she wore a lot of makeup. In the larger version of this photograph, you can notice she is also sporting large pearl earrings and a gold chain bracelet. Since it was her graduation day, I'm assuming she was looking her very best.

World War II was coming to an end, and the economy was still thriving, but there was not much textile choice to go around, so people basically worked with

Mollie O'Brien





1970

This is a photograph of my father, Bruce Phillip Conway, taken in the mid-1970's. At the time the photograph was taken my father was in his mid-20's, living in south-west Missouri. The 1970's were famous for bell-bottoms and the rise of the disco, but it was also an era of economic struggle, cultural change, and technological innovation. It was a time of an ongoing equality battle, for social and political rights among women, blacks, gays and lesbians. Several world events around the time of this photograph include the Vietnam War, the Watergate Scandal and the Ted Bundy murders. Other prominent happenings of the time include the founding of Microsoft, the premier of Saturday Night Live, the first test tube baby was born and the release of the movie Star Wars. Bruce is wearing fitted, high-waist jeans with a thin leather belt, and a collared, plaid button-up underneath a Christmas Sweater. As this photograph was taken in black and white film, colors of clothing were not visible but can be imagined. Bright colors and lots of polyester were seen everywhere during this time. No matter what kind of flare was at the bottoms of someone's pants, they were almost always tight fitting. In this photograph, Bruce's hair is long and

Laura Conway





1940

During the 1940's, fashion was influenced by the effects of World War II. In order to have supplies for the war, fabric was rationed. Because of this, hemlines got shorter. The creation of rayon, a synthetic fiber, was big during this era for fashion. New York emerged as the newest fashion capital as Haute Couture in Paris.

Fig. 1. Example "Tapestry of Your Life" Page, with some actual photographs and narratives produced by students.

To begin using this application, the user must first create a login ID on the website sharethetreads.com (see Fig. 2). The user must then choose whether s/he wants his or her photographs, descriptions, and personal stories to be viewed publicly or privately. The next step depends on the user, and what s/he is interested in, a specific time period, a special event, or specific dress for that event? Once the user determines the direction,

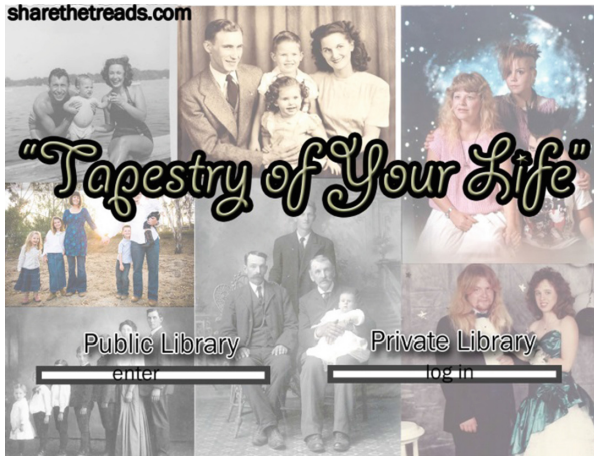


Fig. 2. Homepage

s/he chooses the category representing that interest. For example, if the user is interested in viewing other photographs and information available concerning Easter in 1970 s, s/he would first choose the correct time period and then choose Easter as the special event. From that page, s/he would then be able to read what has been published by others and to add photographs and stories of his or her own about this category.

The application is into four categories, which are available, as illustrated in Fig. 2, in a drop-down menu: time period, item, special events, and location. The time period will be identified by day/month/year or by the word “about” and the year. The dress item may be categorized as one of the following: knit top, blouse, shirt, sweater, skirt, pants, dresses, jackets, coats, shoes, foundation garments, handmade or purchased, fiber content (such as 100 % wool or 60/40 polyester/cotton). Special events are described as one of the following: Birthday, Wedding, Graduation, Death, Holidays, and Vacations with Holidays being further broken down as Valentine’s Day, Easter, 4th of July, Veteran’s Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Hanukah. Finally, the location is identified by country, state, county/province, and city.

The proposed application will use an adaptation of Ancestry.com that allows users to search for shared “threads,” much like Ancestry.com allows users to search the genealogy of their families and to look for shared connections. These “threads” consist of the four categories. For example, if a user is interested in the dress of “the people living in the Ozarks,” s/he could search by geographic location. Knowing the fiber content allows users interested in the development of materials, such as wool, to research this topic (Fig. 3).

When adding a picture of dress to the application, users may choose to take a current picture or to upload an image from their computer. They will then see pop-up options to choose from, for example, public or private. Timeline will follow next with the choice of documentation by date or decade of object as close as possible. Identification of the geographic location comes next. The more complex category of item will lead to the choice of style name, specific function, whether handmade or purchased,



Fig. 3. Organizational Categories

and the fiber content (these may be omitted and added later by others on the system). Finally, the user will be able to add personal stories, folklore, and written documentation, such as newspaper articles or wills that discuss the event. The proposed application will also have the potential to be adapted, to evolve and to add “threads” as needed to develop a more in-depth and specific database of dress. This application has the potential to create a database focusing on ordinary people and filled with symbolism and meanings of dress.

The first users of this proposed application will be students enrolled at a Midwestern University. They will use it to complete an assignment for their History of Fashion course. This assignment is designed to promote personal investment in the assignment and the course. Each student will be asked to choose an artifact, a historical photograph of their family, and to create a connection or a memory by researching this photograph and writing a short narrative. In this narrative the student will identify who is being depicted in the photograph, the time period, and what was occurring during that time frame, along with what were the fashions being worn. Students will give feedback to help improve the website. At a later date, it is our hope to make this website available to anyone.

5 Conclusion

This application could be used as an educational tool that would grow and evolve with each person’s addition of photographs and stories. This is an opportunity to make the fashion of the masses more visible and create a database full of meaningful insights and prolific visuals of ordinary people that have been living, loving, and dying behind the scenes as it were. This would make this application and website a valuable tool to be incorporated in such courses as historical fashion, costume design, product development, and a number of other courses. The material collected might even evolve into a dynamic source of inspiration for future designers.

Studies focusing on the adaptive and societal aspects of nostalgia research demonstrate how these memories of clothing, textiles, and other objects evoke strong memories of the people associated with them [3]. Sentiment and feelings of nostalgia often lead to consumer purchases, especially since baby boomers are well known to be fond of purchasing products that remind them of their childhoods. Thus there is potential here for commercial connections as well. Throughout history, clothing has provided insights into the local culture, along with glimpses of individual personalities that interacted with the natural, the social, and the artistic environment of that time [5]. It is hoped that this proposed website and application will document these histories by collecting pictures of clothing and associated stories about their use for future generations to enjoy.

References

1. Eicher and Evenson: *The Visible Self*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs (2015)
2. Roach-Higgins, M., Eicher, J.: Dress and identity. *Clothing Text. Res. J.* **10**(4), 1–8 (1992)
3. Hamilton, J.: Mass fashion as threat in context and concept. *Clothing Text. Res. J.* **9**(2), 25–32 (1991)
4. Kaiser, S., Nagasawa, R., Hutton, S.: Construction of an SI theory of fashion: Part 1. ambivalence and change. *Clothing Text. Res. J.* **13**(3), 172–183 (1995)
5. Paoletti, J.: Does the costume and textile historian have a place in the future? *Clothing Text. Res. J.* **2**(2), 33–36 (1984)
6. Workman, J., Freeburg, B.: *Dress and society*. Fairchild Books, New York (2008)
7. Watson, L.: Understanding a life history as a subjective document: Hermeneutical and phenomenological perspectives. *Ethos* **4**(1), 95–131 (1976)
8. Tortora, P.G., Eubank, K.: *Survey of Historic Costume*, 5th edn. Fairchild Books, New York (2011)
9. Fox, George P.: *Fashion: The power that influences the World*. Trubner & Co., London (1871)
10. Lillios, Katina T.: Objects of memory: the ethnography and archaeology of heirlooms. *J. Archaeol. Method Theory* **6**(3), 235–262 (1999)
11. Matthews, V.H.: The anthropology of clothing in the Joseph narrative. *J. Study Old Testament* **20**(65), 25–36 (1995)
12. Miller-Spillman, K.: Introduction to dress, culture, and theory. In: Miller-Spillman, K., Reilly, A., Hunt-Hurst, P. (eds.) *The Meanings of Dress*, pp. 1–41. Fairchild Books, New York (2012)
13. Dunn, A.: Average America vs the one percent. *Forbes*, 21 March 2012. Downloaded 24 February 2015 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/moneywisewomen/2012/03/21/average-america-vs-the-one-percent/>