Identity Through Clothing: Argentinian vs. American Women

Magali Farfan

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Identity Through Clothing: Argentinian vs. American Women

Magali Farfan

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Development Plan</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Design Process</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Discussion and Results</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

According to Roach-Higgins, Eicher, and Johnson (1995), “individuals acquire identity through social, physical, and biological settings” (pg.12). When acquiring identity, culture plays a vital role. Because of numerous influences on identity, a conflict exists for those who identify with more than one culture. This study focuses specifically on the problems of women who identify both as Argentinian and American. The purpose of this creative project was to create an outfit that could be worn by an Argentinian/American woman in the presence of family and friends, regardless of culture, and not feel that she is disregarding societal norms of either culture. Data of what is culturally accepted were collected from WGSN, an industry fashion trend website, news articles, and two popular social media platforms, Pinterest and Instagram. After conducting a study of street styles from each country, lists of similarities and differences were noted. From these findings, an outfit was designed and created that could meet the standards of a woman from Argentina or America, in the author’s opinion. A future survey of other Argentinian and American women is recommended to find conclusive, quantitative data to determine if this garment actually does satisfy the purpose of this creative project.

Keywords: Identity, culture, Argentinian clothing, American clothing, multicultural

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present a poster of my creative project. Through this experience I have gained life experiences and lessons that will follow with me throughout my adult life.

I would also like to take a moment to thank my honor’s advisor Stephanie K. Hubert for all of the hard work and long hours she put in to assist in guiding me through my research. She played a critical role in the development of my research project. She has put forth a lot of time and effort into the development of this research project and for that I am truly grateful. Most importantly, she has always believed in me and my capabilities and pushed me to exceed my own limits.

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Introduction

As cultures continue to intertwine with one another in this ever-evolving world, it is becoming increasingly difficult for a person to truly express his/her own identity, more so when there are multiple influences placed upon them (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995). There is an internal struggle between a person’s different backgrounds. Social influences also effect the clothing choices that a person makes. What is deemed appropriate or acceptable in one culture or community may not be the same for another.

The purpose of this creative project was to create an outfit to be worn by an Argentinian and/or American woman in the presence of family and friends, regardless of culture, and not feel that she is disregarding societal norms of either culture. This outfit will allow a woman from multiple backgrounds to feel as though she is truly expressing her identity through dress. To successfully design this outfit, research was conducted to compare the different customs and traditions common in Argentina and America. This allowed for discovery of the influences that have a direct impact on the clothing choices that people, more specifically women, make in their respective countries. These clothing decisions, in turn, allow the women to express their identities.

As discussed by Kaiser; Roach-Higgins, Eicher, Johnson; and Workman and Freeburg, two theories were studied: self identity and social identity. An analysis on identity and its definition was explored in order to understand these two theories behind clothing decisions. By studying the appropriate dress for women in Argentina and women in America, women’s clothing choices in their respective countries can be better understood. There are influences and expectations placed upon women’s forms of dressing which impact their identities, as well as, what they choose to wear.
For the purpose of this research the term “America” is defined as the United States. The term “American” is defined as those who inhabit and/or are natives of the United States. The term “Argentinian” is defined as those who inhabit Argentina and/or are of Argentine descent.

**Literature Review**

**Self-Identity**

Identity as defined by Kaiser (1990) is “the organized set of characteristics an individual perceives as representing or defining the self in a given social situation” (pg.186). A person obtains his/her identity through a series of social, physical, and biological interactions and settings. Although referring to one person, he/she can house a number of identities according to the social positions that make up the self (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995). The people themselves can decide these identities (Kaiser, 1990). Once a person has established their identity/identities, they will use dress in order to portray this desired identity. Through a person’s dress, identity is communicated to both the public self and the private self (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995). Dress not only demonstrates a person’s identity, it also contributes to the obtainment of “the sense of self” (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995, pg. 13). These identities can either help a person connect or separate him/her from others or both can occur simultaneously (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995).

**Social Identity**

As mentioned by Workman and Freeburg (2009), “conformity is a process whereby individuals maintain or change their behavior to act in accordance to society’s norms” (pg.17). There is a power through social acceptance of beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that are deemed normal by society. Society has an influence on one’s identity through coercive power which is based on negative and positive punishments. When a person performs in a manner that society
deems appropriate, or of the norm, then he/she is praised. The goal is conformity through social control.

**Culture and Clothing**

The nationality of another is often visually apparent by the way the person is dressed (Workman and Freeburg, 2009). According to Cordwell & Schwarz, “Clothing and adornment are universal features of human behavior and an examination of what they reveal, and attempt to conceal, contributes to our knowledge about the fabric of cultures and to our understanding of the threads of human nature” (1979, pg.1). Through fashion changes, one is able to comprehend and observe the nature of a group, or culture. Clothing allows for expression and acts as a form of communication within cultures, and as a result, one’s culture can be made comparable to others (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1979). Forms of differentiation exists through fashion and especially for women. In general, women tend to have a wider variety of fashions and trends readily available to them because of how versatile women’s forms of dressing have become over the years. In contrast, men’s dress has not changed drastically since it first began (Crane, 2012). For women in some cultures, dress relates to rarity such as purchasing an item that is of high value. Through this clothing purchase, one can identify his/her economic and social status. In other cultures, a form of rarity is purchasing a clothing item that is least expensive and is typically worn by the poor. This also demonstrating a form of rarity by identifying one’s (lower) social status. Additionally, dress can demonstrate a person in a position of hierarchical authority, political affiliation and/or ideology. Dress also differs in the manner of which that culture perceives the body, particularly for women. In countries where religion is a priority, dress may drastically differ from the styles chosen by those who do not have a strong religious presence in their country. There are more conservative and strict rules placed upon what a woman can wear
or is allowed to wear in countries with strong religious norms. This perception can also dictate how much clothing is to be worn or is acceptable to wear. Because dress can be used to emphasize the body, in some cultures, it can be used as a symbol of sexual enticement. In other countries where nudity is more common, such as third world countries, adornment, such as body paint, is a method used for sexual enticement (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1979). Therefore, through analysis and comparison of two cultures (or more), a large amount of information can be unveiled about the identity of a woman through clothing and how the options and choices of dress differ according to her respective countries.

**Argentinian Women**

To understand the clothing choices of an Argentinian woman demands an understanding of the country, its political and religious influences, and its culture. Argentina is a Latin American country quite different from its counterparts. Argentinians are known as the “Yankees of the South” because of how increasingly urban the country has become compared to the rest of Latin America (Nouzeilles & Montaldo, 2002, pg. 1). That is not to say all of Argentina has become urban, in fact, it is well known that there are two Argentinas. One Argentina is the southern half, where technology has, and continues to, advance quite rapidly. This cosmopolitan area has an economy that continues to thrive. In this part of Argentina, the majority of the population is wealthier than the rest of the country due to the jobs available (Nouzeilles & Montaldo, 2002). The other half of Argentina, the northern side, is rural and more “old school” traditions are seen everywhere. The quality of life in this area is low and the majority live under the poverty line (Erwing, 2014).
Northern Argentina

When the European settlers discovered Argentina, they brought with them Catholicism which greatly influenced the country. Catholicism still influences women in Argentina today. High standards are set for women to uphold the “good morals” of a catholic woman (Erwing, 2014). Because religion (Catholicism) is taken so literally in Argentina, there is a great deal of “machista” which is a Spanish word for male-dominance (Erwing, 2014, p. 10). Culturally, the men are the sole breadwinners and the women are in charge of the house and the children. Women, especially those who reside in northern parts of Argentina, have little say in what they can wear. Most of the decisions are made by their husband or father if they are not yet married (Erwing, 2014). Although the severity of the situation has decreased since the 1990’s, women continue to have a subordinate status in society. This subordinate status makes it difficult for women to express choice in the way they dress. Women wear longer, floor-length, dresses and typically wear more layers (Sutton, 2010). As a result, women do not wear spaghetti straps or anything revealing because it is considered distasteful (Erwing, 2014). The colors seen in northern Argentina are more muted with neutral tones than those seen in southern areas. Women tend to wear clothes that do not gain attention or stand out because they are not purposely trying to attract a mate or compete with other women to see who looks better (Sutton, 2010). They also tend to shop at stores that are low in price due to the lower wages in this area of Argentina (Erwing, 2014).

Southern Argentina

In contrast to women in Northern Argentina, women in the melting pot of south central Argentina wear more trendy clothing that is fashionable and are held to higher regards than in the north. Women in south Argentina have more independence and freedom to express themselves as
they would like (Nouzeilles & Montaldo, 2002). The female body is hypersexualized and it is clearly visible in all sorts of media. This creates a standard to which women are held and so appearances are very important to women in this region. There has been an increase in cosmetic surgery, anorexia, and bulimia. In this region of Argentina, thinness and beauty are valued. Women want to look their best and therefore they are more brand conscious. They look for clothing that is fitted and flattering so that it shows off their figures. Although religion is also quite important in this area of northern Argentina, it is not as strict and does not overwhelmingly dictate what women wear as it does in more rural areas (Sutton, 2010). Although there are two parts to Argentina, both have similarities in the forms of dress for women. The dress seen in both regions of Argentina, however, is different than that of women who live in the United States.

**American Women**

The United States is a melting pot with different people, cultures, and customs. With so much diversity present there is a plethora of fashion trends readily available for consumers (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1979). It is also well known that Americans believe in freedom of choice (Crane, 2012). Typically, Americans prefer to be individualistic and seek to look different from one another as a way of standing out. This is especially true in states that are more populated in America (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1979). A growing trend in America has been informality (Niinimäki, 2010). More citizens walk around day-to-day in casual wear. Informal dress is even becoming more acceptable in the workplace. Another increasing trend is the acceptance of the plus size industry. Sixty-six percent of Americans are overweight and of those, thirty-seven percent of them are obese. There has also been an increase in plastic surgery and an obsession on one’s appearances. This has created a need for consumers to purchase brands and clothing items that make them feel good about themselves (Stang, 2015). In general, clothing serves as a
confidence booster in the United States and evokes different emotions and moods (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1979).

With America being so diverse, women come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. One thing they do have in common is their desire to be stylish. No matter their background, American women put a lot of emphasis on appearances. Trends for women in America are very inclusive and have even expanded into both plus sizes and smaller, European sizes. Because women in America are independent and the vast majority have stable careers, they are more brand conscious (Stang, 2015). The majority are willing to purchase garments at a higher price if a brand makes them “feel good” and is up-to-date with trends (Crane, 2012). As mentioned in the book *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Culture and Adornment*, “new clothes [is] a way of acquiring the confidence that comes with ‘good’ timing within the fashion cycle” (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1979, pg. 9). Women have fought many battles for equality and are now able to hold positions in the community, along with being mothers and wives; this increases the demand for clothing that serves dual purposes (Crane, 2012). American women like to have meaning behind their dress. They also are concerned with creating a mood when dressing in a particular fashion. This is done through contrast in colors and line arrangements. For example, when one is feeling depressed, one would wear a dress color that is bright and joyful. There is a popular trend of secondhand store or attic discoveries which tend to be of great value to women because they are seen as a way to stand out as they are typically one of a kind or no longer sold in stores (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1979). In general, American women prefer to be trendy yet comfortable and confident in what they are wearing (Stang, 2015).
Development Plan

To create an outfit that merges two cultures together, trend research was conducted on Argentinian and American street style. A trend research is a primary method used in the apparel industry to discover what is current in the fashion industry. Research is conducted using fashion sources such as WGSN, fashion magazines, and newspaper articles. In this case, *The Huffington Post* and *Vogue* were used as primary sources for the trend research. Floral patterns have become popular in American street wear (see Figures 1 and 2) and are seen in Argentinian street wear (see Figure 3). There is also a notable increase in the casual trend for both Argentina and America (see Figures 3 thru 6). There has been a shift in focus, especially so in America, in comfort in street wear. Here you can see the use of looser fit clothes as well as elastic waistbands for added comfort and mobility (see Figures 8 thru 10). Another notable trend seen in both American and Argentinian street style is the touch of femininity in clothing through colors (see Figures 7 and 8) or silhouette (see Figures 1, 2, and 9).

Based on these trends, a rough sketch of potential garment concepts were developed until a final sketch was produced (see Figure 11). A floor length skirt, popular in Argentinian culture, was chosen for its versatility. It can be worn during more than one season; it is modest and while work-appropriate can be styled for a night out. The skirt includes a waistband seen in a popular street style trend in order to add a more casual feel to the skirt (see Figure 15). Taffeta and organza with maroon floral appliques were purchased for construction of the skirt (see Figure 14). White taffeta was chosen to give the skirt shape and form while the organza delicately drapes on top of the taffeta. The white allows for the maroon appliques to stand out while also adding a touch of neutral tone to the completed outfit. A crop top, popular in American culture, was chosen to complete the outfit. It is acceptable to the Argentinian modesty standards because
Identity Through Clothing

the skirt fits high enough to cover the midriff, yet adds a very casual touch to the outfit through its silhouette. The t-shirt like silhouette of the crop top is a popular trend that can be seen in America (see Figures 16 and 17). Red velvet was the fabric used to unify the two garments. The velvet adds color and texture to the outfit without being overwhelming. The silhouette of the crop-top adds a comfortable, casual feel to the ensemble, while the velvet makes it elegant. Once the idea for the outfit was finalized, creation of the garment began.

**Design Process**

**Creating the Top**

With the use of flat-pattern methods, a pattern for the crop-top was created using tracing paper, pencil, and a ruler. Because a loose fit was desirable, I took measurements of my mannequin and created a basic bodice pattern which had a dart on the breast and another dart on the waistline of the bodice. Once the pattern was drawn, I cut it out and used the pivot method to manipulate the bust dart in order to combine the bust dart with the waist dart of the bodice front. The sizes of the front waist dart and the back waist dart were decreased slightly to add the intended ease of fit. Once the bodice pattern was complete, it was transferred onto cotton muslin in order to verify all measurements by creating a prototype of the final garment (see Figures 12 and 13). I used an industrial sewing machine to sew the muslin together, including the darts. Adjustments were then made to the muslin to finalize the fit of the crop-top. The prototype garment was then deconstructed to use as a guide to cut out the final pattern pieces. Before sewing the final garment, the pieces were pinned together to avoid the pattern pieces moving during construction of the garment. In the beginning the velvet became a problem due to its stretch. Because I was using an industrial machine, the stretch of the velvet caused the machine to continuously stretch the garment while being sewn creating an uneven, stiff finish. Therefore,
I realized that the tension had to be reduced in order for the stitching to not affect the fabric. I then decided to use a home sewing machine, so the tension could be adjusted, to finish the rest of the crop-top. The raw edges were finished by serging them to prevent unraveling. The hem was finished by serging, then folding the serged area twice towards the inside of the garment and sewing straight along the edge of the fold. If this garment were to be remade, different sewing methods would be used to properly manage the knits.

Creating the Skirt

Because of the desired length and silhouette for the skirt, I chose a draping method to create my pattern. Cotton muslin was draped over the mannequin to achieve the desired appearance of the skirt. Once the length and fit were established, lines were drawn in order to create the pattern outline for the skirt. The waistband was then created by measuring the total length of the skirt. Because no darts were used on the skirt, I used elastic in the waistband casing to naturally gather the skirt at the waist. Once all pattern pieces were created using the muslin fabric, this garment was again deconstructed and used as a guide to cut the final garment pieces. I began with the taffeta fabric, which also had stretch, but because it was a thicker fabric it did not stretch during sewing on the industrial sewing machine. All of the ends were sewn except the waist because it was going to be attached with the organza overlay at the waist. Then, construction of the overlay skirt began. This fabric was difficult to sew due to its lightweight and slippery characteristic. Even with pins being used to hold the pieces together during construction of the garment, the fabric continuously slid out of place. After adding several more pins to prevent the fabric from slipping, the overlay was constructed. The hems for both the taffeta skirt and the organza overlay were finished by serging and folding over twice and then straight stitched close to the folded edge. The raw edges were also finished by serging. Then, the
waistband was constructed using the muslin pattern to cut out a taffeta pattern piece. This was sewn right sides together and attached to the waist along with the elastic which was cut to fit the mannequin’s true waist size. The waist was finished by straight stitching along the edge of where the waistband and the skirt meet.

**Discussion and Results**

This project was born from my personal experience of coming from two different cultures (Argentinian and American). I’ve experienced an internal struggle between my customs and traditions from Argentina and American and how both seemed to clash with one another. This conflict between my two backgrounds then created a struggle with my self-identity. This internal struggle brought about the desire to study the identity of women from both countries. Through the comparison of the clothing choices of Argentinian and American women, it was apparent that each choice influenced the identity of the individuals. The differences of style allowed for unique and individual characteristics to be seen, however similarities were also seen that intertwined the two cultures. The final outfit meets the author’s desired expectations, reflects components of each of the two cultures, and equally embodies a style that both an Argentinian and American woman would feel comfortable wearing in their respective countries. The ensemble is both versatile and trendy. The transparent floral fabric adds a feminine touch to an otherwise plain skirt. Floral is also a pattern that has become quite a popular trend. The length of the skirt allows for it to be worn modestly yet, the fit of the skirt on the waist allows for it to show off one’s figure. The crop-top allows for the skirt to be styled in a more casual manner while also being able to have the choice to dress up the top with accessories to create an elegant look. Many different looks can be achieved depending on how the pieces are styled (see Figures 18 thru 22).
Coming up with the concept of a long length skirt and crop top was quite easy once I began my trend research and from there I expected to have some hardships during my time sewing this outfit. Although I did face one or two struggles when sewing the fabrics together, I surprisingly found myself not having a hard time producing this garment. In general, my sewing skills learned/developed from the apparel program at the University of Arkansas proved to be enough to create this ensemble without many difficulties or setbacks.

**Conclusion/Implications/Recommendations**

This research is essential to understand the importance of women’s clothing choices and how these choices help to form their identities. There is a lack of research in this area, especially the comparison of two cultures pertaining to clothing choices and identity. Therefore, this project adds to the body of knowledge available and may inspire more researchers to investigate this topic.

Where a woman resides influences what she chooses to wear in many ways. Society and the differences in cultures and customs tend to dictate what a woman wears, which in turn shapes her identity. In some regions of Argentina, women are faced with restrictions that lead them to using clothing only as a means of protection from elements of their environment rather than as a form of expression. They are also faced with religious restrictions on clothing as well as limited freedom in options of dress due to old school traditions. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan regions of Argentina are concerned with keeping up-to-date with trends as they proudly mimic European fashion. In America, women seek meaning behind their dress such as evoking emotion or a mood. Women in America also want dress that is comfortable yet versatile and can be worn in more than one occasion, as women hold multiple positions in the community. A major commonality between Argentina and America is their increased beauty standards which lead to a
rise in women’s appearances. This creates a desire to purchase clothes that are trendy, flattering, and boosts morale as they are faced with pressure from competition with other women and society.

The two garments included in this outfit provide versatility and embody a style acceptable by both Argentinian and American cultural norms while upholding the standards from the latest fashion trends (see Figure 18). By styling the garments differently, many varying looks can be achieved, from casual to formal. Although I am content with my results, I recognize that this is my opinion. Further research is recommended to acquire quantitative data to support my conclusion.

As this research mentions, there are differences in customs and beliefs between northern Argentina, southern Argentina, and America. In order to disprove any rejections from either country, a future survey should be conducted in order to measure whether Argentinian and American women agree that this outfit is pleasing. This survey will also substantiate my belief that this outfit embodies both the Argentinian and American styles of women’s dress.

Extended research on this topic can also be performed in order to better understand this topic. Future research can be orchestrated explaining male’s identity through clothing and from there a comparison of females versus males can be performed. Another potential extension of this paper can be identity through clothing in different age groups or a comparison of other culture’s dress and how they relate to a person’s identity.
References


Appendix

Figure 1. American street style green floral dress seen at Coachella (Ritch, 2017)

Figure 2. American street style colorful floral dress with denim jacket seen at Coachella (Ritch, 2017)
Figure 3. Argentinian floral pattern street style (Persad, 2016)

Figure 4. American casual street style tee with jeans (“Street style photos,” 2017)
Figure 5. Argentinian street style crop-top tee with shorts (Persad, 2016)

Figure 6. American street style crop-top with shorts seen at Coachella (Ritch, 2017)
Figure 7. American street style light rose colored slip dress seen at Coachella (Ritch, 2017)

Figure 8. American light rose colored street style outfit (“Street style photos,” 2017)
Figure 9. American white street style dress (“Street style photos,” 2017)

Figure 10. Argentinian black dress with bomber jacket street style (Persad, 2016)
Figure 11. Rough sketch of Argentinian-American inspired outfit

Figure 12. Bodice back pattern being transferred onto muslin
Figure 13. Bodice front and sleeve pattern being transferred onto muslin

Figure 14. Floral organza fabric
Figure 15. Floral skirt

Figure 16. Front view of crop-top
Figure 17. Back view of crop top

Figure 18. Argentinian-American inspired outfit
Figure 19. “Going out to brunch” outfit featuring floral, floor length skirt

Figure 20. “Wild and edgy” outfit featuring floral, floor length skirt
Figure 21. “A night out” outfit featuring velvet crop-top

Figure 22. “Preppy with a twist” outfit featuring velvet crop top