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Music, Fashion, and the Semiotics of Identity Across Pop Culture Eras

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Abstract

This paper examines how music and fashion in pop culture have evolved as semiotic tools to shape identity, influence power dynamics, and reflect societal perceptions across different historical periods. Using Roland Barthes' semiotics, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the study analyses how cultural meanings are produced, interpreted, and embodied through iconic figures. Case studies include David Bowie and Björk, whose avant-garde aesthetics challenged traditional gender norms in the pre-digital era, and Billie Eilish and Harry Styles, whose contemporary fashion practices navigate a globalised, media-intensive landscape. The analysis demonstrates that while the mediums of transmission have shifted, from live performances to digital platforms, the symbolic and ideological power of music and fashion remains central to identity formation and social commentary. The evolution of pop culture highlights its enduring role in contesting norms, redistributing cultural power, and shaping collective understandings of gender and individuality.

Keywords: pop culture, semiotics, identity, gender expression, fashion symbolism, music and society, digital culture

Introduction

For many years, pop culture has been a creative means to hold a cultural mirror, moulding and redescribing society. Popular culture can be broadly defined as a collection of objects, media, practices, and ideologies favoured by a society's masses at any given time. It is so deeply embedded into daily routine that much of society sporadically recognises the significance of pop culture as a semiotic tool. Two integral spheres of pop culture, music and fashion, have repeatedly proven to be an important means of expression, including in political and social contexts.

Over the decades, many individuals and creatives in these fields have emerged, utilising pop culture to shape, expose, and redefine social, cultural and political narratives in numerous ways. With time, the communication and execution of these ideas have evolved, mirroring the shifts in societal dynamics, from the glam-rock era of the 1970s to the widely accessible, globalised and digitised version of pop culture today. In line with the aforementioned, this paper aims to answer the following research question: **How have music and fashion in pop culture evolved as semiotic tools to shape identity, influence power dynamics, and reflect societal perceptions across different periods?**

This paper argues that while the semiotics of music and fashion historically operated as explicit acts of resistance against dominant social norms, contemporary pop culture uses these same semiotic strategies to negotiate digital identities, global visibility, and commercialized authenticity. Despite these shifts, semiotics remains central to how artists shape cultural meaning and influence social discourse.

Literature Review

The term "popular culture" has long existed, historically referring to the cultural tastes and practices of the general population in contrast to those of social elites. Its modern academic usage became more established in the 20th century, particularly through cultural studies scholarship, which positioned pop culture as a site where

meaning, identity, and power are negotiated (Hung and Gillett, 2022). Early distinctions between "high culture" and "popular culture" emerged from this divide, in which elite cultural forms were viewed as more sophisticated and popular forms were sometimes dismissed as superficial or commercially driven.

Today, popular culture refers to the ideas, practices, symbols, and material expressions that are widely shared and circulated within a society. Although commonly associated with entertainment media, it also encompasses music, fashion, visual art, digital culture, and everyday practices that capture mass engagement. Sociologists argue that pop culture functions not only as a reflection of social values but also as an active force that shapes beliefs, identities, and behavioural norms (Crossman, 2025). Building on this, John Storey (2009) contends that popular culture is a contested space in which dominant ideologies interact with resistant subcultures. Rather than being static or purely top-down, pop culture is continually redefined through the interplay of power, identity, and meaning-making.

Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics offers a key framework for analysing how pop culture produces meaning. In *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972) developed a model where cultural meaning is created through the interaction between the *signifier* (the form of a sign, such as a word, image, or song) and the *signified* (the idea or concept it represents). These signs operate on two levels: the denotative, which is the literal or direct meaning, and the connotative, which involves the cultural or emotional associations attached to the sign. According to Barthes, pop culture transforms everyday objects and expressions into signs that carry ideological meaning (Garebian, 2022). For example, a leather jacket might be a literal article of clothing, but connotatively it could symbolise rebellion, masculinity, or freedom, depending on its context.

Barthes (1972) also introduced the idea of *myth* as a second-order signification. In this sense, cultural signs carry deeper meanings that may seem natural or unquestioned, yet serve to reinforce dominant ideologies. Pop culture is filled with these myths, narratives embedded in films, advertisements, and celebrity culture that reflect and reproduce societal values around gender, race, class, or nationalism. As George Rossolatos (2014) notes, the semiotic analysis of popular culture reveals how these meanings are encoded into consumer goods, media, and trends, helping people make sense of their identities and social environments.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model further deepens our understanding of how meaning operates in pop culture. Hall suggests that cultural producers encode messages with specific intentions, but audiences do not always interpret them in predictable ways. Instead, people decode these messages based on their cultural backgrounds, social positions, and lived experiences (Mambrol, 2020). There are dominant readings, in which the audience accepts the intended message; negotiated readings, in which parts are accepted and others rejected; and oppositional readings, in which the message is actively resisted (Hall, 1980). In pop culture, fashion, music, and media often encode specific values, such as luxury, rebellion, or tradition, which audiences then interpret in diverse, often unpredictable ways.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers yet another lens. Butler argues that identity is not something inherent or fixed but rather something we continuously perform through our behaviour, language, clothing, and other choices. Gender, for example, is not just a biological fact but a set of repeated actions and signs that align with cultural norms (Thompson, 2025). Pop culture becomes a key stage for this performance, where fashion, music, and celebrity personas allow individuals to express or experiment with gender, class, and cultural identities. Through this lens, pop culture is not just symbolic but performative. It creates the identities it represents by enabling their repetition and circulation.

Together, these theories highlight the complex semiotic nature of pop culture. Through Barthes's lens, we see how pop culture turns everyday objects into ideological signs. Hall's work demonstrates that these signs are not passively consumed, but actively interpreted, while Butler highlights how these interpretations contribute to the ongoing performance of identity. Therefore, pop culture is more than entertainment; it is a robust system of meaning-making that both mirrors and moulds society.

Semiotic Pioneers: Symbolism and Identity Construction in Late 20th-Century Pop Culture

David Bowie

The 1970s were a transformative era for cultural understandings of gender and identity, marked by social change and challenges to traditional norms. Despite these shifts, conservative attitudes and entrenched prejudices remained prevalent. Traditional gender roles, while beginning to be questioned, were still largely rigid. Men were often expected to embody strength, stoicism, and assertiveness, while women were pressured to conform to ideals of femininity and domesticity. Public perceptions of masculinity were not monolithic: figures like John Lennon represented a more gentle, introspective form of male identity, whereas media portrayals frequently reinforced aggressive or hyper-masculine ideals.

But something else was born in the 1970s as well. The glam rock era, beginning in Britain in the early 70s, was a musical movement that shook the conservatives to the core (Britannica, 2019). It praised the spectacle of the rockstar and the concert. Concerts would be extravagant musical productions, characterised by the futuristic space-age aesthetic. The rockstars would dress up in women's clothes and makeup, often covered in glitter. David Bowie was the horseman of this era. David Bowie's androgynous fashion, sparkling bodysuits and flamboyant makeup were part of a persona, Ziggy Stardust. He challenged norms, creating a visual and musical narrative that blurred gender lines.

Using Barthes' semiotics, Bowie's costumes and stage personas functioned as signifiers: their literal forms (clothing, makeup, and hairstyles) denoted physical appearance, while their connotative meanings conveyed freedom, individuality, rebellion, and nonconformity. At a deeper, mythological level, these signs challenged dominant societal norms by presenting gender as fluid and performable rather than fixed. In line with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Bowie's continual enactment of gender-bending personas shows how identity is actively constructed through repeated acts. His fashion and public image were not merely expressive but also performative, shaping perceptions of masculinity, expanding the semiotic possibilities of pop culture, and turning Bowie into a cultural icon whose influence went beyond music to challenge social norms and inspire alternative ways of being.

Björk

The 1990s and early 2000s were a period of burgeoning globalisation, and concerns began to rise about the rise in cultural homogeneity. These globally spread Western narratives lead to a decrease in cultural diversity and damage the presence of individuality and indigenous identity. Consequently, a crisis of cultural identity arose, making it difficult for people to harmonise their ancestral traditions with their contemporary goals (Paonam, 2025). But amid this drastic decline in individuality, a unique voice emerged. Björk, an Icelandic musician, became known for her distinctive style, not only in music but also in fashion.

Her surrealistic music videos, androgynous and unusual fashion sense challenged traditional gender roles, and the rise of homogeneity. Much of her music reveals her struggles with themes like striving for individuality and resisting conformity. She was an openly queer artist and always promoted the need for self-acceptance and for embracing differences rather than merging into a homogeneous global identity. Björk's experimental music and unconventional fashion, like her iconic swan dress and recognisable biomorphic couture, represented a refusal to conform to mainstream aesthetic standards (Chowdhary, 2024). Björk's artistry reflects a semiotic act. Her fashion and music serve as symbols of individuality and cultural blending. Drawing on Butler's theory of performativity, her changing, eclectic style shows that identity is not permanent but is created. By mixing Icelandic folklore with futuristic styles, Björk expresses a flexible sense of self that defies traditional categories. She challenges social norms and redefines authenticity through her constant reinvention, performances, and mixed cultural expressions.

New Semiotic Landscapes: Reinterpreting Identity and Power in 21st-Century Pop Culture

Billie Eilish

In recent times, specifically from around the beginning of the 21st century, social media platforms saw rapid proliferation among the general public. Overall, the number of users rose from 970 million in 2010 to 5.41 billion in July 2025 (Backlinko Team, 2025). Pop culture has been dramatically influenced by social media, making popular figures increasingly approachable and interactions more instantaneous. But the same platforms that democratise fame also cultivate volatile dynamics, including the rise of cancel culture and the relentless pressure to preserve a carefully manufactured public persona (Harrisson, 2024). Because of this, many contemporary artists have been pressured into conforming to society's ideas of an "ideal" public figure. For female celebrities, this includes aligning with the traditional perception of femininity and leaning into the hypersexualised version of modern-day public standards of beauty (Glago, 2021). But there have also been those who have actively defied these traditions and norms. From the beginning of her career, Billie Eilish rejected conventional standards of feminine presentation, deliberately distancing herself from the hyper-sexualised image that dominates much of mainstream pop culture (Walker, 2020). Her signature oversized silhouettes, dark colour palettes, and eclectic androgynous streetwear became an assertion of bodily autonomy and self-identity. In an era where female artists face huge amounts of scrutiny on social media, Billie Eilish's refusal to reveal her body challenges the expectation that femininity must be tied to sexual display (Gala, 2023).

Using Roland Barthes' semiotics, Billie Eilish's baggy, androgynous clothing functions as a signifier, with its denotative meaning being simply oversized or streetwear fashion. Connotatively, however, these garments signify bodily autonomy, resistance to objectification, and a rejection of dominant beauty ideals imposed on female celebrities. At a deeper, mythological level, her fashion challenges the cultural narrative that equates femininity with sexual display, exposing the ideological assumptions embedded in mainstream beauty standards. In line with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Eilish's repeated enactment of these oversized and gender-neutral styles performs a continuous construction of identity, asserting control over her self-presentation and public persona. Through this deliberate performance, Billie Eilish transforms her fashion choices into a semiotic tool that critiques societal expectations, reshapes perceptions of femininity in pop culture, and empowers alternative ways of expressing selfhood in a hyper-visible social media landscape.

Harry Styles

Harry Styles has emerged as one of the most influential cultural figures of the 21st century, not only through his music but also through his fashion, which serves as social commentary. In an industry where male celebrities are often confined to narrow aesthetic expectations, he actively resists these norms and traditions by embracing gender-fluid fashion (Mcnamara, 2019). His stylistic choices, like skirts at his tour shows, pearls with tailored suits, painted nails, and soft, flowing silhouettes, etc., challenge widespread masculine norms that have long dominated pop culture (Laux, 2021). On his 2020 Vogue cover, he wore a Gucci couture dress, which became a defining cultural moment, sparking global conversations and debate on gender expression and identity.

Viewed through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Harry Styles' fashion becomes a deliberate "repetition of acts" that presents gender as neither natural nor fixed, but as something continually produced through performance. He does not abandon masculinity. Instead, he expands it, blending symbols coded feminine (lace, ruffles, pearls) with conventionally masculine postures, confidence, and charisma. By doing this, he undermines the societal narrative that links masculinity to controlled emotions and subdued aesthetics (López, 2021). Roland Barthes' idea of myth is also relevant in this case. Harry Styles has become a cultural signifier, a mythic figure representing fluidity, freedom, and resistance to heteronormative constraints in mainstream pop culture.

However, Styles' fashion as a symbol of progressive masculinity is not universally interpreted. Some audiences embrace him as an icon who challenges traditional gender norms and promotes inclusive self-expression, while others adopt oppositional readings, viewing his fashion as performative, commercially driven, or shielded by his alleged heterosexual privilege (Wahlgren, 2020). Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model illustrates how these meanings are contested: negotiated readings acknowledge both his cultural

influence and its limitations, particularly in contrast to queer people of colour, who have long used fashion as a form of resistance but often faced far harsher social and cultural consequences (An, 2020).

In the end, through these semiotic and performative acts, Harry Styles' fashion functions as a tool for shaping identity, influencing cultural power dynamics, and reflecting evolving societal perceptions of masculinity.

Conclusion

Across different historical periods, music and fashion in pop culture have functioned as powerful semiotic tools through which identity is constructed, power dynamics are negotiated, and societal perceptions are both reflected and challenged. Semiotic theory, audience decoding, and performativity together reveal that cultural figures, from glam-rock icons of the 1970s to Gen-Z artists shaped by digital media, use signs, symbols, and performances to communicate layered meanings about gender, autonomy, and resistance.

Case studies such as David Bowie and Björk show how the pre-digital era relied heavily on visual spectacle and avant-garde aesthetics to disrupt rigid gender norms and assert individuality. In contrast, Billie Eilish and Harry Styles demonstrate how digital-age artists engage with global audiences through fashion and music to contest beauty ideals, expand definitions of masculinity, and navigate the intensified scrutiny of social media.

While technology and platforms have shifted dramatically, the function of music and fashion as semiotic instruments remains constant: they shape how individuals understand themselves, redistribute cultural power by challenging dominant norms, and mirror the evolving social values of their time. Ultimately, pop culture continues to reinvent its symbolic language across eras, mediums, and identities, showing that meaning is never static but continually reimagined through sound, image, and style.

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