



From Casual to Formal: Fashion as Intergenerational Communication

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores how academics across generations interpret fashion as a medium of communication within an Islamic higher education environment. The study aims to examine: (1) the meaning of fashion among cross-generational academics; (2) intergenerational experiences in interpreting formal and casual attire; and (3) fashion as a form of communicating identity and professionalism. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study involved 20 participants from Generations X, Y, and Z, consisting of lecturers and educational staff at an Islamic private university in Bandung, Indonesia. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews to explore participants' lived experiences and interpretations of fashion in academic settings. The findings show that fashion functions as a form of nonverbal communication reflecting moral values, religiosity, professionalism, and generational identity. Generation X tends to emphasize ethics and institutional credibility, Generation Y balances comfort and professionalism, while Generation Z highlights aesthetic self-expression and flexibility. Differences in interpreting formal and casual attire indicate that fashion becomes a symbolic space for negotiating institutional norms, personal identity, and intergenerational relationships. The study contributes to the understanding of fashion as a form of moral-visual communication within Islamic academic environments and highlights how clothing practices mediate professionalism and intergenerational interaction across generations.

Keywords: *Communication Accomodation Theory, Fashion, Intergenerational Communication, Islamic University, Phenomenology*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion as nonverbal communication represents identity, values, and social status. This perspective is relevant to examining how clothing is chosen, perceived, and negotiated across generations (Barnard, 2002). In Islamic higher education environments, the choice of clothing styles seems to be increasingly striking when casual styles meet more formal and conservative styles among the academic community, such as lecturers and educational staff.

Fashion serves as a powerful form of communication, conveying identity, social status, cultural values, and group belonging through clothing, style, and visual presentation (Barnard, 2020; Castaldo Lundén, 2020; Huggard & Cope, 2020). Theoretical models, such as the sender-receiver and semiological approaches, have been used to analyze how fashion communicates meaning, but these models face challenges in fully capturing the complexity and context-dependence of fashion's communicative role (Barnard, 2020; Castaldo Lundén, 2020).

On the other hand, intergenerational communication refers to the exchange of information, ideas, and values between individuals of different generations, such as between younger and older people in a family, workplace, or community (Gao, 2023; Hatzir & Segev, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Sadovskaya, 2023). This type of communication is shaped by generational differences in experiences, values, communication styles, and technology preferences, and can occur through a variety of channels including face-to-face conversations, phone calls, and digital platforms such as social media or messaging apps (Gao, 2023; Miftahul Jannah et al., 2023).

Intergenerational communication plays a crucial role in fostering connectedness, resolving conflict, and passing on knowledge, but it can also be a source of misunderstanding or tension due to differences in expectations and cultural norms (Hatzir & Segev, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Miftahul Jannah et al., 2023). Intergenerational communication is often conceptualized as a form of intercultural communication, where each generation brings its own "culture" shaped by historical context and life experiences (Gao, 2023; Sadovskaya, 2023). Effective intergenerational communication is essential for social cohesion, learning, and productivity, especially in diverse environments such as families, organizations, and online communities (Li et al., 2023; Matějka & Kořán, 2024).

In the context of Islamic private universities, fashion plays a crucial role in shaping social identity and mediating intergenerational relationships, particularly among younger generations such as Millennials and Generation Z. For these groups, fashion is not just about personal style, but also serves as a visual language to express self-identity, a sense of belonging, and cultural values, often facilitated by social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Ananta & Falah, 2023; Helal & Ozuem, 2019; Nengsi & Azhar, 2025). Generation Z, in particular, views fashion as a tool

for self-expression and social image building, emphasizing inclusivity and a rejection of rigid social norms, while also using fashion to communicate cultural identity and community membership (Ananta & Falah, 2023; Hakim & Suraya, 2024). Generational differences in attitudes towards fashion are clear: research shows that Generation X tends to be materialistic individualists, Generation Y (Millennials) often embraces irony and is anti-fashion, and Generation Z uses fashion as a psychological coping mechanism and a means to promote inclusivity (Keszeg, 2022).

Within Islamic higher education institutions, these differing interpretations of professional appearance may create subtle tensions in everyday academic interactions. Preliminary observations in the university environment showed that clothing styles perceived as "too casual," "less formal," or "overly expressive" occasionally became topics of informal comments and evaluative discussions among lecturers and educational staff. In addition, institutional expectations regarding modest and professional dress are commonly communicated through campus regulations, faculty meetings, and organizational culture emphasizing politeness, appropriateness, and Islamic values in academic appearance. These conditions indicate that fashion in Islamic campuses is not merely an aesthetic matter, but also a symbolic arena where professionalism, morality, institutional identity, and generational values are continuously negotiated.

Previous studies have extensively examined fashion as a form of communication and identity construction. Research has shown that fashion communicates social meaning, group belonging, morality, and self-presentation through visual symbols and appearance (Barnard, 2020; Castaldo Lundén, 2020). Meanwhile, studies on intergenerational communication have highlighted how generational differences influence communication styles, workplace interaction, adaptation, and relational dynamics in organizational settings (Gao, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Luka et al., 2023). However, these two areas of scholarship remain largely disconnected, particularly in discussions concerning academic workplaces and Islamic higher education institutions.

Existing intergenerational fashion studies predominantly focus on family-based relational contexts rather than professional or institutional environments. Previous research has explored the relationship between mothers and children in fashion preferences, showing that fashion functions as a medium of relational communication in which mothers influence their children's style choices and vice versa (Kestler & Paulins, 2014). Another study examined co-shopping behavior between mothers and teenagers through the perspective of social comparison theory (Gentina et al., 2018). Similarly, Park et al. (2019) investigated fashion communication between Korean mothers and teenage daughters, finding that maternal beliefs and appearance-related social pressures encourage clothing matching practices that strengthen solidarity and psychological well-being. Furthermore, research on sustainable consumption demonstrates that strong mother-daughter communication contributes to intergenerational similarity in sustainable consumption behavior (Essiz & Mandrik,

These studies confirm that fashion can function as a medium of intergenerational communication representing values, identity, belonging, and relational meaning. Nevertheless, existing scholarship largely situates fashion communication within domestic, familial, and consumption-oriented contexts. Limited attention has been given to how fashion operates as a form of intergenerational nonverbal communication within academic workplaces, particularly in Islamic higher education environments where professional expectations intersect with religious norms and generational identity negotiation.

The research gap therefore lies not simply in the study of fashion itself, but in the limited understanding of fashion as a communicative and symbolic practice within intergenerational academic interactions in Islamic university settings. This study is novel because it positions fashion as a form of moral-visual communication through which academics negotiate professionalism, institutional expectations, religiosity, and generational identity in everyday campus life.

In Indonesia, fashion research still predominantly addresses the creative industry, popular culture, consumer behavior, or compliance with Islamic dress codes, without specifically examining fashion as a form of intergenerational communication within higher education institutions. Yet Islamic universities represent unique socio-cultural spaces: on the one hand, institutional norms emphasize modesty, professionalism, and religiosity; on the other hand, younger generations increasingly interpret fashion through more casual, expressive, and flexible forms of self-presentation.

This research therefore seeks to explore: (1) the meaning of fashion for academics across generations in Islamic higher education environments; (2) cross-generational experiences in interpreting formal and casual categories; and (3) fashion as a communication of identity and professionalism. The phenomenological approach was chosen to uncover the subjective meanings embedded in academics' lived experiences in using fashion as a form of intergenerational communication within Islamic academic spaces.

This study contributes to the literature by positioning fashion not merely as aesthetic expression or consumption practice, but as a form of moral-visual communication through which academics negotiate professionalism, institutional expectations, and generational identity within Islamic higher education environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fashion as Communication

Fashion is agreed upon as something meaningful and communicative, so that fashion communication becomes the idea that what an individual wears is a reflection or mirror of something (Barnard, 2007). Fashion is connected and intersects with various sectors, from culture and entertainment to the financial world and developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Nobile et al., 2021). Also fashion not only has a practical function but also a cultural function that shapes and communicates cultural identity (Barnard, 2013).

Fashion is understood not merely as self-expression, but as a social object containing shared symbols and meanings that are formed, transformed, and negotiated through interaction, thus influencing both personal identity and social structures (Ambás & Gárgoles, 2025). Fashion as a cultural practice becomes a medium for expressing lifestyles and cultural meanings that maintain identity and social ties, so that—as an integral part of a way of life—fashion not only responds to sociocultural changes, but also reflects the specifics of its time and functions as an indicator of the transformation of a historical period (Cherevach, 2023). Barnard (2013) further argues that fashion communicates social difference and group identity by symbolically marking belonging, status, and relational boundaries.

Within institutional environments, fashion may also function as a symbolic indicator of professionalism, authority, appropriateness, and institutional identity. Clothing choices can shape how individuals are perceived in terms of competence, credibility, morality, and social legitimacy. In academic settings, appearance therefore becomes part of professional communication through which institutional expectations and personal identity are negotiated simultaneously.

Intergenerational Communication

Intergenerational communication is broadly defined as interaction and communication between people belonging to different generations, such as youth and older adults, parents and children, or colleagues of varying ages. This communication can occur within families (intrafamilial), between non-relatives (interfamilial), or in institutional and community settings (Li et al., 2023; Matějka & Kořán, 2024; Sadovskaya, 2023). It is characterized by the explicit or implicit recognition of generational identities and often involves the sharing of knowledge, values, cultural traditions, and life experiences (Matějka & Kořán, 2024; Sadovskaya, 2023; Stephan, 2021).

Intergenerational communication is not a one-way process but an interactive dialogue that can include formal, informal, and incremental learning, as well as mentoring and mutual support (Matějka & Kořán, 2024; Stephan, 2021). It occurs in various settings, including families, workplaces, educational institutions, and online communities, and can be influenced by technological, social, and cultural factors (Bongco & Ama, 2023;

Gao, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Matějka & Kořán, 2024). Thus, differences in communication styles, values, and technological preferences can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts, but also present opportunities for learning and adaptation (Luka et al., 2023).

Previous scholarship identifies several forms of intergenerational communication, including intrafamilial communication within families, interfamilial communication between unrelated individuals, and institutional intergenerational communication occurring in organizational and educational settings (Li et al., 2023; Luka et al., 2023). This study focuses on the third context, namely intergenerational communication within Islamic higher education institutions.

In academic workplaces, generational differences may influence how professionalism, authority, politeness, and appropriateness are interpreted and enacted. These differences are not limited to verbal interaction but may also appear through nonverbal expressions such as appearance, dress style, and bodily presentation. Consequently, fashion becomes part of intergenerational communication through which individuals negotiate social acceptance, institutional legitimacy, and generational identity.

Communication Accommodation Theory

This study employs Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles, as the primary analytical framework for understanding how academics across generations negotiate identity and professionalism through fashion practices. CAT explains how individuals adjust their communication behavior to either reduce or emphasize social differences during interaction (Giles et al., 2023; Soliz et al., 2021). These adjustments may occur verbally or nonverbally and are influenced by relational goals, social expectations, institutional norms, and identity management.

CAT highlights two major communication strategies: convergence and divergence. Convergence refers to communicative adjustments intended to create similarity, closeness, rapport, or social acceptance, whereas divergence emphasizes distinctiveness and group identity differences (Elhami, 2020; Giles et al., 2023). Communication accommodation may therefore function as a strategy for negotiating authority, professionalism, social distance, and relational harmony.

Although CAT is commonly applied to language, interaction style, and verbal communication, this study extends the framework to fashion as a form of nonverbal accommodation. In academic environments, clothing choices may reflect convergence when individuals adapt their appearance to institutional expectations, professional norms, or generational preferences. Conversely, divergence may appear when individuals intentionally maintain distinctive styles to assert generational identity, authenticity, or symbolic authority.

CAT has been widely applied in healthcare, education, organizational communication,

and digital interaction studies, demonstrating that accommodative communication can enhance trust, cooperation, and relational effectiveness, whereas poor accommodation may contribute to misunderstanding and social tension (Ji et al., 2025; Nixon & Guajardo, 2023; Pines et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2025).

In the context of Islamic higher education, CAT provides a relevant analytical lens for understanding how academics across generations negotiate professionalism, modesty, institutional expectations, and self-expression through fashion practices. The theory allows this study to examine fashion not merely as aesthetic appearance, but as a form of moral-visual communication through which generational identities and institutional values are symbolically accommodated, negotiated, and expressed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of academics across generations in interpreting fashion, particularly in relation to formal-casual dress practices as a form of communication within the campus environment. The phenomenological approach was selected because it seeks to understand and describe the essence of participants' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The study was conducted at Bandung Islamic University (Unisba), a private Islamic university in Bandung characterized by institutional norms emphasizing modesty, professionalism, and Islamic values in academic appearance.

The participants consisted exclusively of lecturers and educational staff representing Generations X, Y (Millennials), and Z within the university environment. Participant selection employed purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) active involvement in the university environment for at least one year, (2) experience interacting across generations within academic settings, and (3) willingness to provide reflective narratives regarding fashion, professionalism, and campus interaction.

A total of 20 participants completed open-ended questionnaires, while 8 participants were subsequently selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview participants were selected purposively to represent generational variation, institutional roles, and diversity of perspectives regarding formal and casual dress practices. The interviews were intended to deepen narrative understanding, explore socio-emotional contexts, and clarify symbolic meanings emerging from the questionnaire responses.

Table 1: Participant Distribution by Generation and Institutional Role

Generation	Lecturers	Educational Staff	Total
Generation X	4	2	6
Generation Y (Millennials)	5	3	8

Generation	Lecturers	Educational Staff	Total
Generation Z	4	2	6
Total	13	7	20

Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between January and March 2025. The questionnaires explored participants' reflections regarding:

- (1) the personal meaning of fashion,
 - (2) interpretations of formal and casual dress categories, and
 - (3) perceptions of intergenerational relationships reflected through clothing styles.
- The interview protocol was designed to align directly with the research questions and phenomenological focus of the study, as presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Mapping of Research Questions and Interview Protocol

Research Question	Main Interview Prompt	Follow-up Probes
RQ1. Meaning of fashion among academics across generations	"What does fashion or appearance mean to you in academic settings?"	"How does clothing reflect your identity or professionalism?"
RQ2. Interpretation of formal and casual dress	"How do you interpret formal and casual dress on campus?"	"Have you experienced differences in interpretation across generations?"
RQ3. Fashion as communication of identity and professionalism	"How does clothing influence interaction and communication on campus?"	"Do you ever adjust your appearance depending on who you interact with?"

The data analysis employed phenomenological thematic analysis informed by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018). This approach focused on identifying essential meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences while maintaining phenomenological attention to the subjective interpretation of the phenomenon.

The analysis process involved four stages:

- (1) reading and re-reading participant narratives to gain holistic understanding,
- (2) identifying significant statements related to fashion, professionalism, and intergenerational interaction,
- (3) clustering meaning units into essential themes such as fashion as identity, formal-casual negotiation, institutional expectations, and intergenerational accommodation, and
- (4) synthesizing the thematic structure into a composite description representing the essence of fashion as intergenerational communication within the islamic academic environment.

This study did not employ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in the strict methodological sense, but rather a phenomenological thematic approach emphasizing thematic meaning construction across participants' lived experiences.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, several strategies were applied (Creswell & Poth, 2018):

- (1) member checking, in which interpretive summaries were returned to selected participants for confirmation;
- (2) data triangulation through comparison between questionnaire responses, interview narratives, and generational perspectives;
- (3) audit trail documentation throughout the research process; and
- (4) researcher reflexivity through reflective journaling to maintain awareness of interpretive influence during analysis.

All participants were informed regarding the study objectives, confidentiality procedures, and voluntary participation rights. Participant identities were anonymized using pseudonyms (P01–P20). Ethical procedures included the distribution of Participant Information Sheets and signed Consent Forms prior to data collection activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes how cross-generational academics at Islamic universities interpret fashion as a medium for social and professional communication. Through a phenomenological approach, findings are generated from interpreting the subjective experiences of Generation X, Y, and Z informants in exploring the meaning of fashion for the academic community, the boundaries between formal and casual, and how clothing becomes a means to negotiate identity, values, and social acceptance in the campus environment. Figure 1 below summarizes the research findings.

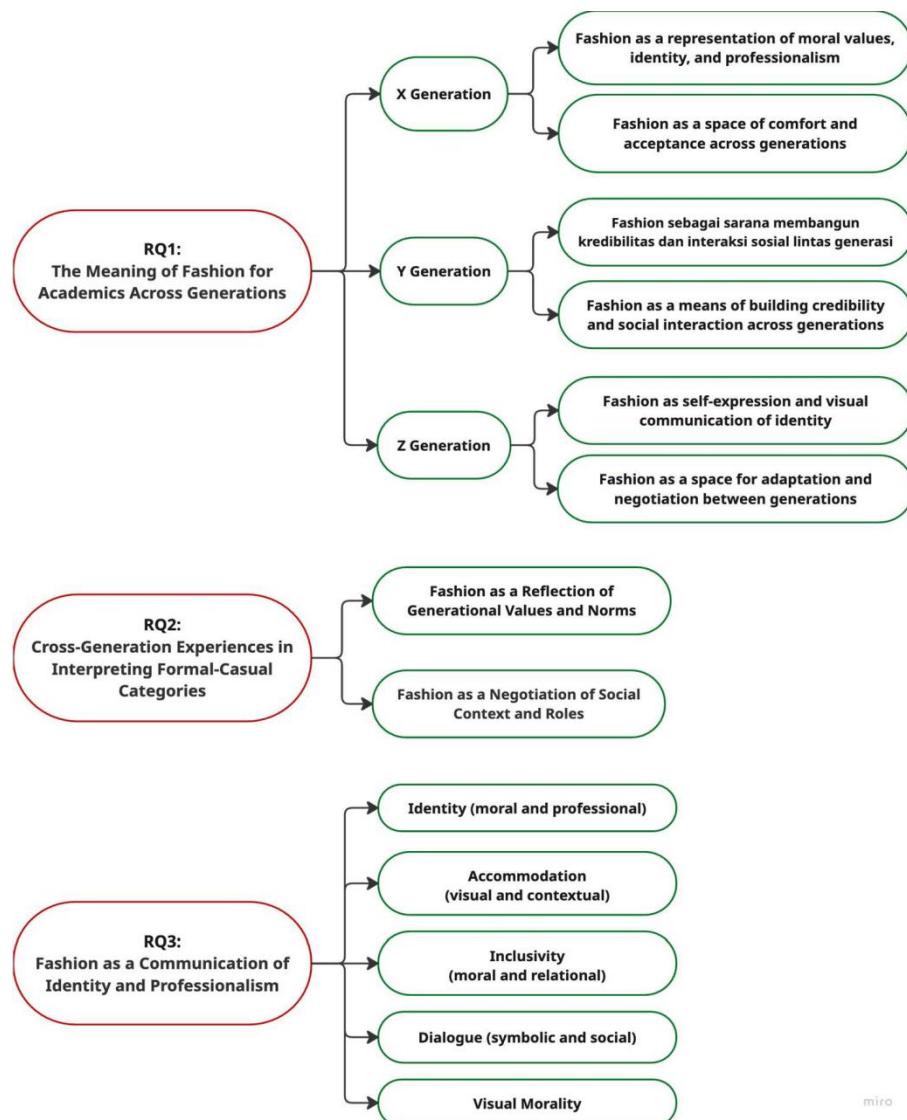


Figure 1: Results mindmap

The analysis shows that fashion not only reflects personal style but also serves as a visual language that communicates professionalism, morality, and intergenerational closeness. The following discussion highlights the essence of cross-generational experiences in using fashion as a means of communicating identity and social values in a religious and dynamic academic space.

The Meaning of Fashion for the Cross-Generation Academic Community at Islamic Universities

This study positions fashion as a cross-generational communication phenomenon, not simply a matter of aesthetics or clothing trends. It explores how clothing becomes a symbolic language that reflects values, identity, and social position within an academic context steeped in religious norms and values. From interviews with informants, the essential themes of Generation X fashion can be observed in Table 2.

Table 1: Recapitulation of Essential Themes of the Meaning of Generation X Fashion

Meaning Unit	Initial Code (Core Meaning)	Temporary Theme	Essential Themes
"Clothing is important", "provides identity and togetherness", "Muslim clothing", "neat, polite and beautiful", "clothing reflects personality and gives a professional impression"	Clothing reflects moral, religious and professional values	Fashion as identity and work ethic	Fashion as a representation of moral values, identity, and professionalism
"Clothing that suits the identity of a Muslim woman on campus", "formal clothing shows professionalism", "neat and polite clothing"	Alignment between institutional values and self-image	Compliance with Islamic campus values	
"Everyone has their own style and taste but still polite", "simple and comfortable clothes", "flexible and agile", "I don't mind the differences in style between generations"	Comfort, flexibility, and acceptance of differences	Fashion as a space for personal expression and tolerance	Fashion as a space of comfort and acceptance across generations
"So far it's been normal, there are no problems between generations in terms of clothing"	Inclusive and adaptive attitude towards diversity of styles	Intergenerational harmony	

(Source: Author, 2025)

For Generation X, fashion is interpreted as a reflection of moral values, identity, and professionalism that align with the Islamic campus culture. Clothing is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a marker of modesty, integrity, and a way to assert one's credibility in the workplace. They view dressing modestly, neatly, and in accordance with Islamic values as a form of respect for the institution and themselves. Furthermore, this generation also emphasizes the importance of comfort and intergenerational acceptance in clothing. They tend to be flexible and appreciate differences in style across ages, as long as they remain within the bounds of decency and work ethics. Thus, for Generation X, fashion is a blend of value expression and social function, where morality, comfort, and tolerance blend in professional harmony within the academic environment.

Similar studies show that for Generation X, fashion is primarily associated with materialist individualism, meaning that clothing and style choices are seen as a way to express personal identity, autonomy, and self-definition rather than simply following trends or group norms (Keszeg, 2022). This generation tends to be less experimental and more conservative in their fashion attitudes, often valuing practicality, quality, and a sense of ownership over fleeting or communal trends (Jain et al., 2023). A shift in meaning occurred among generation Y. Based on the results of interviews with informants, the essential themes of the meaning of fashion for generation Y can be seen in Table 3.

Table 2: Recapitulation of Essential Themes of the Meaning of Fashion for Generation Y (Millennials)

Meaning Unit	Initial Code (Core Meaning)	Temporary Theme	Essential Themes
"Just wear clothes for comfort at work", "Semi-formal casual", "as long as it's comfortable"	Fashion as a spontaneous and functional everyday expression	Natural style and emphasizes comfort	Fashion as a personal expression that balances comfort and professionalism
"Very important; we are what you wear", "clothes represent yourself", "clothes reflect professionalism"	Fashion as an extension of self-image	Professional and personal identity	
"Dress neatly and politely to reflect character", "in addition to personal identity, it also reflects the institution"	Awareness of public image and representation of the institution	Alignment of individuals and institutions	
"Interestingly, many people still judge based on the way they dress", "clothes are an indirect part of self-branding"	Awareness of social perception through fashion	Fashion as social image communication	Fashion as a means of building credibility and social interaction across generations
"Often ask about brands", "looks cheerful from the style of dress", "every generation has its own taste"	Fashion as a tool for building social connections	Bridge of communication between generations	
"I like it when I see senior lecturers still looking fashionable"	Cross-age appreciation of clothing styles	Acceptance and respect for generational differences	

(Source: Author, 2025)

For Generation Y (Millennials), fashion is a space for self-expression that balances comfort and professionalism. Clothing is not merely an obligation, but a medium for demonstrating authentic character in academic settings. Semi-formal attire reflects an effort to appear polite without sacrificing personal style. Fashion is also understood as a social communication tool and a sign of credibility, shaping self-image and supporting self-branding. They value the differences in style across generations and utilize them to build interactions. For millennials, fashion is the meeting point between self-expression, professionalism, and social relationships across age groups.

Studies show that for Generation Y, fashion is closely linked to self-expression, social status, and participation in contemporary culture, with a strong emphasis on style, trend awareness, and conspicuous consumption (Agrawal, 2023; De Klerk, 2024; Soloviova, 2020). This generation uses fashion as a way to build identity and adapt to the social environment, viewing it as a personal and collective statement that helps them fit in or stand out from their peer group (Keszeg, 2022; Soloviova, 2020). From the results of interviews with informants, the essential themes of the meaning of Generation Z fashion can be seen in Table 4.

Table 3: Recapitulation of Essential Themes of the Meaning of Fashion for Generation Z

Meaning Unit	Initial Code (Core Meaning)	Temporary Theme	Essential Themes
"Clothes are style", "someone said 'before you speak, your clothes speak for you first'"	Fashion as self-representation and nonverbal communication	Clothing as a language of identity	Fashion as self-expression and visual communication of identity
"Aesthetic, youthful, flexible clothes"	Emphasis on aesthetic value and style flexibility	Fluid and adaptive modern style	
"I see seniors like formal and neutral colored clothes, while I prefer playful ones."	Awareness of style differences between generations	Reflections on cross-generational dynamics	Fashion as a space for adaptation and negotiation between generations
"In my opinion, the important thing is to remain polite but still be yourself"	Balance between personal expression and institutional norms	Authenticity within the bounds of professionalism	

(Source: Author, 2025)

For Generation Z, fashion is a dynamic, aesthetic, and flexible representation of self. Clothing is not merely a professional obligation, but a medium for displaying a creative identity that is relevant to current values and trends. Dressing in academic settings is a form of self-expression that demonstrates maturity and a close relationship with a cross-age audience. They understand the formal tendencies of older generations but see it as part of intergenerational communication. For Gen Z, fashion is an adaptive visual language—a bridge between styles and values between generations, and a manifestation of younger, more creative, and more authentic professionalism.

In line with the findings, other studies have shown that Generation Z considers fashion as a powerful tool for self-expression, social identity, and inclusivity, using it to communicate individuality and cultural values within their communities (Ananta & Falah, 2023; Christine B et al., 2024). Fashion for Gen Z is not just about following trends, but about building and projecting a unique self-image, which is often facilitated by social media and digital platforms, which play a major role in shaping their preferences and purchasing decisions (Ananta & Falah, 2023; Christine B et al., 2024; Kowsalya, 2025).

Overall, the meaning of fashion for the academic community across generations at Unisba forms a continuum between morality, professionalism, and self-expression. Generation X sees fashion as a reflection of morality, religiosity, and professional integrity. Generation Y defines fashion as a balance between comfort, professionalism, and social credibility. Meanwhile, Generation Z sees it as a medium for self-expression that is aesthetic, flexible, and adaptive to academic norms. However, in line with Zulkefli's study (Zulkefli, 2024), clothing choices are triggered by pragmatic considerations of an individual's subjective aesthetic choices. These differences demonstrate that

fashion is a language of communication between generations, with each group displaying a distinctive style to convey values and build interactions within a professional and institutional framework.

Cross-Generational Experience in Interpreting Formal-Casual Categories

The results of the study indicate that the formal-casual category is interpreted differently by each generation, reflecting the values, social context, and life experiences of the informants in academic settings. Table 5 summarizes the essential themes regarding the interpretation of the formal-casual category in academic attire.

Table 4: Recapitulation of Essential Themes of RQ2

Meaning Unit	Initial Code (Core Meaning)	Temporary Theme	Essential Themes
"For me, formal means modest clothing that covers the body, like a shirt and a long skirt. Casual means staying neat, but it's okay to be more relaxed as long as it doesn't violate campus regulations." (Generation X)	Formal is associated with religious norms and politeness; casual is still within ethical boundaries.	Formal-casual boundaries are determined by moral and institutional norms.	Fashion as a Reflection of Generational Values and Norms
"Formal is for important events, meetings, or teaching. If it's just guidance, I can wear semi-formal. The key is to consider the context." (Generation Y)	Formality is situational and contextual	Flexibility of formal-casual interpretation	Fashion as Negotiation of Social Context and Role
"Nowadays, formal doesn't have to be batik or a blazer. As long as the clothes look clean, are neutral in color, and look serious, that's formal, in my opinion." (Generation Z)	Formal assessment based on modern aesthetics and cleanliness of appearance	Redefinition of formality	Fashion as Negotiation of Social Context and Role
"Students often say my style is stiff, but to me it shows respect. They probably see it as too serious." (Generation X)	Formality as a symbol of respect	The tension of perception across generations	Fashion as a Reflection of Generational Values and Norms
"I feel more comfortable wearing an oversized shirt and trousers, which is formal enough. Wearing a blazer makes me look older." (Generation Z)	Formal is perceived aesthetically and age identity	Formal style is associated with youthful self-representation	Fashion as Negotiation of Social Context and Role

(Source: Author, 2025)

For Generation X, the formal-casual category is rooted in moral, religious, and institutional norms. Formality is interpreted as politeness and professionalism, while casual must remain appropriate as a sign of morality and integrity. Generation Y views formal-casual contextually. Both are fluid and dependent on the occasion, role, and audience. They emphasize adapting to social norms without sacrificing comfort, demonstrating a shift from normative compliance to professional flexibility. Generation Z views formal-casual through aesthetics and self-expression. "Formal" for them means neat, neutral, and a clean look, not just outdated symbols like blazers or batik. Professionalism is built through modern and authentic style, marking a shift from formality as an obli-

gation to a self-presentation strategy.

These results indicate that fashion serves as a reflection of generational values and norms, with each generation expressing its unique priorities and social attitudes through its clothing choices. Based on these results, formal and casual fashion worn on campus can be interpreted as:

1. Reflection of generational values and norms

Generation X is characterized by materialistic individualism, using fashion to assert personal autonomy and credibility, and being less influenced by communal or rapidly changing trends. (Keszeg, 2022). Millennials (Generation Y) use fashion as a tool for self-identity and social adaptation, often navigating between global trends and local cultures, with social media playing a significant role in shaping and displaying their fashion choices (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022; Nengsi & Azhar, 2025). Meanwhile, for Generation Z, fashion is closely linked to the values of sustainability, inclusivity, and self-expression; they use fashion to communicate individuality, embrace diversity, and reject rigid social norms, often leveraging digital platforms to spread these values and influence market trends (Ananta & Falah, 2023; Gazzola et al., 2020; Hwang & Zhao, 2022; Polisetty et al., 2025).

2. Negotiation of social contexts and roles

Fashion acts as a dynamic process in negotiating social contexts and roles, serving as a means of individual self-expression and as a shared symbol system that communicates social meanings and group affiliations (Ambás & Gárgoles, 2025; Gjoni, 2025; Ovsiankina & Kuprii, 2021).

As is known, formal wear refers to clothing designed for professional, ceremonial, or formal occasions, typically characterized by structured clothing such as a suit, tie, shirt, blazer, trousers, and a formal gown or gown. This style of dress is associated with attributes such as professionalism, authority, and self-control, and is often required at formal business, legal, or social events (Ejigu et al., 2022; Sotak et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2021).

In contrast, casual wear includes relaxed, comfortable, and informal clothing such as jeans, t-shirts, casual shirts, sneakers, and other clothing that is not bound by a strict dress code. Casual wear is generally worn in everyday, non-professional settings and is associated with comfort, approachability, and personal expression (Prakash Shrestha & Sanu Babu Bhujel, 2024; Sotak et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2021). The difference between formal and casual wear is not just about style, but also about the context in which the clothes are worn and the social signals they convey (Sotak et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2021).

These differing interpretations illustrate that the formal-casual category is not just about clothing, but rather a generational representation of values, social context, and self-identity. Fashion becomes an arena where norms and expressions negotiate, shaping nonverbal communication that demonstrates how each generation interprets professionalism and social acceptance on campus.

Fashion as a Communication of Identity and Professionalism

Fashion as a means of communicating identity and professionalism can be understood as a form of nonverbal communication that represents who a person is and how they wish to be perceived in social and professional contexts. Through their clothing choices, individuals not only display their personal tastes but also convey symbolic messages about their values, status, and credibility within a given environment. In academic settings, for example, clothing style reflects a balance between self-expression and adherence to institutional norms, becoming a means of constructing a professional identity while negotiating social acceptance across generations. Table 6 below presents the structure of meaning and the essence of the phenomenon of fashion as intergenerational communication.

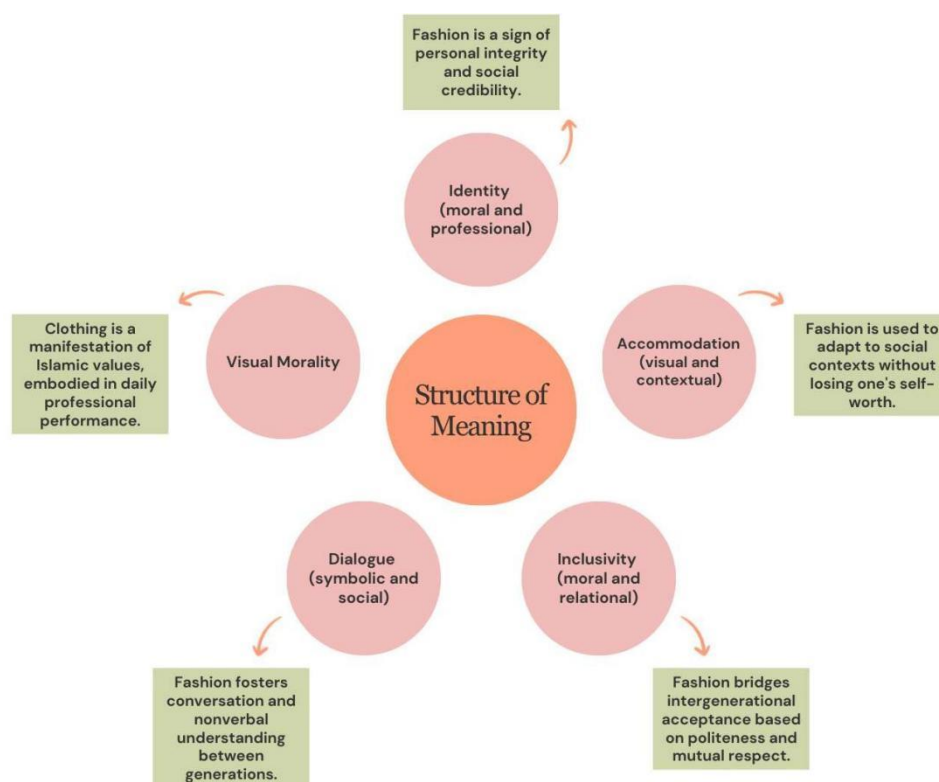


Figure 2: Structure of Meaning and Essence of Phenomena

The interpretation of the research results indicates that fashion in the intergenerational academic community functions not only as a style of dress, but also as a complex medium of social, moral, and professional communication.

First, the structure of identity meaning confirms that fashion serves as a marker of personal integrity and social credibility. The way one dresses represents who one is in the eyes of others, both as a professional and as a moral individual. This suggests that clothing serves as a visual ethos—a symbol of trust and self-responsibility in the academic space.

Second, the meaning of accommodation describes an individual's ability to adapt to the social context without losing personal values. Intergenerational academics use fashion to negotiate their positions: remaining authentic but relevant to environmental expectations. This aligns with the principles of communication accommodation theory, where nonverbal adjustments are made to maintain harmonious interactions.

Third, the dimension of inclusivity demonstrates that fashion functions as a relational bridge between generations. Politeness, politeness, and mutual respect are reflected through clothing choices, creating a space of mutual acceptance between conservative and modern styles.

Fourth, through symbolic dialogue, fashion fosters nonverbal communication across generations. Each style of clothing becomes a social language that enables wordless conversation—subtly yet meaningfully negotiating values, roles, and identities.

Fifth, the meaning of visual morality emphasizes that for Unisba academics, fashion is not merely an outward appearance, but also a manifestation of Islamic values in everyday professional life. Modest, clean, and proportionate clothing reflects the balance between religiosity and professionalism, making fashion a form of visual piety that connects ethics, aesthetics, and spirituality in academic life.

Overall, these five structures of meaning demonstrate that fashion functions as a moral-visual communication across generations by linking values, identity, and professionalism within a harmonious social narrative. Figure 2 below maps the hierarchy of fashion meanings in intergenerational communication within Islamic higher education institutions.

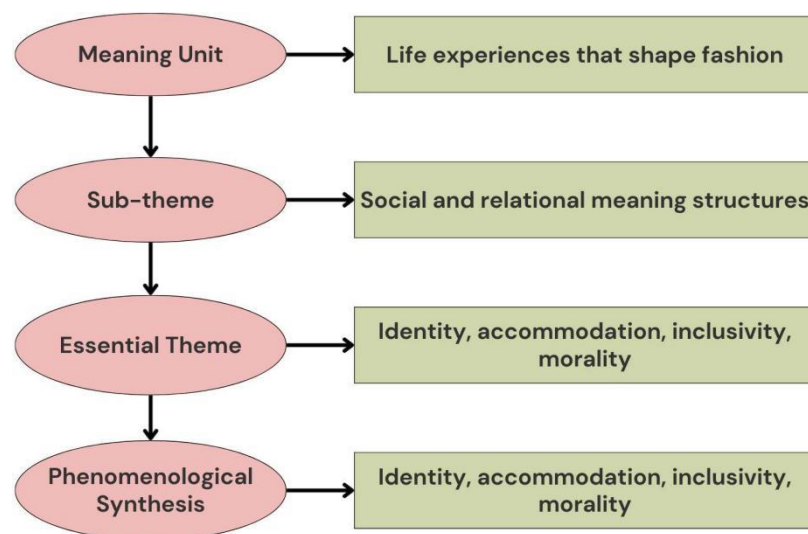


Figure 3: Hierarchical Model of Fashion Meaning in Cross-Generational Communication

This model demonstrates that dressing on Islamic campuses is not simply an aesthetic or institutional norm, but a practice of moral communication that brings together three horizons of generational experience. Gen X affirms moral values, Millennials negotiate adaptation, and Gen Z champions inclusive expression. All three combine in a symbolic dialogue that builds social cohesion and professionalism based on Islamic values.

The connection between "Fashion as a Means of Communicating Identity and Professionalism" and Communication Accommodation Theory lies in how individuals adjust their communication behavior, including through nonverbal expressions such as fashion, to build similarities, closeness, or emphasize identity differences in social interactions. According to Howard Giles, this theory explains that individuals engage in convergence (adjusting their communication style to get closer) or divergence (emphasizing differences to assert their identity) (Giles et al., 1991). In the context of clothing, this process is evident when academics across generations adjust their appearance to align with professional values and institutional norms, while still expressing their personal identities.

For Generation X, the choice of polite and conservative formal attire often serves as a form of divergence to assert an authoritative position and professional image. Conversely, Generations Y and Z tend to converge by adopting semi-formal or casual styles that demonstrate flexibility, comfort, and social closeness. Thus, fashion can be understood as a nonverbal communication accommodation tool that reflects each generation's efforts to negotiate identity and professionalism in the academic space. In line with Giles's thinking, this adjustment serves as a symbolic strategy for building social harmony, reducing generational distance, and strengthening professional credibility and acceptance within the campus environment.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research demonstrates that fashion functions beyond simply signaling style or trends, but rather as a medium for social, moral, and professional communication in academic environments grounded in Islamic values. Through a phenomenological approach, it was found that academics across generations interpret fashion as a visual language that reflects personal integrity, social credibility, and a means of negotiating values and identity in the campus workplace. Generation X views fashion as a reflection of moral and professional values, affirming politeness and respect for the institution. Generation Y (Millennials) understands fashion as a means of balancing personal expression, comfort, and a professional image relevant to modern workplace demands. Generation Z views fashion as an aesthetic and flexible form of self-expression that respects academic norms but allows for creativity and authenticity.

The interpretation of the formal-casual category across generations reflects differing social dynamics and generational values: from normative adherence to contextual flexibility, and ultimately to inclusive identity expression. These findings confirm fashion's function as a nonverbal communication accommodation tool, reflecting the principles of Communication Accommodation Theory, where convergence and divergence in dress serve as symbolic strategies for building closeness, authority, and harmony between generations. Thus, fashion in Islamic campus environments can be understood as a form of moral-visual communication that connects three horizons of experience: morality (Gen X), adaptation (Gen Y), and inclusive expression (Gen Z). These three combine to create an ethical, dynamic, and professional intergenerational communication ecosystem.

This research is limited to the context of Bandung Islamic University, which is steeped in religious values. Therefore, it is recommended that further studies be conducted at various institutions using an observational or visual ethnographic approach, while also considering dimensions of gender, social media, and popular culture to enrich our understanding of the meaning of fashion and cross-generational communication in academic spaces.

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Yulianti: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Supervision.

Nabilla Anasty Fahzaria: Investigation, Data Collection, Literature Review, Data Curation, Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical principles for social science research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Artificial Intelligence tools were used only for language refinement and writing support.

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