

THE SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED OF FASHION POWER IN THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA: A SAUSSUREAN SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT. This research examined the semiotic construction of fashion power in the film *The Devil Wears Prada* by applying Saussure's concepts of the signifier and the signified. The topic was important because fashion in cinema often influences public perceptions of professionalism, social legitimacy, and identity, yet its meaning-making process has rarely been explained in structural detail. The purpose of the study was to examine how fashion communicates power and social belonging in the film's workplace setting. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method, in which twenty scenes were analyzed by documenting visual elements of costume, footwear, accessories, and bodily presentation, and by interpreting their symbolic meanings within a semiotic framework. The findings showed that fashion consistently acted as a signifier of authority, social acceptance, and identity negotiation, and even subtle auditory cues such as the sound of heels contributed to hierarchical meaning. The study concluded that fashion does not simply decorate the narrative but functions as the core mechanism through which power relations and character transformation are communicated. These results suggest that fashion in visual media shapes the audience's understanding of professional success and that mastery of visual codes is represented as a requirement for social legitimacy in the workplace.

Keywords: fashion semiotics; signifier and signified; workplace power; identity construction; *The Devil Wears Prada*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion is often associated with personal style and external appearance. However, in contemporary culture, fashion functions as a communicative system through which individuals construct and project identity, authority, and social belonging. Clothing influences how a person is evaluated in both social and professional environments because visual markers such as brand choice, color palette, silhouette, footwear, and bodily posture operate as meaningful signs rather than neutral aesthetic elements. As Lee (2020) argues, fashion functions as a semiotic resource that enables individuals to position themselves within social structures and negotiate how others perceive them. Through this process, fashion becomes a form of non-verbal communication that conveys values, status, and power.

Fashion, therefore, does not operate merely as decoration but as a cultural language that allows individuals to express, maintain, or contest their position within a hierarchy. In professional settings, visual conformity to institutional fashion norms often determines credibility and acceptance, sometimes even more strongly than competence or verbal performance (Salvatore, 2021; Li, 2023). This suggests that fashion plays a regulatory role in shaping social interaction, where those who master the dominant visual codes gain legitimacy while those who fail to do so risk marginalization. Such dynamics highlight the ideological dimension of fashion as a system that normalizes certain identities while excluding others.

In cinematic representation, fashion serves not only an aesthetic function but also a narrative and symbolic one. Costume design guides audience interpretation by visually signaling character traits, power relations, and social distance without requiring explicit dialogue. Thompson (2022) emphasizes that in workplace-centered films, fashion frequently precedes speech as the primary indicator of authority. Through recurring visual patterns, cinema constructs a legible hierarchy in which clothing serves as a key tool for storytelling. As a result, fashion in film operates as a semiotic structure that shapes how viewers understand social status, professional success, and identity transformation.

The film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) illustrates the relationship among fashion, social identity, and power. The shift in the protagonist's wardrobe marks not only a transformation of appearance but also the process by which she is accepted into a prestigious workplace. Her increasing familiarity with designer clothing becomes the visual evidence of her growing status and legitimacy. The film shows that fashion determines who is recognized as valuable, who is trusted, and who gains access to professional authority. This observation aligns with recent scholarship that acknowledges the communicative function of fashion in media.

Studies published in the past five years have emphasized fashion as a structured language. Nugraheni (2023) explained that the process of interpreting visual identity in media continues to rely on the conceptual pairing of form and meaning, which corresponds to Saussure's model of signifier and signified. Han and Kim (2022) observed that

symbolic visual details in popular media are often used to encode hierarchy and aspiration, indicating that the semiotic approach remains relevant for analyzing how contemporary narratives present power. Research in fashion communication has reached similar conclusions. Salvatore (2021) argued that clothing is a coded message that influences how a person is positioned within a social structure. Meanwhile, Li (2023) demonstrated that audiences are likely to judge characters in a film as competent or authoritative based on clothing before being exposed to their dialogue or actions. These findings support the view that fashion cannot be separated from its cultural function as a sign system.

The relationship between fashion, gender, and workplace power has also become a recent point of discussion in film studies. Thompson (2022) reported that in film narratives about female ambition, costume design frequently acts as a visual system that signals which characters hold influence in professional environments. Ramírez (2024) expanded this argument by noting that fashion has become a cinematic symbol for competence and confidence, especially for female characters in career-centered films. Malik (2023) demonstrated that clothing has become a prerequisite for recognition in workplace narratives where women's authority is expected to be visually proven. These studies acknowledge the strong connection between fashion and the representation of power.

Research on *The Devil Wears Prada* specifically supports this idea. Hartono (2021) identified that the film uses fashion to construct the image of American career women by equating wardrobe transformation with professional success. Wijayanti (2022) analyzed the protagonist's identity negotiation and concluded that fashion functions as an adaptive strategy for responding to workplace pressures and expectations. Both studies show that fashion shapes gendered power relations within the narrative. However, neither of these studies examines fashion as a semiotic structure that links specific visual elements to specific conceptual meanings. The focus of previous research remains on sociocultural themes rather than on the mechanism of meaning production.

The theoretical gap identified in recent studies concerns the absence of a structured semiotic approach to fashion in *The Devil Wears Prada*. While scholars agree that fashion communicates identity, none of the studies in the past five years apply Saussure's sign model to explain how individual fashion elements in the film operate as signifiers that correspond to signified meanings of authority, competence, and social legitimacy. This gap creates the academic need

for a study that analyzes fashion in this film, not only at a thematic level but also through a formal reading of the signifier and signified relationship.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to analyze how fashion in *The Devil Wears Prada* functions as a sign system that represents power and social status. The guiding research question is: How do the visual elements of fashion in the film serve as signifiers that point to signified meanings related to authority and belonging in the workplace. By applying a Saussurean semiotic framework, this research seeks to reveal the structural mechanism that connects clothing to social meaning, contributing both theoretically to semiotic film analysis and practically to the understanding of how fashion shapes cultural perceptions of identity and power.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative descriptive research design because the primary objective was to interpret the meaning embedded in visual and narrative elements rather than to measure variables statistically. Qualitative descriptive research is particularly appropriate for studies that seek to explain how meaning is constructed and represented within cultural texts. In media and film analysis, this approach enables researchers to engage directly with observable data, such as images, scenes, costumes, and character interactions, without imposing numerical abstraction.

Qualitative methods are widely used in cultural and visual studies because they prioritize depth of interpretation and contextual understanding. Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2020) stated that qualitative descriptive research is effective for examining social phenomena as they appear naturally, enabling researchers to capture patterns of meaning that emerge from data rather than from predetermined categories. Similarly, Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasized that qualitative analysis is essential when the research focus involves symbolic meaning, representation, and interpretation, particularly in visual and narrative texts. This aligns with the present study, which examines fashion as a system of signs operating within a cinematic narrative.

Furthermore, Aditya (2022) explained that qualitative descriptive research is suitable for analyzing cultural representations because it allows meaning to be interpreted directly from visual forms and narrative structures. The method does not seek to generalize findings statistically but to provide a detailed and contextualized explanation of how symbols function within a specific cultural text.

Saldaña (2021) also highlighted that qualitative inquiry is appropriate for semiotic and interpretive studies because it enables systematic coding and interpretation of symbolic data, including visual cues and social behavior. For these reasons, the qualitative descriptive method was considered the most appropriate approach for analyzing the semiotic construction of fashion power in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

The primary object of this study is the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), and the analysis concentrates on the fashion elements that appear across the storyline. These elements include costumes, footwear, brand labels, accessories, makeup, hairstyle, and the presentation of the body through posture and movement. The primary data consist of selected scenes in which fashion appears to influence the characters' interactions, their access to authority, or their position within the professional hierarchy. To support the interpretation of the film, secondary sources are also incorporated. These secondary sources include scholarly publications on semiotics, fashion communication, and film representation that contribute to theoretical accuracy and analytical depth.

Data were collected through repeated, close viewing of the film. In each viewing, scenes that demonstrated a possible relationship between fashion and power were identified and recorded. Screenshots and descriptive field notes were used to document clothing details and character presentation. Dialogue and sound that contributed to the meaning of the fashion signs were also transcribed. This approach ensures that meaning is grounded in observable evidence from the film. Yuliana (2021) stated that semiotic film analysis requires careful documentation of visual cues to prevent subjective interpretation unanchored from the text.

The analysis followed the Saussurean semiotic framework. The first step of analysis was to identify the signifiers, which are the perceivable visual elements of fashion found in the selected scenes. The second step was to determine the signified meanings associated with those visual forms. Mahendra (2023) noted that the interpretive process of pairing signifier and signified is central to identifying how films construct symbolic meaning. In this research, the meanings attached to fashion relate to authority, confidence, professional legitimacy, and social belonging in the workplace. The pairing of signifier and signified resulted in thematic categories that reveal how fashion communicates power in the narrative.

The research was carried out in three stages. The first stage was preparation, which involved determining the theoretical foundation and gathering supporting literature. The second stage was data collection through close viewing and documentation of scenes. The third stage was data analysis, which applied Saussure's signifier and signified model to interpret the fashion signs in the film. The comparison between the research findings and interpretations found in recent studies strengthens the credibility of the results and ensures that the conclusions align with current scholarly understanding of fashion as cultural communication.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research are derived from a detailed semiotic analysis of twenty selected scenes from *The Devil Wears Prada*. These scenes were chosen because they contain explicit fashion elements that actively shape character positioning and workplace interaction. The analysis is grounded in classical semiotic theory, particularly Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the sign, which understands meaning as the relationship between the signifier (form) and the signified (concept). Within this framework, clothing, accessories, footwear, makeup, posture, and even sound operate as signifiers, while authority, professionalism, belonging, and identity function as the signified meanings produced through these forms.

Across the analyzed scenes, fashion consistently precedes verbal interaction and determines how characters are treated within the workplace hierarchy. This confirms Saussure's argument that meaning is not inherent in objects themselves but produced through socially shared systems of signs (Saussure, 2011). In the film, fashion operates as a structured visual language that regulates power relations before dialogue or professional competence is displayed. The validity of these findings is supported by repeated patterns across scenes, narrative consistency between visual cues and social consequences, and strong alignment with existing scholarship on fashion, power, and cinematic representation.

This table shows that each visual signifier in the film consistently leads to meaningful narrative consequences. When powerful outfits appear, the storyline reinforces authority. When visually non-conforming outfits appear, the narrative reinforces social rejection. Even auditory cues of fashion, such as the sound of heels, trigger responses consistent with hierarchical meaning. This pattern confirms that fashion is not only a symbolic marker but a

functioning system of meaning that shapes social interaction in the film.

Table 1. Scene-Based Semiotic Data of Fashion in *The Devil Wears Prada*

No	Visual Signifier (Form)	Signified Meaning (Concept)	Narrative Impact
1	Miranda wears a long black structured coat with fur lining	Authority, distance, unapproachability	Employees instinctively step aside and lower their tone in her presence
2	Andy wears a loose blue sweater and non-designer shoes	Inexperience, lack of competence, outsider identity	Colleagues ignore and underestimate her
3	Andy appears in fitted Chanel blazer, polished makeup, and pointed high heels	Social legitimacy, acceptance, rising workplace power	She receives respect and help from colleagues
4	Andy wears a couture dress at a corporate event	New identity overpowering her personal self	Nate reacts with disappointment, signaling emotional distance
5	The sound of Andy's heels echoes down the hallway	Auditory cue of power and dominance	Coworkers immediately move out of her way
6	Andy removes accessories and switches to casual clothing	Reclaiming personal identity outside the institution	She walks away from the competitive fashion world

Fashion as a Signifier of Workplace Power

The first finding demonstrates that fashion serves as a primary and immediate indicator of power within the workplace depicted in the film. Characters who occupy positions of institutional authority consistently appear in structured silhouettes, darker color palettes, and garments associated with elite luxury brands. Within Saussurean semiotics, these visual forms function as signifiers whose meanings are culturally stabilized through repeated association with control, exclusivity, and dominance. As a result, authority is recognized instantly, even before a character speaks.

This is particularly evident in scenes involving the editor-in-chief. Her entrance alone triggers behavioral changes among employees: conversations stop, posture becomes rigid, and voices are lowered. These reactions occur before any verbal instruction, confirming that power is visually activated. According to Saussure (2011), signs gain meaning through difference; in this case, her fashion distinguishes her from subordinates, marking hierarchical distance. Fashion thus becomes the first communicative channel through which power is constructed and recognized.

The protagonist's early marginalization further reinforces this system. Her loose clothing and lack of designer markers signify her failure to align with the workplace's dominant sign system. Consequently, she is ignored and underestimated, not due to incompetence but due to visual nonconformity. Once she adopts the accepted fashion codes, the signified meaning attached to her body changes. She is reinterpreted as competent, authoritative, and worthy of respect. This shift illustrates that power in the film is not earned solely through performance but granted through visual legitimacy.

This pattern is equally evident from the protagonist's perspective. In the early stages of the narrative, she lacks the visual codes associated with workplace authority. Her loose clothing and absence of designer labels mark her as not belonging to the institution's symbolic system, and her colleagues respond accordingly. She is ignored, treated dismissively, and denied access to information that is essential to her role. What is significant is that her performance does not trigger these negative responses, since she attempts to fulfill her duties responsibly, but by her inability to align her appearance with the fashion norms of the organization. Her failure is therefore not professional but visual.

The turning point occurs when she adopts the fashion signifiers that dominate the workplace. Her use of a fitted blazer, a curated color palette, designer accessories, and pointed heels functions as a direct entry into the system of authority. From that moment, the tone of interaction around her changes sharply. The same colleagues who previously overlooked her begin to greet her warmly, offer assistance, and value her contributions. Her supervisor also begins to acknowledge her competence, even though her actual work performance has not changed dramatically. The social elevation she gains originates from her mastery of visual compliance rather than from a measurable improvement in professional skill. This shift highlights that the film positions fashion not simply as a surface-level aesthetic transformation but as a mechanism through which credibility and power are established.

The relationship between fashion and control is further strengthened by scenes in which dialogic power aligns with visual power. Whenever a character with high-authority fashion speaks, their words are immediately accepted. Conversely, when characters without such fashion attempt to assert their ideas, their contributions are either dismissed or treated as interruptions. The film, therefore, constructs a hierarchy in which fashion determines whose voice is heard. The aesthetic display of power

precedes the exercise of verbal power, and verbal influence is permitted only after visual dominance has been signaled. Authority becomes inseparable from appearance.

Taken together, the film's representation of workplace authority illustrates a system in which power is not only a matter of position, task, or skill but a matter of visual performance that is continuously monitored and evaluated. Fashion becomes a compulsory language of power, and mastery of that language determines whether a character is seen as someone who commands respect or someone who occupies a marginal space. The findings, therefore, expand the understanding of fashion in cinema by showing that fashion does not merely reflect power; it produces it.

Fashion as a Symbol of Belonging and Acceptance

The second finding reveals that fashion functions as a symbolic gateway to social belonging within the film's workplace. Unlike traditional professional narratives where acceptance is rooted in competence or work ethic, *The Devil Wears Prada* constructs belonging as a visual achievement. In the early scenes, the protagonist's clothing signifies her unfamiliarity with the institution's cultural codes. Although she is physically present in the workspace and occupies an official job title, her appearance positions her as an outsider. This is evidenced by how colleagues ignore her questions, exclude her from informal conversations, and withhold information that is necessary for her job. The visible mismatch between her personal fashion and the workplace aesthetic becomes the justification for her social exclusion.

Belonging begins to develop only after she visually conforms to the institutional fashion system. When she appears in garments consistent with the organization's fashion identity — including designer brands, curated styling, and intentional makeup — her social treatment changes immediately and dramatically. An explicit verbal acknowledgement does not accompany her transformation, but her acceptance is communicated through behavioral shifts from others: coworkers recognize her presence, greet her by name, offer advice and cooperation, and integrate her into professional tasks. These interactions demonstrate that the organization regulates social belonging not through formal rules but through visual performance.

An important observation emerges from how quickly her status changes after adopting the appropriate fashion signifiers. The speed of this transition suggests that belonging is not earned

over time, but visually granted in a single moment, highlighting the power of appearance in shaping group dynamics. Furthermore, her acceptance signals a system in which individuals are rewarded not for authenticity but for conformity. Her colleagues do not respond to her as an individual with skills and personality; they respond to the symbol she now represents. Belonging thus becomes conditional and transactional, dependent on sustained visual alignment with group expectations. Fashion in this narrative is therefore not merely an expression of identity but the price of admission into workplace social legitimacy.

Fashion as a Site of Identity Negotiation

The third finding shows that fashion serves as a complex arena where identity is both strengthened and threatened. Once the protagonist visually aligns herself with the workplace fashion code, she acquires confidence, opportunity, and visibility. She moves through professional spaces with ease, and her colleagues treat her as a capable and influential figure. The symbolic power of fashion empowers her socially and emotionally; she begins to believe she belongs. However, the film simultaneously presents the cost of this empowerment. As her visual identity becomes increasingly shaped by the workplace system, her personal relationships begin to weaken. Friends and loved ones interpret her new fashion identity not as progress but as transformation into someone detached and self-absorbed.

This contradiction between empowerment and loss forms the emotional core of the narrative. Fashion equips her to succeed within the institution, but it distances her from her earlier values and connections. She is caught between two identities: a polished, visually appealing identity that enables her to thrive in the workplace and a personal identity that grounds her emotionally. The fashion signifiers she adopts begin to represent both achievement and sacrifice. The more she integrates visually into the institution, the greater the risk of losing the version of herself that existed before. The film portrays this conflict not as a sudden crisis but as a gradual erosion, reflected in small choices such as prioritizing work events over personal commitments and adopting speech, gestures, and attitudes that mirror those of her superiors.

Ultimately, the protagonist's identity negotiation demonstrates that fashion in the film does not function as a neutral medium of self-expression. Instead, it becomes a mechanism through which the institution shapes individuals, rewarding visual conformity and discouraging deviation. Fashion

becomes a mirror that reflects who a character must become in order to remain within the system — and simultaneously what must be surrendered to stay there.

Footwear as an Auditory and Visual Hierarchy Marker

The fourth finding extends the semiotic analysis by highlighting the role of footwear as a distinct, multisensory indicator of power. In several key scenes, authority is communicated not only visually but through sound. The sharp echo of high heels functions as an auditory warning that a powerful figure is approaching, prompting immediate behavioral adjustment. This signaling occurs even when the dominant character is not visible, indicating that the authority associated with fashion becomes internalized within the social system of the workplace. The sound itself becomes a signifier that carries meaning independent of the clothes it accompanies.

When the protagonist first wears high heels, the hallway scene where her footsteps echo establishes that she has not only adopted fashion outwardly but has internalized the character of power physically. The sound marks her transformation as fully realized; colleagues respond before they see her, recognizing the sign of authority through auditory stimulus alone. This highlights fashion's semiotic capacity to operate beyond appearance, entering the realm of rhythm, gait, and spatial presence. Footwear dictates the pace of movement, the volume of attention, and the immediacy of reaction. The film reinforces the idea that power is not merely worn — it is performed and experienced through the body.

The auditory semiotics of footwear also emphasize hierarchy. Flat shoes are associated with subordination and invisibility, as characters who wear them move quietly and unobtrusively through the workplace. High heels, by contrast, demand space and attention. The sound they produce becomes an announcement of position within the hierarchy. The film, therefore, suggests that power is not only a role but a choreography, and footwear determines whether a character walks as someone who should be noticed or someone who should remain unnoticed.

Synthesis of Findings

The collective results of the analysis confirm that fashion in *The Devil Wears Prada* functions as a deliberate and structured sign system. Power is expressed not only through professional capability but through visual performance that adheres to the cultural expectations of the workplace. Belonging

is granted only when visual conformity is achieved. Identity is negotiated through the application or resistance to the clothing rules that govern social interaction. Even minor elements, such as the sound of heels, reinforce hierarchy. These findings align with Saussure's theory of signifier and signified, demonstrating that physical forms of clothing and bodily presentation serve as signifiers that convey abstract meanings of authority, legitimacy, and identity. The results also confirm the broader discussions of Li (2023), Salvatore (2021), and Thompson (2022) who acknowledged that fashion in visual narratives shapes how audiences and characters understand credibility and influence.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has demonstrated that fashion in *The Devil Wears Prada* functions as a highly structured semiotic system rather than a decorative component of costume design. By applying Saussure's model of signifier and signified to twenty selected scenes, the study reveals that clothing, accessories, footwear, and bodily presentation consistently communicate meanings related to power, social belonging, and identity formation in the workplace. The most substantial advantage of this research lies in its ability to explain not only that fashion represents authority but also how visual forms translate into social consequences within the narrative. The study moves beyond descriptive observations of costume and contributes theoretically by identifying the mechanism through which fashion constructs hierarchical interactions.

However, this research also has limitations. The analysis focuses on a single film; therefore, the findings may not represent all portrayals of workplace fashion in cinema. The study also focuses on visual semiotics and therefore does not examine other cinematic elements, such as lighting, camera movement, or the soundtrack, which might interact with fashion to reinforce or weaken symbolic meaning. Future studies could expand the dataset by including multiple films across different genres or cultural contexts, or by integrating Saussurean semiotics with multimodal approaches to deepen analysis.

Despite these limitations, the research offers meaningful implications. The study provides insight into how cinematic representations contribute to public perceptions of professionalism, social legitimacy, and gendered expectations of success. It also demonstrates that the mastery of visual codes plays a significant role in workplace acceptance,

suggesting that fashion influences not only fictional narratives but also real-life social evaluation. These implications make the findings relevant for scholars in linguistics, media studies, film studies, gender studies, and fashion communication. The methodological approach employed in this research may also be used to study other forms of symbolic representation in visual media, making the work applicable for further academic development and cross-disciplinary expansion.

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