

## A Design Analysis of Headwear

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While it is lost to history, it would be interesting to know for what purpose the first headdress was created. Since our ancient ancestors spent their lives outdoors it is natural to assume that something was fashioned to protect them from the elements. However, I believe the first hat had a symbolic purpose. Constructing a hat requires a certain level of skill and awareness that we do not see elsewhere in the animal kingdom. By the time our ancestors developed this ability they would have already been living for centuries in an organized group where those in powerful positions would likely be ordained with any items manufactured. We do know that today's hats serve a variety of functions and, as a result, come in many styles. During the past month I interviewed hat wearers to find out what motivates them to don headgear. I grouped the reasons that were observed into the following categories: utilitarian, style, status, employment, ritual, and collective.

When I asked people why they think others wear hats most felt it had some utilitarian purpose like to protect from the weather. However, very few people interviewed referenced this as a reason for themselves wearing headwear. While looking for protection may be true for people that are required to spend large periods of time outdoors such as laborers, beachgoers, and gardeners our infrastructure has grown so that most humans do not need to spend large amounts of time outdoors. Hat wearing of today seems to mainly have other reasons beyond utilitarian. (Although as the deleterious effects of the sun become more known this functional aspect of hats is starting to rise again.)

Looking beyond utility, the purpose of hats has two modalities: differentiation and integration. Differentiation is the symbols of the self that point out the unique characteristics of the owner. In this case, the owner of the hat is wearing it specifically to separate herself from the social context and emphasize her individuality or status. While this is about separating oneself from the group, Csikszentmihalyi points out that this process ultimately strengthens integration:

[T]he cultivation of individuality serve a larger goal of integration because the intention to differentiate oneself from others still needs other people to give it meaning. If pursued as an ultimate goal, differentiation would eventually result in chaos, not uniqueness, and so differentiation has a purpose within and for the integrated life of the community.

The two categories where differentiation occurs are style and status. When interviewing hat wearers some focused on expressing their individuality. The owners in this category used the word "style" when being interviewed (e.g., "this is my style" or "it fits my style"). The other significant way hats are used for differentiation is status. Here hats are not only setting a person apart, but above. This means the hats symbolically invest the person with power that needs to be heeded by society.

To understand this think how a king is not a king until the coronation. In other words, a king has no power until a crown is placed on his head. The moment the crown is positioned the symbolic power of the crown is passed to the king and while the crown continues to hold significance the king doesn't cease to be king once the crown is removed. Csikszentmihalyi states, "Status symbols, therefore, express a very general aspect of their owners—their power to control others. They are in some way a summary of all the salient characters of the self, a global measure of the owner's standing in the community."

Looking at hats from the functionalist view the focus is on the role these objects play in facilitating social cohesion. In this respect hats serve as social integration. Durkheim identified the idea of *organic integration*. He believed this organic process holds true in complex societies where labor is highly specialized and therefore cues that indicate what each person's function is becoming more important. This fits with the category of hat wearing I identified as employment. Figuratively we speak of someone "wearing many hats" when we want to say they do more than one job. While this is a figurative statement it is common that different professions do indeed have different hats.

Another aspect of reinforcing the shared values and beliefs of a society is through rituals. These rituals may be reserved for special occasions, or when individuals or communities feel there is a compelling reason to perform them. They can be performed by an individual, by a group, or by the entire community. Things like holidays, weddings, or parades are all examples of rituals. Headwear often plays a special role in rituals (as with the coronation mentioned above). A good common example of this is a graduation ceremony. The importance of hats (caps) is well known to anyone who has attended a commencement ceremony. These rituals are designed to create a sense of group identity.

The final aspect of integration I found by hat wearers is what I termed collective. This is derived from what Durkheim called "collective effervescence." This effervescence is the perceived energy experienced when someone participates in a group activity especially of a ritualistic or exhilarating kind. By merging with the group the experience becomes synergistic. The majority of hat wearers I interviewed were wearing baseball caps and on them was emblazoned the logo of one of various sports teams. All the people interviewed were big fans of the teams they were advertising and were eager to speak about them. Their identity was joined with a collective group (the team and its fans) and it was clear they were swept up in something that was bigger than them.

Csikszentmihalyi reminds us that "man-made objects have an extremely important role to play in human affairs." Historically speaking headwear may have played the largest role of any object. Beyond the practical purposes that hats serve they also aid in differentiation and integration. From the functionalist view hats play a large part in facilitating social processes. Hats allow us to blend in with the collective when we want or stand out when necessary. The symbolic power of headwear is seen across cultures and resonates strongly in the human psyche.