

## “INDIAN FASHION & SPIRITUALITY” - BASED ON WORKS OF H.H. ADI SHANKARACHARYA

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### **Abstract**

*Indian Fashion has been inspired by spirituality also. Spirituality has provided a greater edge to culture and traditional practices. Art, literature, architecture and other sources have provided evidences for existence of many Indian Cultures – even Fashion! Spirituality is one such area which has not been explored to understand the Origin & Nature of Indian Fashion. The research is based on the study made on the literary works of H.H. Adishankaracharya – “SOUNDARYA LAHARI”. The research aimed to prove to the world that Indian Fashion is much ancient and origin dates back to antiquity, not France. Explorations of certain scriptures / literary works are evident to understand the ancient Indian Fashion. Versatile nature of Indian Fashion and significance of every aspect related to it was explored through the research. It was also explored that Accessory and cosmetics are integral part of Indian Fashion from ancient times. Indian fashion will go more segmented to suit various moods, moments and functions of wearing. The spirited aspect of Indian fashion will continue to attract more and more people. The deep rooted clothing culture will give rise to more asymmetrical fashion intermittently, to suit present day’s needs. The balanced recipe of Indian Fashion carrying a good blend of design, concept and subject will be more suitable for people across the world to adapt through.*

**Key Words:** *Antiquity, Accessory, Clothing Culture, Indian Fashion, Versatility.*

### **1. Introduction**

Indian Fashion has been inspired by many factors, but very few are aware about the influence of spirituality in popularizing Indian Fashion. While we talk about Fashion, it is a concept which depicts factors like social, economic, traditional and cultural, political, psychological and demographic aspects of a place and the lifestyle of people. In simple words, it identifies and symbolizes the trend at a particular time, of a particular place. In Indian scenario, spirituality has provided a greater edge to culture and traditional practices. Many of such practices have transcended from generations, revealing many facts and also have provided several evidences in support of these facts. It is through art, literature, architecture and other sources we have been able to study the practices. In early days, Fashion was not just fetish, or a product to fulfill the external bodily needs. It was an orderly thing that would satisfy all the senses thereby being more appealing in nature. Then, Fashion was more aesthetically driven and used to be very significant. People never made any extra efforts to preserve any culture nor to popularize any Fashion. The very nature of Fashion used to be such that, it used to be unanimously adapted by the people. Though Indian Fashion history dates back to the early civilizations of Indus Valley, it always experienced a roller coaster of cultural influences by various cults, travelers and foreign rulers. In spite of all these we see that Indian Fashion never lost its identity; rather it influenced the other cultures. At every stage, Indian Fashion went on assimilating other cultures becoming more grounded in its own way and at the same time being very versatile. It has been universally accepted that Fashion originated at France and Paris is the Fashion Capital. This seems to be contradictory if we glance through Indian Spiritual literature and its relativity to origin of Indian Fashion. It is evident through many sources that Indian Fashion is very ancient and India is one of the pioneers in the world of Fashion.

The essence of Indian Fashion is well depicted in many scriptures, sculptures and they date back much earlier to the Fashion history of France. Hence, it is essential to know the origin of Indian Fashion and its orientation through ages based on the spiritual sources like literary works of His Holiness Adi Shankaracharya.

## 2. Aim and Objective of the Study

- To understand the origin of Indian fashion and its antiquity.
- Exploration of certain scriptures / literary works, which can provide authentic evidence and throw light on the ancient Indian Fashion.
- To present to the world that Indian Fashion is much ancient to Western Fashion, where it is strongly believed that Fashion originated from France.

## 3. Limitations of the Study

- Only one scripture, “Soundarya Lahari” was considered for exploration.
- The explorative study was supported by translator who translated the meaning of the Sanskrit shlokas.

## 4. Review of Literature

Adi Shankaracharya was a very learned person and he had surrendered himself to the goddess “Parvathi”. His enormous knowledge made him to create works like ANANDA LAHARI, SOUNDARYA LAHARI, KANAKADHARAA STHOTHRAM, GOVINDASHTAKAM and many more to mention. Through his work it was explored that Indian Fashion what exists now has a direct impression from the past, dating back to the era of Shankaracharya. Soundarya Lahari is one of the most popular literary works of Adi Shankaracharya. Shankaracharya symbolized his surrender and devotion to Goddess Parvathi through Soundarya Lahari. It is written in Sanskrit. His unconditional devotion took him very close to the Goddess and in his entire work he describes the Goddess Parvathi, in terms of her beauty, power and grace. It is beyond our imagination to understand the depth of his work. All his works are so multifaceted that they cater not only to one requirement, rather to all aspects of life. May it be psychological, materialistic or spiritual.

Many have worked on these set of literature and have expressed it as per their perception. Many are working even now, and every time we refer to it, it speaks out different things and the whole concept is left to one’s imagination. This is the beauty and uniqueness of Acharya’s works. Similarly, this inspires to learn about Indian Fashion through the works of Acharya. Especially based on SOUNDARYA LAHARI, as it talks about the complete description of beauty of Goddess Parvathi.

The Soundarya Lahari meaning “Waves of Beauty” It’s hundred and three shlokas (verses) praise the beauty, grace and kindness of Goddess Parvathi.

The Soundarya Lahari is not only a poem. It is a tantra textbook, giving instructions on puja and offerings, many yantras, almost one to each shloka; describes tantric ways of performing devotion connected to each specific shloka; and details the results ensuing therefrom. There are many interpretations and commentaries.

Soundarya Lahari is composed of two components. But collectively known as Soundarya Lahari.

- 1) Ananda Lahari ,
- 2) Soundarya Lahari

1. Ananda Lahari contains shlokas from 1 to 40, which talks mainly about the energy centers in our body. It is a micro level of understanding the goddess. It talks about the grace of Goddess Parvathi, her wisdom, her power and how that the entire universe is depending on her shakthi. Infact, Acharya even mentions that without her power, even Lord Shiva will not be able to manage this creation. Therefore, the supreme Goddess is worshipped by all Gods and demons. H.H. Adi Shankara says that one who worships such a deity is undoubtedly a blessed one. H.H. Adi Shankara surrenders to this great mother with utmost gratitude and humility. He surrenders it in the form of Ananda Lahari, which means WAVES OF HAPPINESS, when translated. The Goddess has been incredibly praised, upholding the essence of surrender and spiritual living, which will bring waves of happiness into one’s life – an eternal happiness.

2. Soundarya Lahari contains shlokas from 41 to 100, which completely describes the beauty of the Goddess Parvathi. From top of the head to tip-toe. It is a macro level of understanding the goddess. Shankaracharya never separated himself from the Goddess Parvathi. He worshipped her as his mother and had an immense devotion for her. It is very clear through the shlokas that how the Goddess appeared to him, how she used to dress, what she wore? Her expressions, her gestures and every bit of her. He iconize Goddess Parvathi for Indian traditional dress culture. His description in the work starts from the head till the feet where the anatomy as well as the dress and ornamentation of the Goddess are well explained. It is incredible to learn that everything has logic for its existence. This significance needs to be well understood and this will become a key to understand the Indian clothing culture better.

## 5. Research Methodology

Research method	: Scientific method.
Research design	
Study	: Exploratory study.
Approach	: translation work from Sanskrit scriptures.
Secondary data	: Articles, Journals And Books.

## 6. Research Process

The research was an exploratory research, which was carried out in consultation with learned Sanskrit scholars, who translated the inner meaning and essence of the shlokas. Also, the intricate grammar used and a series of similes and metaphors were described. The findings were documented and illustrated. A comparative study was made to understand the origin and similarities of present Indian fashion practices.

## 7. Findings

Throughout the course of Soundarya Lahari, Adi Shankaracharya describes the anatomy of the Goddess, which is amazing. The following are some of the great expressions and unbelievable similes,

1. The hairline which takes a smooth bent is compared to the beauty of the crescent moon, where the moon himself is jealous about the beauty. (shloka – 42)
2. The hair length is tied up into a bun where it resembles a bunch of grapes, graduating, and they are giving out aroma of flowers from the garden of Indira. (shloka-43)
3. The center partition of the hair is decorated with Sindhur (vermilion), which is like a ray of rising sun, enhancing the face value of the Goddess. (shloka-44)
4. The curls of hairs framing the face is making the face to appear like a blossomed lotus in a pond. (shloka-45)
5. The nose is like a sharp, thin bamboo.
6. The teeth are beautifully radiating and they are looking like a row of pearls. (shloka-45)
7. The eyebrows are slightly bent and the gap between them is so ideal and it is looking like a bow that is all set for operation. (shloka-47)
8. The eyes carry such a gleam that right eye is comparable to sun, responsible for the day and the left eye is comparable to moon, responsible for night. The third eye of fire is like the evening. (shloka -48)
9. The eyes further look like glowing lilies on a full moon day. They are wider in nature and are compared to the big cities like Kalyani, Ayodhya, Vishala, Dhara, Madhura, Bhagavathi, Avanthi and Vijaya. (shloka – 49)
10. The eyes of the Goddess carry all 9 Rasaas that is Nva Rasaas. According to the situation she uses the suitable rasaa. (shloka – 50)
11. The eye lashes are like the brush ends of an arrow. (shloka – 52)
12. The kajal she uses is so dense that it looks as if it can accommodate the entire creation. (shloka-53)
13. The ear rings worn are so pretty that their reflection on the cheeks appear like two wheels of a chariot and the face is like a chariot. They also appear like sun and moon. (shloka – 59)

14. Her lips are naturally colored in pink, the color of a tender lotus. As such there is no similar shade to match this lip color in this nature. (shloka-62)
15. The face is so attractive that the birds namely chakora are saturated to the sweetness of the face and for a change they went to the moon to experience a bit of sourness. (shloka – 63)
16. The chin is well shaped and resembles the handle of a mirror, into which Lord Shiva keeps looking into. (shloka – 67)
17. The nails of the Goddess is radiating with natural pinkness of a lotus. (shloka – 67)
18. The nails of the feet are so shaped due to the rubbing of the crowns of the other gods & goddesses when they bow down to the goddess parvathi. (shloka – 67)
19. The breasts are bouncing with fullness like bunch of grapes hanging down heavily. (shloka-72)
20. The necklace worn by the Goddess is gracefully hanging down over the breasts, where the pearls are also carrying the shade of pink, due to the reflection of the lips. (shloka – 73)
21. The waist is extremely delicate like a narrow tree trunk, bearing strain due to hanging fruits. (shloka – 79)
22. The feet are so soft like a flower and absolutely pink. The nails are shaped due to the rubbing of crowns of the gods and other goddesses, when they bow down. This has shaped the nails like an arrow. (shloka – 83)
23. The entire body of the Goddess is in great proportion, due to which she appears good in any form of dressing. (shloka – 98)
24. The Goddess uses thambulam, a combination of betel leaves and arc nut. This has created a deep red color in the mouth. (manta matrika pushpa)
25. The saree worn by the Goddess is in deep color of red, finely woven and with a golden border. It is heavily embellished with pearls, stones and other valuable elements. (manta matrika pushpa)
26. The drape of the saree is very graceful and it exactly binds the curves of her body, making her to appear more beautiful. (manta matrika pushpa)
27. When the saree is draped over the waist, they are almost helpless, as the waist is extremely small and weak. (manta matrika pushpa)
28. The frills made at the waist flow out like the rivers branching out to meet the ocean. They are full of force and jerk. (manta matrika pushpa)
29. The crown worn by the Goddess is studded with precious stones and their reflection is lightening the face. The crown has made the face absolutely round and the moon is again jealous of it. (manta matrika pushpa)
30. The accessories and the drape style change significantly depending on the action and mood of the Goddess. (manta matrika pushpa)
31. Such is the beauty of the Goddess and she is the most glamorous one. She has mesmerized the whole world. (shloka – 98&100)
32. In mantra matrika pushpa, where acharya performs 16 different types of offerings to goddess Parvathi. In this he mentions about the jewelry and the attire worn by the goddess, which is evident even today.

**kiritam**, meaning crown

**Chudamani**, a head jewelry

**Ratna thatanka** or kundala, meaning earrings studded with precious stones.

**Nasaa moukthika**, meaning nose ring made of pearls.

**Bhujakirti**, meaning the shoulder ornament

**Vanki**, meaning an armband

**Hara samuha**, meaning a cluster of many precious necklaces of varying lengths and designs.

**Mangalya**, the holy pendant representing the married status of the goddess.

**Odyaana**, meaning the waist jewelry

**Kankana**, the precious bangle

**Manjira**, is the nupur or the anklets

**Kanchi pitambara**, the popular traditional kanchivaram saree of India.

The above mentions are just a glimpse of the work of Adi Shankaracharya. It is quite evident to what the women Fashion prevailed at that time. (2, 6, 7).

## 8. Analysis

### Interpretation of the Past to Present

The above description of the Goddess directs us to many aspects of Indian Fashion today and to many fashion related subjects.

1) **Fashion illustration:** the technique of illustration started as a means of communication. It is believed to be started during the early years of 15 century. Even today, the art of illustration is based on the concept of proportion which not only makes the presentation ideal but also gives a realistic feel. Of course, with the changing time and technology the techniques have improved but the basic concept has remained the same.

In Soundarya Lahari, which was created during 7<sup>th</sup> century, there is a mention about the body proportion of the goddess and also about the theory of proportion or the eight heads theory, which is practiced even today. In those days it was called the Ashtadhatu shastra, which is a Sanskrit term. Ashta means eight and dhatu meaning materials in proportion. The theory was based on using eight materials in eight equal proportions to make idol of gods and goddesses, each part in the ratio of 1:8 to their total length. In many of the temples, statues and ancient architectures carrying the Shila balikas which are known for their exotic beauty have been created based on the Ashtadhatu principle. They are absolutely enchanting in their proportion and harmony. Even today the sculptors and painters who are indulged in creating mythological characters, work based on this principle, which has its origin from India. (5).

Above all these, every woman today, aspires for a figure following the above proportion. This shows that it is a well-established and well appreciated concept of proportion, which is now universal. Anything in good proportion is always appreciated.

It is therefore very obvious that the concept of proportion, anatomy and art of illustration started much earlier in India and is much established and evolved.

2) **Clothing style & detailing:** the world of fashion is said to be started with the introduction of draping styles which are said to be routed from the ancient Greece and Rome. Many in the western world today have adapted to cut-stitched garment styles, where as in India, draping styles in the form of sari is still prevailing and is widely accepted as a formal wear for women. It is a very versatile and adaptable form of wear. It mainly suits the tropical climatic conditions of India.

In Soundarya Lahari, there is a description about the saree – its draping style, that it was pleated, the intricacy of weave, where, it is mentioned that the pleats of the saree resembled the flow of the river, which indirectly points out at the fineness and the hand of the fabric that was created. It is really beyond a guess work as to what denier of silk was probably used? It is also clear that the art of weaving was well established and the usage of zari / golden thread in the borders of the saree shows the economic status, the art of drawing threads into required fineness and also a culture of wearing rich textiles.

The coloring of the saree, raktha varna, means the deep red color of the blood – an important aspect to be noted here is that, the dyes were sourced from nature and to achieve such deep color of red using a natural dye is most challenging. People then, knew how to achieve the deep shades also the blood red color is a complex color to achieve in those ancient days. So even the dyeing process was much evolved. These sarees were embellished beautifully and richly using precious stones. The borders and the pallav of the saree were heavily embellished to impart richness. Through this it is evident that even art of embellishment was well known and practiced during

those days. The saree carried a massive length, from 9 yards to 12 yards. It used to be draped in various styles both in pleated and pleat less forms. The saree were produced with a plain colored body and with a contrast colored border and pallav. It is also mentioned that Kanchipuram was the hub even at that time for the richly woven fabrics. The fineness can be compared to the Dacca Muslins, which might be inspired by these South Indian fine silk. Even today Kanchipuram is well known for its silk sarees, popularly known as Kanchi silks and they were known as Kanchi Pitambaram in the ancient time.

Though China is said to be the most earliest and pioneering country in the art of sericulture, it is evident that India is one of the most established place for the art of silk weaving, dyeing and decoration.

Indian clothing styles were in drape forms and much ancient and much evolved when compared to other parts of the world. Even today, may it be the goddesses or the common woman; all are traditionally dressed in saree in almost similar way. It is a much established style of dressing for women carried from the ancient times. It upholds the femininity and it is also a glamorous style. It is seen that the styles of draping the saree changes from one part to other in India, as it follows the regional culture. In spite of all these variations, saree remains as a major clothing style for Indian women even today. It is also very surprising to note that the drape style of the saree varied according to the moods and activity of the Goddess, this is very evident from the Navrathri forms. It conveys that the drape styles were highly significant. It supported the postures and gestures of the goddess. This can be compared to existing draping styles today. Like – the Kaccha / dhoti style by dancers, warriors or the Rajput women, Maharashtrians for the easy movement of the body, at the same time the sensuous aspect of the saree wear is depicted by changing the draping style.

In mythology, Goddess has done all acts that probably most women of today do. May it be a home maker's role, mother's role, savior's role, glamorous role and so on. Saree is one such thing that has helped and supported this entire role to be performed comfortably and conveniently. Even to this day, the influence of Indian culture is so much so that during the Oscar Awards 2008, it was witnessed that many gowns were in single asymmetric styles. It included drapes totally inspired by the saree styles.

3) **Value addition:** in India, the art of embellishment is very ancient, which has been mentioned in Soundarya Lahari. . Especially in Asian countries, that too in India, it is a practice to embellish a garment or a saree or just be a piece of cloth used for holy rituals. People showcased their skills by working on the robes and it conveyed the prosperity of the life of people. In Soundarya Lahari, there is a mention about the rich embellishment of the saree border of the Goddess, which was studded with precious stones and it was decorated with gold thread stitchery. The border was so heavy that whenever the goddess walked she literally had kicked the pleats and walked. From this it is evident that even the art of embellishment prevailed in Indian and is one of the ancient arts related to clothing and availability of precious gems and stones are very evident from this. It is a noticeable fact that even today the sarees are richly worked at the borders and the pallav, using zari and semiprecious stones like kundans.

4) **Ensemble:** mostly, the south Indian string instruments were used as ensembles like, veena, tanpura, etc. In today's scenario, using ensembles in a fashion collection is such an obvious thing. It is seen that it has its root from the past. Every ensemble used had a significant purpose. Goddess Saraswathi, carrying veena is a sign of knowledge, goddess Lakshmi, and sitting on a lotus flower with golden coins flowing out of her hands is the sign of wealth, Annapurna carrying a rice bowl is a sign of prosperity and well being and so on. This is very evident that people at that time were so skilled to relate objects with functions. (3,4). Even today, in Indian culture we come across many such ensembles that are highly significant.

5) **Accessories:** the history of accessories dates back much prior to the history of clothing itself. Men used accessories first and clothing later. In India, the use of accessories has been very scientifically derived like any

other custom or the practice. They are not just used to enhance the looks of the wearer, but also carried much significance. They communicated the status of the wearer like the rich, poor, the married, widow, and so on. The mention of the different types of ornaments used by the goddess Parvathi, in Soundarya Lahari, is not very different from what women wear even today. Especially in India, it is seen that women accessorize with few basic accessories like earrings, nose pin, a mangal sutra or a necklace, a toe-ring for a married lady and so on. It is prominent that the metals used and the design forms have changed but the nature and purpose of the accessories have remained same. These shows, how ancient and symbolic are the Indian accessories, when compared to rest of the world. Today, Indian jewelry, especially the antique jewelry has a great demand in the world across. They just don't beautify, they also communicate.

6) **Cosmetology & make-up:** with out right make up and an appropriate use of cosmetics, the dressing is never complete. This is not just today's version; rather, it existed from ancient times. In the manthra mathrika pushpa, there is a mention about the use of chandana, kesar, kumkum, and lotus and other herbal aromatic essences used by the Goddess, which has added gloss to her skin. Also there is a mention about the lip coloring agent, the arcanut, and beetle leaf also, which imparted reddishness to the lips. The use of kajal has also been mentioned. There is an evident mention about the hairstyle, the huge knots, the curls and the use of hair dressing accessories.

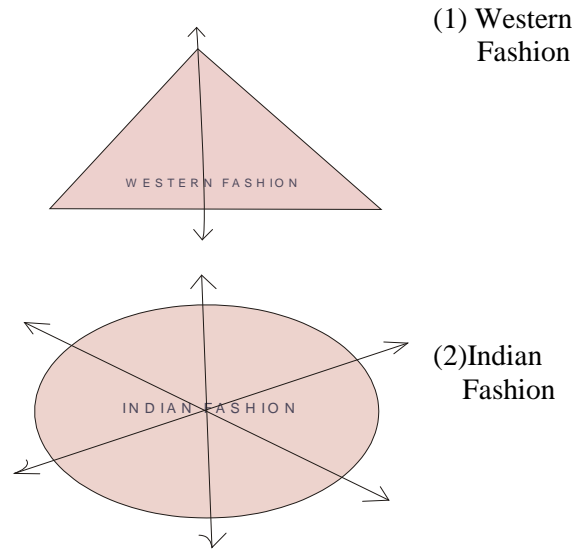
With these, it is very clear that India is the hub for herbal, ayurvedic and aromatic practices and was therefore attracted by many foreigners in the history who carried the resources and ideas from here. Including Frankincense, Sarsaparilla seeds, Benzoin and Cypress into the recipe. India, first to use the roots of plants, such as that of the Lime tree (Tilia) and Indian Spikenard as incense materials. Strongly scented floral fragrances, such as Jasmine or Rose, also contribute to the characteristic sweetish scent of Indian incense. Fragrances like Saffron, Cassia, Cardamom, Cinnamon, Aloe-wood, Basil and Patchouli are also common. All those herbal cosmetics we use today are based on the ancient recipes prepared by the rishi's then. This shows that Indians were much evolved in applied sciences. Therefore, even today, in India, people show a great bent to herbal and natural products in spite of many chemically composed cosmetics being available in the market. (3).

7) **Theme based works:** many styles that were used during those days were more functionally driven and the same feature is followed even today. The styles carried a purpose that was based on a theme or a subject. Similarly even today, fashion is developed based on a theme. A theme is a very significant one which is usually inspired by some aspect. This theme based work in Fashion also existed in ancient times, which can be well understood by going through the clothing styles of Goddess worn during Navratri festival. Goddess is decorated in 9 different ways during 9 days based on her varyiing moods. It is very significant. It is incredible to know that India is the pioneer in many aspects of fashion.

- The drape styles will continue to have their say in the Indian fashion scenario, as many designers still believe in working in free style with new textures. The strength of Indian fashion is its exotic features that include grace, femininity & sensuousness.
- Indian fashion will have its niche in the art of embellishment that is most traditional.
- The rich design culture and texture will have their way made further into the world's fashion market.
- Indian fashion will continue to be thematically focused and balanced upholding the nature of Indian fashion from the past.
- Indian fashion will go more segmented to suit various moods, moments and functions of wearing.
- The spirited aspect of Indian fashion will continue to attract more and more people.
- The deep rooted clothing culture will give rise to more asymmetrical fashion intermittently, to suit present day's needs.
- Indian Fashion will go more and more versatile, truly carrying its original feature.
- The balanced recipe of Indian Fashion carrying a good blend of design, concept and subject will be more suitable for people across the world to adapt through.

## 9. Conclusion

India pioneers in almost all the fields of fashion from textiles, color, styling, embellishment, ornamentation, accessories, beauty & cosmetics make up, and also in the science of proportion, it is very evident from the works of Adi ShankaraCharya. Indian fashion is an appealing fashion than just a fetish fashion. All the elements and factors contribute to satisfy all the senses of the person. It is though materially driven; it upholds the spirit of the wearer and will surely continue to do so. Indian fashion is therefore highly evolved and deep rooted, when compared to other cultures. It is scientific and aesthetic. Indian fashion is so complete in its nature that it can give vigor, splendor, and identity to a wearer.



Western Fashion is comparatively fetish and nascent, always, one of the factors will be overpowered than the rest fig (1). Where as, in Indian Fashion from the past, it is seen that it is very complete and aesthetically satisfying. It is both glamour driven as well as functional, which is a very unique aspect in Indian Fashion fig (2). In spite of any more impact and influence of any number of external cultures, Indian culture and fashion will be untouched and rather will emerge out more individually by imbibing the essence of other cultures. Indian fashion in the world is so advanced and developed that any other fashion can be assimilated into it. It is divine!

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7. Based on translation by Mr. Krishna Murthy (Sanskrit teacher & philosopher).
8. Pictures are based on the description (symbolic) and have an evident reference in Soundarya Lahari.
9. Special guidance by Mrs. Meera Kamat, Sanakrit Professor and soundarya Lahari tutor.



**ANNEXURES:**

Illustrations depicting the beauty of Goddess Parvathi, highlighting the ensemble, accessory, makeup and cosmetics.



