



## GENDER SENSITIVITY IN CLOTHING IMPRESSION

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### ABSTRACT

Communication is the transfer of information from one person to another person. Nonverbal communication usually occurs through the process of communicating wordless messages using the medium of "silent language". Along with all other nonverbal signals, clothing, as probably the most prominent source of nonverbal communication, transmits messages which are important aspects of communication. Clothes often signal a person's sense of self esteem, personality, education, general character, background, socio-economic status, and credibility. In a world that is becoming dominated by multimedia, the likelihood of people being judged on snapshots of their appearance is increasing. Social networking, dating websites and online profiles all feature people's photographs, and subsequently convey a visual message to an audience. Whilst the salience of facial features is well documented, other factors, such as clothing, will also play a role in impression formation. Clothing can communicate an extensive and complex array of information about a person, without the observer having to meet or talk to the wearer. There are significant cross-cultural differences regarding the relationship of gender and clothing. The present research aimed at studying gender sensitivity in clothing impression. It was expected that females would be more sensitive towards clothing impression than males. An incidental sample of 60 male and 60 female college students was selected and administered a clothing Impression Scale. The findings supported the hypothesis.

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### INTRODUCTION

"Actions speak louder than words."

Communication is the transfer of information from one person to another person. People spend nearly 75% of their time in communicating with others. But they forget that they are mostly observed by non-verbal communications (body movement, eye movement, eye contact, facial expression, gestures, and postures and clothing). The term nonverbal communication was introduced in the twentieth century by psychiatrist Jurgen Ruesh and Auther Weldon Kees in the book *Nonverbal Communication: Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations*, 1956. Non-verbal communication usually occurs through the process of communicating wordless messages using the medium of "silent language" (Hall, 1959). It is accomplished through different types of nonverbal communication signals such as gesture, body language or posture, facial expression and eye

gaze, object communication such as clothing, hairstyles or even architecture, vocal cues, etc.. In fact, a significant amount of communication that goes on between people is nonverbal. To Brown (2007), what people communicate nonverbally in their conversations is so much that it often makes the verbal aspect of the communication negligible. While communicating with each other, people are constantly sending nonverbal signs to each other and make an impression about themselves to the surrounding people and that impression forms the basis of their acceptance. This acceptance, in turn, functions as a criterion for the success or failure of their communication. Along with all other nonverbal signals, clothing as probably the most prominent source of nonverbal communication, transmits messages which are important aspects of communication. Even in the presence of other indicators, clothing makes a statement and tells people more about their wearers before opening their mouth to speak (White, n.d.). Clothes often signal a person's sense of self-esteem, personality, education, general character, background, socio-economic status and

credibility (Brown, 2007). According to Morris (1977) wearing clothes without transmitting non-verbal cues is impossible; a person's dress discloses a great deal about that person. Like other nonverbal cues, clothing signals can be communicated intentionally or unintentionally and they can, thus, be interpreted consciously or unconsciously by the observer (Morris *et al.*, 1996). In other words, clothing, according to Molloy (1977) is a primary impression management tool. Accordingly, the first impression produced as a function of clothing messages leads to different reactions and decisions on the part of the receiver. Thourlby (1978) states that people make decisions about others' level of sophistication, level of success, economic level, educational level, trustworthiness, social position, economic background, social background, educational background, and moral character solely upon clothing. In addition, judgments about one's credibility, likability, interpersonal attractiveness, and dominance are affected by clothing (Molloy, 1988; and Raiscot, 1986). Generally speaking, appropriate clothing choices can result in effective impression management which may in turn lead to desired reactions in any particular setting. In other words, though people expect to be judged by their knowledge, personalities, skills and ability, it is their mode of dress that influences others' judgments and reactions towards them (White, n.d.).

Over few decades ago, the role of clothing and interpersonal perceptions has been investigated from different perspectives by researchers in psychology and clothing fields (Paek, 1986). The literature in general, seems to give strength to the position that garment style, as a nonverbal component of communication and as a useful means for gaining some initial understanding of people and interacting with them on a daily basis, plays a key role in our real-world interactions (Jones, 1987). For instance, researchers have reported that attire has an influential role in first impression formation (Taber & Harrison, 1981; Buckley, 1983; and Rucker *et al.*, 1984); that there is a relationship between attire and personality (Aiken, 1963; Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977; and Dubler & Gurel, 1984); that there are similar tendencies toward preferred clothing styles (DeLong & Larntz, 1980; Dillion, 1980; and DeLong *et al.*, 1983); and that attire influences the credibility of individuals (Korda, 1975; Forsythe *et al.*, 1984; Lang, 1986; and Paek, 1986). Modern, western people are accustomed to the way in which the clothes they wear begin their lives as 'trendy' or 'stylish', but then start to age, become 'stale' and are no longer trendy or stylish. People are used to the idea that clothes come, or go, in and out of fashion and the English phrase 'old hat' would appear to describe a well understood drift from literal to metaphorical usage. Thus, fashion, the idea that what people wear may or may not be the current or latest style, is clearly understood in modern and western cultures. Also, modern, western people are familiar with the idea that the clothes they and others wear are meaningful. Clothes are selected for purchase, and for wearing, according to the meaning people believe them to have, or the messages they believe them to send. A novelty tie or a strappy frock worn to a job interview in the city, for example, 'sends out all the wrong messages'.

There is an old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words". This may be the best way to understand the influential role that clothing plays in communication. When a person has no spoken word to go by, they often form impressions of others based on visual cues, such as that person's clothing. Clothing is a nonverbal tool and expressive one at that. Nielsen &

Kernaleguen (1976) refer to clothing as a part of appearance that provides data for perceptions. It is said to give off information about a person's age, sex, personality, socio-economic status, value and political ideologies (Satrapa *et al.*, 1992). According to Feinberg *et al.* (1992), there are three reasons why clothing is important to research:

- Clothing is used in daily activity.
- Clothes constitute a frequent public display and
- Clothing choice is an easily manipulated symbol.

Generally, clothing is frequently seen and diverse in nature. What a man chooses to wear may communicate a complex array of information about who he is to others around him, even when he may or may not be trying to communicate with them (Howlett *et al.*, 2013).

### Gender role in Clothing Impression

"Gender" is the phrase now commonly used to refer those methods in which a lifestyle reformulates what starts as a reality of characteristics. Fashion and clothing are intertwined with each other in creating a gendered-structure of society predicated on the outlook of clothed human body. In the last two centuries, the definitions of gender are becoming more and vaguer, reflecting the cultural uncertainty that surrounds the male and female roles. These roles provide to each the gender identity which is a social construct not only determined by biological sex. The stereotypical masculine or feminine qualifications are not personality characteristics of individual men and women but socially constructed representations of gender, on the basis of what society expects of each sex (Condor, 1987; and Lloyd & Duveen, 1993). These expectations organize the social gender identity, making a strong frame of reference within which boys and girls socialize and adults are redefined. Thus the term gender identity refers to the construction of this identity due to the interaction with the social environment but also due to the realization of a person that it exists as a man or a woman (Cox & Dittmar, 1995). There are significant cross-cultural differences regarding the relationship of sex and clothing. Also, clothing is the main instrument of the appearance of the body considering in the general sense that it includes anything that contributes to this configuration, like shoes, hairstyle, accessories and even cosmetics. Two major socio-cultural factors shaping gender are the dress and fashion.

### Dressing and Fashion

The dress has the most direct contact with the human body and is therefore considered an integral part of the Self. Garments influence and shape the appearance with significant impact on the construction of social identity (Tseelon, 1989), that, delegates to others and to the self information about the economic and social situation of the wearer, occupation and nationality, but also individual properties and values (Holman, 1981; and Lurie, 1981). In the dressing there are types of coded cultural identities and people interact with them through the garments (Davis, 1988). Fashion meets people's lives and infuses them. Some follow it more or less and some not. However, daily selection of dressing affects the way they are perceived by others, defines the expectations of those around them and has the main contribution in forming impressions. In most cases the dress makes the man or the woman. The costume, someone wears at work, at a social gathering or in an

interview affects the perception and the opinion created on the capabilities and preferences (Giles & William, 1975). The subjective influence of clothing, except from psychological, has also historical roots, as people choose color, style and form of garments, according to the traditional social status, role and age. All these are also influenced by the interaction with other cultures and neo-colonial or not, state of their society (Bahl, 2005). In some societies, a particular form of dress may be used as a social control mechanism, such as political uses of women's clothing and as a means to change social norms (Bahl, 2005). The dress is among products with strong symbolism and great semantic value through the types of brands, origin, etc. (Mayer & Belk, 1985). Mostly, it is an external signal emitting meanings of an image of the self to others, but can also be internal, enhancing the self-image and confidence of someone to play a role (Solomon & Douglas, 1987). The interpretation of that image is a social phenomenon because the isolated individual body image always influenced by the collective body image and the interpretation of this affect the responsive behavior (DeLong *et al.*, 1983). The clothing is a form of nonverbal communication, clear enough for the user, although others interpretations may vary (Barnard, 1996). Fashion is a social product and includes a duality: a) providing for safety and uniformity, b) for personalization. So, the person wishes to be recognized as part of a team and as a personality (Dodd *et al.*, 1998). Where the expression of personality is undesirable, like in the army or in some companies, this is expressed through dressing, with an obligatory uniform or the khaki in the first case, or a certain suit and tie (Hughes, 2004). When someone is casually trying to decide about everyday wear, that person is influenced by historical - social factors and does not consciously think about whom she/he is or how she/he wants to be seen. The deep-seated inhibitions of Judeo-Christian tradition are expressed with modesty, prudence, lack of confidence, which are well engraved in the symbolic code of dress that prevails in the West (Davis, 1989).

## History

Roles of men and women have influenced clothing and garment and vice versa. The female dress has historically limited the social roles of women both physically and symbolically. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dress of non-working woman, demonstrates the economic situation of her husband, who was the supplier of the family (DeLong *et al.*, 1983).

## Construction of Masculinity

Fashion was not always gender scarred. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were no significant differences in the dressing of both sexes and both men and women wore long decorated costumes. The aristocrats and bourgeois superiors, used to show the abundant lace, rich velvets, silks, decorated shoes, elaborate hats, wigs and plenty of perfume (Davis, 1992). A pink, silk suit with gold and silver decoration was seen as entirely masculine. The dress was the signifier of social class and the more elaborate it was the higher the social class. Fashion became feminized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the expression of sexual difference through the clothing was more important than that of the social order (Steele, 1989). At the same time there was also a marked change in the expression of male identity through clothing. At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois men refrained from using all forms of decoration, gayer colorful fabrics and jewelry, leaving it all to women (Kawamura, 2005).

It's the great male abandonment, the most important event in the history of dressing, according to Flügel (1930), in which men are no longer interested in "beautiful" appearances and want it only to be useful. The systematic variations between male and female clothing began in late Middle Ages, when men's clothing appeared and reached its maximum in 1850 (Flügel, 1930). Since then, western fashion seeks to apply technical femininity in women's clothing to show their feminine qualities and this phenomenon became almost universal. The feminization of fashion started with the fall of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie and was accelerated by the French Revolution. Then the Protestant values of thrift, hard work and individual economic progress dominated and these values reflect on men's clothing (Davis, 1992). While men competed hard in the arena of politics and business, they gave women the decorative part to reflect the social status via their dresses and appearance (Craik, 1993). The postmodern construction of personal identity through clothing is more common among the youth, famous actors, members of racial or ethnic minorities, members of groups and subcultures, sexually differentiated people willing to be considered different from the mainstream. For these reasons there was a division in men's fashion (Crane, 2000). From the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, laws were passed regulating the cost of clothing and allow clothes depending on occupation and social class. It was an attempt of the aristocrats to keep their diversity in clothing and appearance of their socio-economic class. As it was not possible to eliminate the fashion and consumerism of the emerging bourgeoisie they merely formalized the formation of a new dress code called "town fashions". (Craik, 1993).

There is a clear separation of fashion in male and female. The female one requires constant change and innovation, imposed by the capitalist system of production and fashion with the excuse of the supposed obsession of women with elegance. After 1960, menswear was revived and this is explained from the change in power relations at the contact between genders and change in the participation rate of women at work. Men changed their dress codes and incorporated narcissistic and superficial elements, trying to highlight the different personalities. Perhaps the garment that concluded the need of more young people to diversify and their desire to escape the pressures of the industry of men's fashion, was a humble pair of blue jeans, which was worn with a few variations and is still worn today (Entwistle, 2000). The change in characteristics of masculinity that turned men into objects in front of the female gaze imposed a change of men's fashion and design and gave way to a superficial and light appearance. This could be explained by the change of position and character. Men ceased to be the sole actors in the socio-economic power struggle, not always worked in the factory or office while many worked from home, others were students, and unfortunately more and more were unemployed. These changes in living conditions influenced the dress code. However, there remained a diversity of gender status in costume institution (Craik, 1993).

## Construction of femininity

**The Battle for the Trousers:** Since 1850, trends of women's independence emerged in the U.S., a manifestation of the fact is that they wore trousers, shocking the moralists. Since 1920, pants for women began to be tolerated in sports and some limited activities such as cycling and horse riding (Sawyer, 1987). In 1949, Curle (1949) unleashed a damning indictment of women who revolt against traditional forms of femininity,

calling them “sour spinsters”. Earlier, in 1939, the fashion designer Elizabeth Hames argued that women were not yet ready to wear trousers at work. It took a world war to remove their corsets; will need another one to accept the trousers. As trousers symbolized male power, women who wore them were accused as unfeminine. Many movie stars like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn had worn trousers in their movies, but they have been protected by the glamour of Hollywood and their trousers added an aura of mystery and exoticism (Arnold, 2001). The fashion designers Coco Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet, since 1920, had suggested a soft and baggy trouser for dinner, but few women dared to wear it until 1940. Feminists, in 1970, looked at fashion as a trap for women, rejecting the traditional female dresses. Although the famous burning of bras, perhaps literally did not exist, even as a slogan, gave rise to a discussion of the view that femininity was a social construction justifying the interests of a patriarchal society (Beward & Evans, 2005). In 1966 the famous fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent modified the male tuxedo to a female line, and it quickly became a chic expression for women who wanted to appear different. Even couture fell to the attacks and the secular feminist movement and put pants on fashion collections (Craik, 1993).

In 1984 Susan Brownmiller criticized her friends who returned to women's dresses, but also justified it by saying that perhaps it was unreasonable to ask women to leave the basic expression of their diversity from their husbands (Rodnitzky, 1999). Although in 1980s, women had not achieved full equality, there was significant progress and the fashion was a powerful tool for the reversal of traditional gender roles. Women could accept or reject the “conventional” feminine clothes without feeling guilty or rebellious and cheating (Walter, 1998). Since 1980 women had been able to wear trousers in most places without being criticized (Arnold, 2001). Different was the case of women who used too much of their femininity. They were suspected of trying to attract other women rather than to attract men. Many men felt threatened by the provocative use of female sexual power and either avoided them or treated them as a joke (Curler, 1949).

### The role of Haute couture

In the 1990's Haute couture was revived with a strong female character overly adorned with fancy dresses. Chief representatives of this trend were John Galliano's collections for the fashion houses Givenchy and Christian Dior and Alexander McQueen's for the fashion house of Givenchy. Their designs brought back romance, were marked as statuary and reconstructed the female identity of the late 20th century (Arnold, 2001).

### Dressing Movements

The Macaroni were aristocrats who tried to distinguish themselves from the growing middle class with too quirky and weird clothes but the style was quickly discredited and refused (Craik, 1993). The Dandies were the movement introduced by Beau Brummel in London, a socially ambitious man, who tried to join the higher social circles. It was continued by Beerbohm and George de Maurier. With simple, plain clothes he tried to create the new aristocrat style. He wore starched white linen shirt with cravat and black pants, black vest and tight waisted wool coat and breeches. Everything fit perfect, was clean and crisp, and he was proud for the cleanliness. He wore soft

yellow gloves and used a black walking stick with ebony handle. He was the forerunner of the modern business suit and tie (Entwistle, 2000). The movement of Mods and Teddy Boys consciously tried to reverse the values and assumptions deliberately challenged the prevailing dress code. Since 1970, the subversive style was overtaken by the decadent style of the hippies and the psychedelic unisex stars of rock, like Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones (Arnold, 2001).

### Unisex and Androgynous Style

Hippies in the 1960's and later the Ravers (1985 - 1995) were the protagonists of the movement that tried to conceal gender differences showing a masquerade of equality for all, obscuring the identification of sex. Despite the promise of equality unisex garment was essentially of masculine style. The basic flaw in this fashion was that the concealment of diversity with a veil was not a fair measure (Arnold, 2001). Denial of the existence of a different sexuality and even different shades of it equaled to the overstressing of diversity. Both strategies aimed to eventually remove individual rights (Schor, 1987). On the other side, the androgynous style sought to unite the male and the female body in one, leading to a return to a primordial cosmic unity, which would alleviate the confusion of gender roles and the stress resulting from it. This style required a thin, youthful and energetic body with a boyish figure and referred to adolescence. Therefore it was problematic because it required a masculine frame and thin body, thus excluding the vast majority of men and women from it. This style was an imitation of the aristocratic identity, albeit somewhat milder due to the uncertainty of youth. Eventually the two styles emphasized the differences between the sexes. Garments are items made by people and with the clear distinction in male and female show the socially constructed nature of gender differences. They have functional character, but also make statements about social class, economic status, attitudes and even the desire to comply with social norms or vary from them. Usually they are used unconsciously as a code for someone to show himself/herself to others or to declare the group that he/she belongs to and thus their sex and their sexual tint. Fashion, because of the close association with the formation of the body, mediates the negotiation of different identities, sometimes with provocation. The inherent contradiction of fashion stems from the reflection on the representation of the body in the declaration of gender identity. Fashion may indicate social frivolity but it is sociologically important because it is a result of a lengthy process and has great influence in the collective determination of society.

### Objective

- The present research aimed at studying gender sensitivity in clothing impression.
- It was expected that females would be more sensitive towards clothing impression than males.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Sample:** Sixty male college students and 60 female college students were selected incidentally from a larger population of Raipur city.

**Tools:** A Clothing Impression Scale (CIS) was used to seek scores for sensitivity of respondents towards clothing impression.

**Table 1. Average Clothing Impression Scores of Male and Female College Students and the Obtained t Value**

Gender Comparison Group	N	Mean	$\Sigma x^2$	Obtained t ratio	P Value
Male	60	44.39	1948.30	5.80	P<.01
Female	60	54.86	1764.80		

**Table 2. No. of Male and Female College Students Showing Preference for Difference Categories of Clothes**

Group	Categories of Clothes			Total	Obtained X <sup>2</sup> Value	P Value
	Professional	Casual	Trendy			
Male	18	22	20	60	0.40	P>.05
Female	14	20	26	60	1.80	P>.05
Total	32	42	46	120	1.38	P>.05
Obtained X <sup>2</sup> Value	X <sup>2</sup> = 1.38, P>.05					

**Procedure:** Initially 60 male and 60 female college going students were selected incidentally by contacting them in college premise and were administered a clothing impression scale.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is clear from Table 1 that average score on the scale was higher for females (M = 54.86) than for males (M = 44.39). The obtained t value (t = 5.80) for this difference was significant at .01 level of significance, indicating thereby genuine difference between male and female college going students in regard to their sensitivity toward clothing impression, the difference being in favour of female college students. Furthermore, a X<sup>2</sup> was obtained to check significance of difference in preference of college going male and female students for clothing categories i.e., professional, casual, and trendy. The obtained X<sup>2</sup> value (X<sup>2</sup> = 1.38, Table 2) was not significant at any acceptable level of significance. It can be concluded that there did not exist any difference in male and female college students in regard to their preferences for different clothing categories. It is also interesting to note that there did not exist any genuine difference in regard to their preferences for these categories of clothes at individual gender level too (X<sup>2</sup> = 0.40 for males, X<sup>2</sup> = 1.80 for females). It seems that college female students were more sensitive to enhance their femininity through clothing, than college male students for their masculinity. This difference may be attributed to more varieties of clothes available for girls than for boys. This shows higher inclination of girls towards fashion than boys. It was also clear when we observed that more girls had preferred to the categories of trendy clothes as compared to boys. The non-significant differences in regard preferences for differently categorized clothes i.e., professional, casual, and trendy indicate that both male and female college students had almost equal level of preferences for three different categories of clothes i.e., professional, casual, and trendy, probably due to their emphasis on different categories of clothes for different occasions. The findings of this research has implication in fashion management. Further researches are recommended with larger sample and with separate emphasis on different items of the scale.

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