

Does it Matter What We Wear? A Sociolinguistic Study of Clothing and Human Values

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Received: January 16, 2013 Accepted: February 5, 2013 Published: April 22, 2013

doi:10.5296/ijl.v5i2.3051 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v5i2.3051>

Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the differences in people's reactions to each other as a function of dress style to see how a stranger clothed in different modes of dress is reacted against. Effects of two dress conditions, the former normally worn by upper-middle class members of society and the latter often worn by lower-class members (style A and style B, hereafter), were investigated under controlled conditions. To this end, three female housewives clothed in the two sets of polar garment styles were selected as buyers to have shopping experiences in different settings. Results indicated that participants (clients) of the study received different reactions from their respondents (sellers) in the two different conditions of dressing. In other words, participants in style A were accepted more readily than when they were dressed in the style B. This seems to indicate that clothing has a great impact on social interaction and impression management.

Keywords: Non-verbal communication, Clothing signals, Human values, Garment style

1. Introduction

Non-verbal communication usually occurs through the process of communicating wordless messages using the medium of “silent language” as called by Edward 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 we communicate nonverbally in our 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 (Brown, 2007). 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, socioeconomic 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, Gorham, Cohen, and Huffaman, 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; Rascot, 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.). This seems to be quite contrary to the prevalent cultural and religious values held in Iran, where human beings are claimed to be judged according to their personalities. Because of such discrepancy and the scarcity of scholarly research in Iranian contexts, the present study is an attempt to investigate whether the outward appearance or mode of dress can influence peoples’ reaction towards their interlocutors in Iranian context.

2. Clothing Style in the Literature

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 (Buckley, 1983; Rucker, Taber & Harrison, 1981; Lennon & Miller, 1984); that there is a relationship between attire and personality (Aiken, 1963; Dubler & Gurel, 1984; Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977); that there are similar tendencies toward preferred clothing styles (DeLong & Larntz, 1980; Dillion, 1980; DeLong, Salusso-Deonier & Larntz, 1983); and that attire influences the credibility of individuals (Paek, 1986; Lang, 1986; Forsythe, Drake & Cox, 1984; Korda, 1975).

A good number of researchers investigating the role of clothing, except for a few, have conducted their studies mostly on the basis of questionnaires. Aiken (1963), for instance, in his study administered an 80-item opinionnaire to 300 undergraduate women in a southeastern college. 33 of the items were used to constitute 5 "dress clusters"-decoration, comfort, interest, conformity, and economy. 160 of the original 300 women completed the revised 33-item opinionnaire, *the Study of Values, the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire, the California Psychological Inventory, and the F Scale*. The results indicated that there were significant correlations among the dress and personality variables. Results also revealed that both high scorers on decoration and interest tended to be uncomplicated and socially conscientious and high scorers on comfort were characterized as "controlled extroversion". Finally, the data suggested that high scorers on economy in dress tended to be intelligent and interested in the discovery of truth.

Similarly, Jones (1987) investigated the effect of attire on forensic competitors and judges in order to come up with standards for attire in intercollegiate forensic competition. To this end, the author distributed questionnaires to both students and judges attending two national intercollegiate forensic tournaments sponsored by the University of Texas at Arlington. Based on the findings, it was concluded that attire is influential, that attire standards exist in forensic competition for male and female competitors as well as for male and female judges; and that standards for female judges and competitors are more conservative than they are for male competitors and judges. Furthermore, a student's attire may affect his or her rating and may influence other competitors' performances.

In another study, Johnson, Francis, and Burns, (2007) investigated the relationship between personality and appearance emphasis by means of questionnaires. Two questionnaires, one measuring five personality factors and the other including nine appearance emphasis items were administered to a sample of undergraduate female college students. Linear regression demonstrated that there is a relationship between certain personality traits and appearance emphasis variables. Neuroticism, extraversion, and openness to experience were found to be moderate predictors for appearance emphasis. The findings of this investigation had

theoretical implications for the social-psychological aspects of appearance or dress and personality research.

Paek (1986) studied the effects of attire on personal traits formed by perceivers of a stranger clothed in two sets of polar garment styles of daring-conservative and dressy-casual. He also explored the relationship between interest rating of subject and personal trait ratings of each garment style. One hundred and three subjects rated 18 personal traits of wearers presented to them on slides and responded to clothing interest measures and questions about personal backgrounds. Results revealed that a stranger dressed in a conservative casual style was perceived to be more self-controlled, understanding, and reliable, whereas a person dressed in daring style was regarded as more attractive and individualistic than a person clothed in other clothing styles. On the other hand, a stranger clothed in dressy style conveyed social unease and dependency on others. Significant positive correlations existed between the clothing interest ratings of subjects and several personal traits of daring garment style, while significant negative correlations were revealed between the former and attractive and popular traits of conservative and casual styles. These findings also indicated that clothing interest of perceivers influenced first impression conveyed by different clothing styles.

Instead of using questionnaires, Morris et al. (1996) conducted an experimental study in a live context to investigate contemporary effects of instructor attire on students' perceptions of college teachers. For this purpose, the influence of three dress conditions of formal professional, causal professional and casual were tested under tightly controlled experimental conditions. Results indicated that instructors with more formal dress were perceived to be more competent. It was also indicated that the positive influences of instructor dress were found in the highly casual condition. Perceptions of homophily produced a small amount of variance in instructor ratings, but there was no significant effect of dress conditions on ratings of homophily.

As (Morris et al., 1996) truly noticed, across the body of literature available to date, it can be concluded that few studies have empirically examined the effect of clothing and most of them have used responses to photographs, slides, and questionnaires. It is also obvious that except for studies related to the subject of clothing, with reference to different variables such as personality traits, first impression formation, and so forth, no other study, to date, has tackled the object of the present study.

3. Objectives of the study

With reference to the background presented in the previous two sections and regarding the significance of nonverbal communication in general and clothing nonverbal cues in particular, this study is to determine whether in an Iranian context clothing makes any difference in reactions among strangers (here sellers and clients) engaged in their real-world activities. In other words, the present study is an attempt to probe whether in an Iranian context clothing can provide the basis of one's failure or success in their daily social activities or not.

4. Research Question

To specify the point and in order to gain knowledge as to the effect of clothing in an Iranian context, this study was designed to address the following research question:

To what extent is sellers' reaction influenced by their clients' appearance or mode of dress?

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

Three female housewives with undergraduate degrees, an average physical build, and relatively similar level of attractiveness, whose ages range between 25 to 30, participated in this study. Prior to the study, they were informed about the research objectives and were thus volunteers to participate. Each of them had the similar experience of going to a single store twice. As buyers, they were asked to wear two sets of polar garment style in each experience with the same store. Sellers in the two specified stores, stated below, were two males in early middle ages with almost equal years of experience. They were observed without being informed about the purpose of the study.

5.2 Pilot Study

Before the commencement of the main study, a pilot study was conducted with the intention to check for the practicality factors and observe if any variation in sellers' reaction as a function of cloth manipulation could be found. For this purpose, one researcher clothed in two polar garment styles had some shopping experiences in different settings. Findings showed that cloth manipulation resulted in difference in sellers' reaction towards their client. Decision about the procedures of the research and aspects brought to investigation was made according to the pilot study.

5.3 Procedures

Settings for the study were a jeweler's and a cosmetic store selected mainly according to the element of unfamiliarity since familiarity has been shown to affect the effect of cloth manipulation. Attempt was made to control factors such as the sellers' ages and years of experience. The subjects of the study as buyers had two experiences of shopping with each of the specified settings of the study. Altogether, every person had 4 shopping experiences, two in the jeweler's and two in the cosmetic store. Their visit was once in garment style A and once in style B. Style A was normally worn by upper middle-class members of the society and style B was one often worn by lower-class members. In their first encounters with each seller subjects clothed in garment style B and in the second one clothed in garment style A. In order to avoid the effect of familiarity, one week time interval between the two experiences was decided. Barring mode of dress manipulated during the study, other factors such as time of shopping, subjects' speaking style, gender, age, physical build, level of attractiveness and education were kept consistent. During each experience, one researcher accompanied the subjects for observation and note-taking purposes. Finally the findings of the study were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively with respect to different variables in order to gain knowledge as to the effect of clothing in an Iranian context.

5.4 Classification Scheme

For ease of presenting and discussing the results, individuals involved in the study, the sellers and clients were anonymously named seller X, seller Y, client1, client2, and client3. As stated earlier each subject had 4 shopping experiences, two in the cosmetic store with seller X and two in the jeweler’s with seller Y. Their two visits with each seller were once in garment style A and once in style B. Altogether, there were 12 shopping experiences. It is schematically represented in Table 1 blow.

Table 1. Schematic presentation of shopping experiences

Clients	Styles	Seller encountered	Experiences
1	A	Seller X	1
	B		2
2	A		3
	B		4
3	A		5
	B		6
1	A		7
	B		8
2	A		9
	B		10
3	A		11
	B		12

After observing each experience, the interactions between clients and sellers in the two polar dress conditions were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Aspects brought to investigation in quantitative part of the study included number of times the clients addressed the sellers to initiate a conversation, number of turns taken by conversation participants, types of responses given by sellers, number of interrogative and imperative sentences used by the clients and the sellers in the course of conversation, price ranges and items suggested by sellers to their clients in different modes of dress, and finally total time of conversation between the sellers and the clients in each different occasion. It should be noted that since the length of responses given by the sellers in their turns varied from a single word to a complete story, types of responses were divided into two types, telegraphic and sentence-length; the former included single word or semi-sentence responses and the latter included full-sentence responses.

For the qualitative part of the study, it was decided to investigate address terms used by sellers, sentence voice, speech style including formal, informal, respectful, and friendly speech styles, and finally immediacy variables such as (sellers') smiling and looking at clients, using a stern/ friendly tone, and paying compliments while talking.

6. Results

What resulted from shopping experiences were conversations between sellers and buyers that were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. As mentioned before, regarding the quantitative part of the study, conversations were analyzed in relation to aspects such as speaking turns and the number of interrogative and imperative sentences. Table 2 presents this information.

Table 2. Speaking turns and sentence types

Experiences	Subjects' Names	Speaking turns	Interrogative sentences	Imperative sentences
1	Seller X	6	5	3
	Client 1, A	5	2	0
2	Seller X	4	3	0
	Client 1, B	8	3	0
3	Seller Y	4	5	1
	Client 1, A	5	2	1
4	Seller Y	4	1	0
	Client 1, B	4	1	0
5	Seller X	5	4	2
	Client 2, A	5	3	1
6	Seller X	3	3	0
	Client 2, B	4	2	0
7	Seller Y	9	5	1
	Client 2, A	7	3	1
8	Seller Y	4	1	0
	Client 2, B	2	3	0
9	Seller X	6	7	3
	Client 3, A	6	4	1
10	Seller X	3	1	0
	Client 3, B	3	3	1
11	Seller Y	7	4	2
	Client 3, A	6	4	0
12	Seller Y	3	0	0
	Client 3, B	2	3	0

Moreover, types of responses given by the sellers, times of addressing the sellers, price ranges, number of items suggested by sellers, and finally total time of conversation were addressed. Frequency of each one is reported hereunder in Table 3.

Table 3. Values for quantifiable variables in different situations

Clients' Names	Dress Style	Types of responses				Times of addressing the seller		Price-ranges suggested by sellers		Total time of conversation (min)		Number of items suggested by sellers	
		telegraphic		Sentence-length		SX	SY	SX	SY	SX	SY	SX	SY
		SX	SY	SX	SY								
Client 1	Style A	2	1	8	5	1	0	50-100	2-4 m	25	16	17	5
	Style B	4	3	1	0	2	3	15-35	600-1m	5	4	4	1
Client 2	Style A	1	2	10	6	1	1	60-90	1.5-2m	10	13	9	4
	Style B	2	3	4	0	4	2	12-20	500-1m	6	4	3	2
Client 3	Style A	3	2	11	7	0	1	40- 80	1-3m	13	20	15	6
	Style B	4	2	3	1	1	2	12-30	1-1.5m	5	3	5	3

*SX = Seller X

*SY = Seller Y

Conversation analysis with respect to the qualitative aspects mentioned above led to different results. As one constituent part of the conversations, addressing terms used by sellers varied for clients with different dress styles while clients consistently used the term 'sir'. Table 4 shows addressing terms sellers used for each client in the two different situations.

Table 4. Address terms used by the sellers in opposite conditions

Sellers' names	Client 1		Client 2		Client 3	
	style A	style B	style A	style B	style A	style B
Seller X	Ms.	Ø	Ms.	You (sin)	(Sarkâr)	Ø
Seller Y	(sarkâr)	(hâj khânom)	Ms.	(khâhar)	Ms.	Ø

Both sellers and clients used active voice except for one case when the seller X asked his client clothed in style A: whether she was offended by sweet smell. Sellers' speech styles were also observed for analysis purposes. Sellers' styles were determined by examining the way they treated the clients and specific expressions they used reflecting one of the formal, informal, respectful, or friendly styles. Distribution of speech styles used by sellers came out to be considerably variable across different situations. Moreover, immediacy variables observed by the researcher also varied during each experience. Immediacy variables and speaking styles were closely related to each other because it was immediacy variables that gave sellers speech characteristics of a particular style. Consequently, almost in all

experiences with clients dressed in style A, sellers had a friendly, respectful, and informal style since, during conversation they smiled and looked at their clients using a friendly voice. The use of some particular expressions by sellers when speaking also confirmed this point.

7. Discussion

As the data suggested, a stranger dressed in style A perceived to be more credible, likable and dominant, whereas in style B she was treated differently. Quantitative data presented in Table 2 and 3 supported this point.

Findings presented in Table 2 also accounts for the discrepancy in sellers' reaction towards their clients in the two polar dress conditions. Although the difference between speaking turns taken by sellers and clients in the two different conditions is not so high, number of interrogative and imperative sentences used by sellers in the course of conversation with clients dressed in style A were higher than those in the opposite situation. It can be said that sellers in their experiences with those clothed in style A were much more willing to continue buying and selling due to the first impression formed on the basis of appearance and perceived the style A holders as more credible, likable, educated, or considered them as being from higher economic and social level, and attributed them a higher social prestige.

As for the information presented in Table 3, it was indicated that types of responses given by sellers in all experiences with clients dressed in style B were mostly telegraphic, while it was sentence long for style A. That is, sentence-length responses possessed the highest number of 14 for style A and the lowest number of 0 for style B. Put it differently, the first encounter between sellers and clients dressed in style B did not lead to a successful social interaction, while it was quite the other way round when the clients dressed in style A. perhaps this was because sellers made decisions about their economic level, social position and social background differently solely upon clients' clothing in the absence of other information. This is in line with Thourlby's (1978) statement that people make decisions about economic level, level of sophistication, level of success, educational level, trustworthiness, social position, economic background, social background, educational background, and moral character solely upon clothing.

As shown in Table 3, total time of conversation between sellers and clients in the two different conditions varied considerably. Total time of conversations in all experiences with style A were higher than those in all experiences with style B. There was a time span as short as 3 minutes that was by no means enough to keep the conversation going to have a successful shopping experience. Similarly, times of addressing the sellers in the two polar conditions of dressing implied that clients in style A were more dominant and sociable. That is, when dressed in style A, clients were welcomed even without addressing the sellers, whereas there was occasion when clients dressed in style B had to address the sellers even more than three times. Additional findings in Table 3 for price ranges and number of items suggested by sellers provided support for the previously discussed points since for style A the announced values highly surpassed those for style B.

In line with the quantitative data of the study, qualitative aspects also advocated that to a large extent clothing can make difference in one's respondent's reaction. Variation in address terms used by the sellers in the two opposing dress conditions was remarkable. As shown in Table 4, more than half of the address terms used by the sellers when addressing the clients in style A was the term 'Ms.' What is apparent is that when addressing the sellers by title, clients in style A were mutually addressed by title which could indicate equality in power and similar social status (Yule, 2006). On the other hand, in half of the experiences with clients in style B, there was asymmetric use of title; the clients addressed the sellers by title but received zero address terms (Ø) in response. According to Wardhaugh (2006) this can be a clear indicator of a power differential. Besides, as Aliakbari and Toni (2008) note, such employment of address terms can show that sellers may deliberately avoid using any address terms to show unwillingness or annoyance

Almost in all experiences with clients clothed in style A, there was an attempt towards intimacy simply because sellers had a friendly, respectful, and informal speech style. Besides, they smiled and looked at their clients using a friendly voice during conversation. However, there was no sign of intimacy in experiences with style B due to sellers' formal speaking style and using a serious voice; they neither smiled nor looked at their clients.

8. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that participants (clients) of the study received different reactions from their respondents (sellers) in the two different conditions of dressing. Sellers judged their clients' credibility, likability, interpersonal attractiveness, dominance, and other personal traits differently based on their mode of dress; accordingly, they were either cold or warm to them. That is, consistent with the findings of the addressed research, results of the present study also indicate that in an Iranian context, outward appearance or mode of dress can influence peoples' reaction towards their surroundings. As stated earlier, barring mode of dress manipulated during the study, other factors such as time of shopping, subjects' speaking style, gender, age, physical build, level of attractiveness, education and even sellers' ages and years of experience were kept consistent. Thus, it can be claimed that it is the garment style as the only visible and manipulated cue that accounts for differences in viewers' reactions. Therefore, viewers (sellers) made many decisions on the basis of garment style and perceived strangers dressed in style A as higher-class members of the society. The in-context manipulation of this study adds strength to its contribution to literature because it has been suggested that responses to photo manipulation, slides, or questionnaires are not affected by variables present when actual people interact in context.

The knowledge gained would increase insight into the important role of clothing and appearance in daily activities and in impression formation providing the basis of one's success or failure in being socially accepted. Findings of the study have implications for both L1 and L2 communications. Since people in their daily activities interact mostly with persons whom they don't know, lack of knowledge about non-verbal clothing signals as the only visible cues can impede communication and mutual understanding. Therefore results imply

that all language learners in general and L2 learners in particular need to take care of clothing and its informative cues in order to form a positive impression in their interlocutors' minds. Admitting the importance of non-verbal communication, the obtained results signify that, besides reinforcing students' conversational (verbal) skills, L2 teachers need to raise their consciousness to the miracle role of non-verbal communication in general and the role of clothing in particular. In addition, findings of the present study have implications for research regarding social-psychological aspects of appearance and dress in relation to variables of interest. Yet, this study used a small number of 3 female subjects having shopping experiences with just two sellers in two particular settings of a jeweler's and a cosmetic store. Accordingly, future research is warranted to precisely determine the effect of clothing using a larger number of subjects including both males and females interacting with sellers in a series of different settings. Further research may also include a cross-cultural examination of this topic which may also be of interest for researchers.

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