Dress as a Communicator: A Case of Great Zimbabwe University Students: Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Appearance is a critical dimension of communication which almost always precedes verbal transactions. Dress is a form of non-verbal communication. The purpose of the study was to establish whether students were aware of the role of dress as a language of communication in society. A qualitative case study approach was used. The population of the study comprised Bachelor of Education Undergraduate students. Stratified random sampling was used to come up with a sample of 20 respondents. The strata constituted male and female students. The questionnaire and interview methods were used to collect data from students on whether dress was a language of communication. The observation method was also used to collect data on the type of dress college students used when they are at campus. The data collected was presented in narrative form basing on the themes which emerged. The findings from the study were that to a great extent people dress for impression management, social acceptance is also an important factor. Students were generally aware that dress can act as a language of communication. Although the youth were aware that dress acts as communicator, their dress selection was affected to some extent by factors like mass media fashion trends, peer pressure. The findings also indicated that sometimes dress cues used by some students conveyed wrong messages, resulting in problems in communication. The study recommends that the youth be exposed to knowledge and skills in clothing selection for different occasions, roles and personality types, for informed clothing choices and effective communication.

Keywords: Dress, communicator, non-verbal, impression management, impression formation.

Introductions and background

The researchers noted that some young women in Masvingo urban were being harassed because of the way they were dressed. This occurred at places with a high concentration of people like taxi and bus ranks. This observation developed an interest to investigate whether young people knew that dress was a communicator. Dress is defined by Roach Higgins Eicher (1995) as an assemblage of modifications and supplements to the body. The modifications could be permanent like scarification and tattoos, or temporary like make up, manicure and pedicure. The attachments could be clothing items like dresses, skirts, jeans, trousers or accessories like ear-rings, bracelets, dress rings, broaches, shoes and handbags.
Stain, Hauck and Su (1973) refer to transmit as to interchange thoughts and information. Communications involves a sender, a message and a receiver. The message would be the dress cues the individual is presenting. Communication occurs between the perceiver and the perceived. The dress will act as a communicator from the perceived to the perceiver. Dress can be used to establish a person’s position in social terms (Kaiser 1988). A person of high socio-economic level can be identified through dress e.g. police uniforms signify a policeman, a work suit a blue collar worker and a business suit an executive. Dress can also signal a person’s identity (Dimbley and Barton 1985). Identity of a policeman, executive and blue collar worker may be detected through dress. An individual may have many roles and these may be identified through dress (Book 1980, Horn 1986). A person can be a wife, a nurse or an affiliate of a church group, these different roles will be identified through dress.

Dress is an important factor in impression formation (Myser, 2008, Kaiser, 1988). Impression formation occurs when dress symbols are observed e.g. decent, friendly, reliable or reserved. From these observations people make judgments and categorize people (Davies and Houghton 1991). Categories like decent person, immoral woman and reliable person are assigned to people due to dress.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study was to establish whether students were aware that dress plays a role in peoples’ everyday interactions.

- Find out students views on dress as a non-verbal communicator.
- Establish whether students were aware that dress can be used in impression management.
- Find out if students were aware that dress is used as identity kits to establish people’s roles in society.

**Theoretical Framework**

The symbolic interactionist theory guided the research. Proponents of the theory are Mead, Holon, James. Symbolic interactionist theory is a sociological theory that focuses on the processes of person to person interactions and how people develop viewpoints about themselves and others (Ritzer 2008). Symbolic interactions deal with verbal and non-verbal interactions. We interact with symbols forming interactions around them. McNeil Newbead, Peace, Swain and Wright (2008), Ritzer, (2005) say human beings are different from other organisms because they have the ability to communicate using symbols.

Symbolic interaction involves communication between the wearer and the perceiver and the process involves shared meaning. Haralambos and Holborn (1990), Ritzer, (2008) are of the view that social life can only proceed if the meaning of symbols are shared by members of a society. We must be aware of the symbols we are displaying and others must be aware of them too (Kaiser 1988, Ritzer 2008). The purpose of our interaction is to create shared meaning. The
The function of symbolic interaction is to assist in deriving meaning through non-verbal cues and symbols. The basic premise of the theory is that we act towards objects on the basis of, action and meaning they have for us. The meanings are derived through social interactions with others. The meanings are held and modified through interpretative processes.

The key concepts of the symbolic interactions theory are shared in meaning, symbolizing, interpretation and definition, role enactment, role learning and situated identities (Kaiser 1988).

Theory in the Dynamics of Everyday Living

The utilization of the Symbolic Interactions Theory will be covered with reference to the key points. The key concepts are: shared meaning, symboling, interpretation and definition, role enactment, role learning and situated identities. The concept of shared meaning is assigning similar attributes to a symbol i.e. between perceiver and wearer. According to Kaiser (1988), shared meaning occurs, once the awareness context is established, the meaning the wearer attributes to the article of dress must be the same meaning attributed to it by the observer, who is trying to understand the article of dress and the intent of the wearer. This is supported by Haralambos and Holborn (1990) Ritzer, (2008) when they social interaction can only proceed if the meanings of symbols are largely shared by members of the society. One example could be a lady wearing a black dress, shoes and scarf (dress symbols) and then the perceiver who sees the dress symbols. The shared meaning is that the perceived is in mourning.

Meanings are derived, and must be understood in social interaction. As Kaiser (1988) and Ritzer (2008) says, in order for this to occur, we must all be aware of the symbols that we are displaying, and others must be aware of them as well. However there are times when we do not share the same meaning as others because of cultural, ethnic, age difference, etc. The perceiver might not be able to understand the dress symbol presented by the perceived e.g. a change of symbols within the same setting. To illustrate this point, a school child wearing clothes instead of uniform. A perceiver who is not aware that it is civvies day might have a different meaning of the perceived. Another example is that of a white man seeing the regalia of a spirit medium for the first time. The white man will not be able to perceive the meaning of the dress. In this case shared meaning will not occur.

According to Kaiser (1988), symboling consists of originating and bestowing meanings upon things and events and in comprehending these meanings. Through the symboling, special meanings are assigned to things. An example of symboling behavior is a high schools colors symbolizing achievement. The blazer does not differ from other blazers, but the symbolizing process assigns to it a special meaning. Wearing the blazer will imply special abilities on the part of the wearer.

Interpretation and definition are said to be key elements in symbolic interaction. According to Kaiser (1988) and Ritzer (2008), interpretation involves the observer’s assignment of meaning to appearance symbols. Based on this interpretation, the observer provides a definition to the
wearer as to how the wearer’s identity and situation are being interpreted. The author goes on to say that since we all wear clothes we should be aware that these processes apply to us. We are also working on how to work one another’s identities or intentions and also the situation. The authority says the extent to which we use clothing cues in making interpretations and definitions depends on our awareness of the situation /context. Looking at a lady wearing a trouser suit, and smart shoes, the impression might be that the person is serious, professional and then the lady may be given the definition/ identity of being a female executive.

McNeil et al (2008) says there are various names and values associated with different social roles and people occupying a social role are likely to try to breed cultural standards associated with the role. Role enactment can be referred to as the use and selection of particular dress symbols for a role an individual plays e.g. formal suit for an executive, work suit for blue collar jobs (Kaiser 1988). An individual selects particular dress symbols in order to play a role. Joseph (1986) says if someone’s type of dress is expected in their particular role, social interaction is facilitated.

Another concept covered under symbolic interactions is role learning. This involves leaning of roles e.g. gender roles. Gender roles are reinforced through use of specific dress symbols. As Rouse (1989) says, clothing and other forms of body modifications such as hairstyles make up, scarification or tattooing can communicate quite pleasing information about an individual. Through role learning, the person is able to define the characteristics expected in his particular role. McNeil and Townely (1986) are of the opinion that the interactions theory tries to explain the role player’s definition of his/her role. Tesser (1995) is of the view that culture and society influence how one builds his/her identity through self presentation one would compare his/her dress against the standard role and part he/she is playing. Through role learning, the role player defines his/her role e.g. a girl learning about the female role would observe how perceivers react to her clothes and would make adjustments. If the perceived (girl) puts on a pair of trousers and the perceiver makes a negative comment and disgusted facial expressions, she will adjust. A newly married woman would have to learn her role as a daughter in law/ married person through interacting with other people. This interaction will help her know the accepted dress code and symbols to suit her new role. With reference to situated identities, dress is said to help individuals to define one another’s situations by categorizing or naming e.g. Rasta, or virtuous woman. As Kaiser (1988) says, clothing styles commonly accepted as being formal, casual or somewhere in between tend to communicate in a manner that helps to define a situation. A woman dressed in decent clothes may portray that she is virtuous; whereas a woman wearing skimpy revealing clothes may portray that she is a loose woman.

Joseph (1986) says sometimes teenagers and young adults deviate from the norms by rejection of contemporary forms of dress. Conformity to dress is to some extent influenced by sensitivity to reactions of significant others e.g. members of the peer group.

Kaiser (1988) and Myers (2008), refers to impression management as the control of appearance related to impressions that are communicated to others during social interactions. The author further argues that impression management is a process resulting from the perceptions we
have about ourselves and from motives of our behavior. Impression management is important because we are managing other people’s views and judgments of ourselves. Tesser,( 1995), Kaiser (1988) and Ritzer (2008) say, clothing symbolism provides a means of communications with others. Perceivers of a person select clothing cues to assist in understanding that persons motives for interaction and predicting future actions (Kaiser 1988). This involves perception of others using their dress. We engage in impression management because other people are making impressions of us (impression formation). (Kaiser 1988) further indicates that it is not always possible to understand the meanings that individuals may be intending to communicate with their dress cues. Inaccurate assumptions about someone dress cues may inhibit social interactions. Kaiser (1988) points out, that we have a basic desire to understand the meaning behind others appearance and actions. We predict these in order to predict future behavior.

Research Methodology

Design

The research was conducted as a case study of undergraduate Bachelors of Education students at the Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. Leedy and Ormorod (2005) refer to a case study as a type of qualitative research where a single entity bounded by time and activity is investigated using a variety of data collection instruments.

Population and Sampling

The population sample comprised of 101 undergraduate students. The study focused on university students because they are in the category of people harassed by the public because of their dress.

A sample of 20 students was selected using stratified random sampling procedures. The procedure was used to give each student an equal chance to participate (Tuckman 1988). The stratum’s comprised of male and female students. The sample was small and manageable. Leedy and Ormond (2005) say a small sample is what is recommended for qualitative research as data collection methods are time consuming and can be expensive.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through questionnaire, interview and observation. This helped in triangulation of data.

Semi-structured interviews were used to enable respondents to expand on topics as they saw fit, focus on particular issues and relate to their experiences. This type of interview was used to allow respondents to express their views on whether dress can communicate a person’s personality, identity, disposition and social status. The interview was also used to establish
whether dress can be used in impression management. Sidhu (1984) defines observations as a
data gathering tool which seeks to ascertain what people think and do by watching them in
action as they express themselves in various actions and activities. Students were observed on
campus in terms of their dress for lectures, sporting activities, and other activities like dinner
classes and fashion shows.

The questionnaire method was used to collect information from respondents through use
words and pictures of people dressed in various types of dress. Both closed and open ended
questions were used. The open ended questions were used to enable respondents to provide
fuller and richer responses.

Findings and Discussions

The findings and discussion focused on the themes that emerged from the research. The
recurring themes were;

- Shared meaning in dress.
- non verbal communicator.
- Role enactment.
- Impression management and impression formation.

Shared meaning in Dress

From the interviews, questionnaires and observations, the general view was that for effective
communication to occur through dress there should be a shared meaning on dress cues. These
sentiments showed that shared meaning on dress is important for effective communication. As
human beings we have a basic desire to understand the meaning behind the appearance and
actions of others (Kaiser 1988). This helps in future interactions because we will be in a position
to predict future behavior. As one respondent said, “When you understand one’s clothing
tastes, it is easier to relate to him/her. If you interpret the meaning of their clothes correctly
you will not have problems communicating with them.”

From the findings, it was established that it is important to have the same meanings for
clothing cues with those you interact with, especially significant others like members of the
peer group. The general view of the respondents was that it was important to dress
appropriately to avoid becoming a misfit. Like one of the interviewee pointed out, “When we
go for parties we wear mini skirts, shorts or tops, because that’s what people wear at parties.
You want to feel relaxed and accepted.” A similar view was presented by another respondent
who said that, “If you do not wear what is appropriate for a function people will discriminate
against you and you will be a misfit.” Another respondent indicated that, “I have watched ‘How
Do I Look’ on DSTV and it is apparent that some people are not aware of how they are dressed.”
Sometime assigning the same meaning to dress was difficult because of age differences,
location, culture, social and educational factors. (Kaiser 1988). It was portrayed by the findings
that adults did not share the same meaning to dress as young people, especially on what was considered as modesty. One interviewee pointed out that, “We have problems at our church, some of the elders there think that girls should not wear trousers especially tight fitting one’s when coming to church. They think it shows loose morals.” The young people did not think trousers were immoral since they covered the whole body.

It was also noted in the investigation that views in modesty of dress differed from the urban setting to the rural setting. Certain types of dress symbols might be wrongly interpreted in the rural setting. The case of tights and mini skirts which might be accepted in the urban setting might not be accepted in the rural areas. One respondent indicated that she had a nasty experience when she visited the rural areas in skinny jeans. She revealed that she attracted nasty comments and looks. She ended up wearing a wrapper to cover her skinny jeans so as to mix and mingle freely at the wedding she had attended. One respondent also said, “Sometimes some-one’s clothes and make up may convey wrong messages to others. One might think they are fashionably dressed in a micro mini skirt when observers consider them loose or view them as prostitutes attracting undesirable comments, looks or actions from males.”

**Non Verbal Communication**

From the findings it was established that dress is a form of non verbal communication. To some extent dress may communicate one’s mood, personality, identity, social status, sex, etc. Dress can communicate ones mood, e.g. sadness, boredom, happiness. One respondent said, “You can tell some one’s mood from their clothes for example, when one is shabbily dressed it means one does not care.” Another respondent said, “Wearing shorts and a t-shirt shows a casual and relaxed mood.”

The findings also show that dress might also be linked to some one’s personality. Clothing can be used to portray a positive side of the self in order to present a personality that others have come to expect of us and that we would expect others to expect of us, (Kaiser 1988). One of the interviewee said that, “A reserved person may wear dull clothes to avoid drawing attention of others and a outgoing person may wear bright and stylish clothes to announce his presence. One interviewee who considered herself to be an introvert said, “I don’t like bright clothes, they attract too much attention, I prefer colours like blue and grey.” Colours like red and yellow are said to be active colours whereas colours like blue and grey are cool colours which recede into the background.

The findings also showed that dress as a non verbal communicator can indicate of a person’s identity. One respondent said that, “Poor people do not wear clothes in season; a nurse can be identified from her clothes.” Findings also showed that well off people wear expensive clothing and designer labels such as Nike, Gucci, Versace, Louis Vuitton and Bvlgari, however, quality of clothes and designer do not necessarily indicate ones economic status. People make use of second hand goods from flee markets. One respondent said, “Some people are well dressed as they wear good quality second hand clothes. You can get blouses at $1 at flea markets. Trendy
jackets could be bought for as little as $5 to $10 each.” This shows that clothing can serve the purpose of confusing social status and identity.

**Dress and Role Enactment**

People have different roles in society and these roles may be communicated through dress. The general findings showed that people dress to suit their positions and identities. As one respondent pointed out, “People are expected to dress according to their roles in society for easy identification and communication e.g. when you are hurt and you see a person wearing a nurse’s uniform they feel that help is at hand.” This shows that we depend on dress cues to declare our identities to others and ourselves to pave a way for interaction with others and to maintain positive feelings of personal identity (Roach-Higgins, Eicher and Johnson 1995).

The findings show that dress should suit social situation so that there is effective interaction. Individuals occupying a social position or particular role are expected to dress in a way that defines who they are in society. The general feeling is that one’s dress should announce who they are for effective communication by coinciding with the expectations of dress held by others for specific social situations (Joseph 1995).

It also emerged from the findings that one’s dress might not coincide with the expected role in society or social situation. One respondent said, “Dress is not always a reflection of one’s economic status or social position. Some of our lecturers wear very simple inexpensive clothes which do not show their economic status.” Another respondent said, “Some married women do not dress in a modest way expected of them. They dress like young girls causing problems to young boys who think their still searching.” If the type of dress is contrary to expectations, it can hinder or terminate interaction (Kaiser 1988, Joseph 1995). This shows that sometimes people deviate from the norms of dress expected of them. One respondent said, “from watching ‘How Do I Look’ on DSTV, one can see that some people just dress anyhow without following the norms of dress acceptable in a social setting.” In most cases the young deviate from the norms of dress because of their rejection of the contemporary modes of dress (Joseph 1986). The respondents showed that dress for most young people is mostly influenced by the reaction of their significant others rather than the norm of dress. The other indication was that towns are becoming more and more cosmopolitan because you find people from different parts of the world. Cosmopolitan dress diminishes visual distinction among people encouraging easy communication in a global scale, (Roach-Higgins, Eicher and Johnson 1995).

**Impression Management and Formation**

The respondents were generally in agreement that dress can be used in impression management. People dress to impress others as one respondent pointed out, “I sometimes dress to impress others, especially my friends. I want my friends to think I’m cool. For this reason I go shopping for clothes with my friends.” Another respondent said, “When I go for gigs, I dress to impress my friends. When going to church, it’s a different case, I dress according to church expectations. I dress in decent clothing like skirts; I don’t want to portray an impression of a lady
with loose morals.” One respondent indicated that, “It is more important to be dressed appropriately for an interview to be considered for a job. This shows the employer that you are serious.” The ideas emerging from the findings are that people are continually trying to manage the impression they create and identities emerge from impression management (Goffman in McNeill et. al. 2008, Tesser 1995 and Kaiser 1988). Impression management is important since we are trying to manage others views and judgments of ourselves (Kaiser 1988 and Tesser 1995).

The findings also showed that we engage in impression formation. The respondents said that in most cases they try to make use of what someone is wearing to try to understand a person’s motives and figure out how to relate to them (Kaiser 1988). One respondent said, “When I meet someone for the first time I analyze what they are wearing to categorize them. Well dressed people make a good impression. You feel they are dependable and approachable.” Another respondent said, “You can tell in some cases one’s character by the way they are dressed e.g. people who are dressed untidily do not give the impression of dependability.” We are constantly engaging in impression management because others are forming impressions about us (Kaiser 1988).

Conclusions

From the findings it may be concluded that dress is a communicator.

The study has shown that dress is a form of non-verbal communication. Dress may be used to communicate one’s mood, personality, social status, role, sex and identity. However, dress as a non-verbal communicator may not be effective because sometimes the perceived may not have dress congruent to his/her social situation.

The study established that for dress to act as an effective communicator, there must be shared meaning between the perceived and the perceiver on dress cues used to identify different social settings. Sometimes meaning in dress symbols is not shared because of cultural, age, social and educational factors.

It may be concluded that dress is an important factor in role enactment. Dress was found to be important in reflecting different roles and identities in society. When a person’s identity is established, social interactions becomes easy. The study also established that if dress symbols conflicted with expectation, dress communication is inhibited or terminated.

In terms of impression formation and management, the conclusion was that we engage in impression management by using dress to create an impression about ourselves on others. It was also established that we as human beings are involved in impression formation on people we observe. Dress as a non-verbal communicator is used to form impressions about other people.
Recommendations

The study came up with the following recommendations:

- Youth in universities and other institutions be exposed to knowledge and skills in dress selection for different social settings and personality types by wardrobe experts.
- Expose youth to the social psychology of clothing to avoid attitudinal barriers to communication through dress.
- A similar study on views of adults on dress as a communicator be conducted.
- Replica studies to be conducted at universities in bigger cities to see if similar result are obtained.

References