Dress and Identity: A Case of Great Zimbabwe University Students: Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Appearance is a critical dimension of communication which almost always comes before verbal transactions. Dress is a form of non-verbal communication which can communicate a person's identity. The purpose of the study was to establish the relationship between dress and identity. A qualitative case study approach was used. The population of the study comprised Bachelor of Education Undergraduate students in the Textile Technology and Design section at the Great Zimbabwe University. Ten students were sampled using convenience and purposive sampling. The questionnaire, interview and observation method were used to generate data from students on whether identity and dress were inextricably tied together. The data collected was presented in narrative form. Students were generally aware that dress can act as a communicator of identity. The findings also indicated that poor dress choices conveyed wrong identities resulting in problems in communication. The study recommends that the students be exposed to knowledge and skills in clothing selection for different occasions, roles and personality types, for informed clothing choices.

Keywords: Dress, Identity, Identity Kits, Shared Meaning, Social Interaction.

Introduction and background

Dress is defined by Roach, Higgins and 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 (Mupfumira, 2017). The attachments could be clothing items like dresses, skirts, jeans, trousers or accessories like ear-rings, bracelets, dress rings, broaches, shoes and handbags (Adam & Galinsky, 2019; Mupfumira, 2017).

Dress can be used to establish a person's position in social terms (Kaiser, 1988; Damhorst, 2018). A person's dress can heavily influence the impression they transmit and is therefore a powerful communication tool. Dress can also signal a person's identity e.g. police uniforms signify a policeman, a work suit a blue collar worker and a business suit an executive. (Dimbley & Barton, 1985; Mupfumira, 2017). Clothing is symbolic. What we wear tells a lot about us to others without our uttering a word (Hickson & Stacks, 2015). 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; Mupfumira, 2017). A person can be a wife, a nurse or an affiliate of a church group, these different roles will be identified through dress.

From observation it was noted that some students dressed formally for lectures as if they were going to teach in the classroom. This observation brought about questions on whether students understood the link between dress and identity and that dress announces who a person is in social terms.

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 of one's identity.
- Establish whether students were aware that dress, identity and the body were inextricably tied.
- Find out if students were aware that dress is used as identity kits to announce people's roles in society.

Theoretical Framework

The symbolic interactionist theory guided the research. Symbolic interactionist theory proponents are Mead, Holon and James. Symbolic interactionist theory focuses on the processes of person-to-person interactions and how people develop viewpoints about themselves and others (Ritzer, 2008, Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013). The symbolic interactionist theory deals with non-verbal communication. Symbols are used in interaction (Mupfumira, 2017). Human beings differ from other organisms in their ability to communicate using symbols (Ritzer, 2005).

Symbolic interaction involves communication between the wearer and the perceiver, and the process involves shared meaning (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013; Mupfumira, 2017). Effective interaction can only proceed if the meaning of symbols are shared by members of a society. Shared meaning is assigning similar attributes to a symbol between perceiver and perceived. According to Kaiser (1988), shared meaning occurs once the awareness context is established. The meaning the wearer attributes to the dress symbols must be the same meaning attributed to it by the observer, who is trying to understand the dress symbols and the intent of the wearer. Brooks, (2019), Haralambos and Holborn (1990) and Ritzer (2008) say that social interaction can only take place if the meanings of symbols are largely shared by members of the society. A lady clothed entirely in black, may be perceived to be in mourning. In this situation, perceivers may pass their condolences. Symbolic interaction assists in deriving meaning through non-verbal cues and symbols (Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013; Mupfumira, 2017).

For shared meaning to occur, we must all be aware of the symbols that we are displaying, and others must be aware of them as well (Kaiser 1988; Ritzer 2008; Mupfumira & Jinga 2013). Due to economic, cultural, ethnic and age differences, etc., there are times when we do not share the same meanings as others. The perceiver might not be able to understand the dress symbols presented by the perceived, e.g., a change of symbols, within the same setting such as a child wearing street clothes instead of a school uniform. A perceiver who is not aware that it is civvies day might conjure a different meaning of the perceived (Mupfumira & Jinga 2013).

Symboling consists of originating and bestowing meanings upon things and events and in comprehending these meanings (Kaiser, 1988). Through symboling, special meanings are assigned to dress symbols like attachments, body modifications and enclosures. An example of symboling behaviour is wearing a ring on the third finger which symbolises that one is married (Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013). Different blazers, colours, badges and neckties are also used in schools to symbolise class levels, special achievements. Prefects, head girls and head boys in schools are identified through different colours in uniforms from those of the rest of the school. Wearing different colours will imply special abilities on the part of the wearer (Mupfumira, 2017).

Interpretation and definition are key elements in symbolic interaction. According to Kaiser (1988) and Ritzer (2008), interpretation involves the observer's assignment of meaning to appearance symbols. The observer provides a definition of the wearer's identity and situation. The extent to which we use clothing cues in making interpretations and definitions depends on our awareness of the situation or context (Mupfumira & Jinga 2013; Mupfumira, 2017). Someone looking at a lady wearing a formal trouser suit and court shoes carrying a briefcase and talking on an expensive cell phone is perceived through shared meaning as a business executive.

Individuals play different roles in society, such as wife, mother, teacher, church elder. McNeil et al. (2008) says that various names and values are 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, such as a formal suit for executives and a work suit for blue-collar labourers (Kaiser 1988; Mupfumira, 2017). An individual selects particular dress symbols in order to play a role. Joseph (1986) asserts that social interaction is facilitated if people dress as expected for their particular roles.

Role learning is another concept covered under symbolic interactionist theory. Role learning involves internalizing roles, e.g. gender, occupational or social. Roles are reinforced through the use of specific dress symbols. Females usually put on dresses and skirts, and men trousers. Dress symbols communicate information of an individual's identity. Role learning helps a person to define the characteristics expected in his particular role. Culture and society help an individual build his/her identity through comparing his/her dress against the standard role being played. A person in a new role must observe how others in a similar role dress, in order to dress appropriately for the acquired role (Mupfumira, 2017).

The concept of situated identities refers to the categorisation of dress of an individual according to situations (Mupfumira, 2017). This helps individuals to define their situations through dress symbols, e.g. virtuous woman. Clothing styles commonly accepted as formal, casual or somewhere in between tend to communicate in a manner that helps to define a situation (Kaiser 1988). A woman dressed in decent clothes may portray that she is virtuous; whereas a woman wearing skimpy, revealing clothes may portray herself as a loose woman.

Dress as a Medium of Communication
Kaiser (2015) noted that, communication is an on-going process that guides and shapes our interactions with other people. Personal appearance is one mode of communication. Roach-Higgins, Eicher and Johnson (1995) say that the list of possible meanings communicated by type of dress is endless. Dress may, for example, make a statement about age, gender, social class, school affiliation, political affiliation or religion (Barnard, 2002; Kaiser, 2015; Mupfumira, 2017).

Merriam-Webster (n.d) refers to identity as the distinguishing character or personality of an individual. Identities are in most cases communicated by dress (Mupfumira, 2017). Feldman, (2017), Horn (1975) and Mupfumira, (2017), are of the view that dress of an individual is a kind of sign language communicating an individual's identity. Clothing is a symbol of crucial social and psychological importance and serves to communicate to others an impression of one's social status, occupation, role, self confidence and other personality characteristics (Barnard, 2002; Kaiser, 2015; Horn, 1975). Dress can make statements about age, gender, social class, school affiliation, occupation or religion. An individual's personality can be revealed through their type of dress (Johnson, et al, 2017). Choice in dress can communicate responsibility, status, power, and the ability to be successful (Turner-Bowker, 2021).

Dress facilitates interaction within social structures because individuals may be quickly identified by what they wear (Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013). For example, when a cleaner and managing director are present, the cleaner would wear a work suit, and the managing director a formal suit. Thus, dress confers identity on individuals as it communicates their positions within social structures (Barnard, 2002; Kaiser, 2015). These social structures include: family and kinship structures; economic structures; political divisions; government hierarchies; and religious groups.

Identity, Dress and Body

Identity establishes a person's position in social terms (Mupfumira, 2017). This is when others place him as a social object e.g. nurse, policeman, school child, man, woman. Roach-Higgins, Eicher and Johnson (1995:14) say 'From the perspective of symbolic interactionist theory, individuals acquire identities through social interaction in various social, physical and biological settings, so, conceptualized identities are communicated by dress as it announces the social position of the wearer to the observers within a particular interaction situation'. Some identities are assigned at birth. These identities include those associated with body variations according to sex, race, or deviations from average. Identity is an integral part of social life. It is only by distinguishing the identities of different groups; people are able to relate to other people. An awareness of different identities provides some indication of what sort of person you might be dealing with and, therefore, how you can relate to them (Mupfumira, 2017). Identities are communicated by dress. An individual's personality may be revealed through dress (Johnson, et al, 2017). Choice in dress can communicate responsibility, status, power, and the ability to be successful (Turner-Bowker, 2021).

The relationship between identity, dress and body is mainly that dress serves as a medium of communication. Dress communicates identity and position in a social structure. Dress gives a body an identity (Mupfumira, 2017; Rouse 1989). Without dress it would be difficult to assign identity to a naked body. According to Davis (1991), clothing represents and adds extra dimensions to our identity. Dress is said to relate to identity in that it makes statements about people, i.e., their age, gender, social class, school affiliation, political affiliation or religion. Dimbley and Burton (1985:40) indicate that dress signals people's identity: 'When we group people by class or job, age, occupation, economic status, often it is clothes which identify them with the group'. It would be difficult to read one's identity without dress. A soldier's uniform makes it easy to determine he's a soldier; the same applies for a school child, a general hand at a hospital. As Kaiser points out (1985: 199), 'Clothes help individuals to define one another's situated identities by supplying cues that are symbolic of certain social groups, thus resulting in naming and categorizing.' Dress relates to the body, in that it is through dress that the person's body is linked to his or her role. If one is wearing a police man's uniform, it

is easy to conclude that one is a police man. In this way, dress provides identity kits for the roles we play in every day life. If the type of dress is contrary to expectations, it can hinder or terminate interaction (Kaiser 1988, Joseph 1995).

Above all, dress is inextricably tied to the body in that it helps to communicate the body's identity (Mupfumira, 2017). Without dress, it would be difficult to determine whether one is male or female, what a person's occupation is and, in some cases, what his/her social status is. When the body is clothed, it is possible to assign it an identity (Mupfumira, 2017. As Rouse (1989) says, 'Clothing helps establish a sense of identity for the wearer'.

Therefore, the relationship between identity, dress and body is united. There cannot be dress without a body. An identity is essential in order for the body to be furnished with the right kind of dress. It is also clear that it is not easy to perceive identity on a body without dress. In society, the body is always presented in a dressed state, and dress is said to be a second skin (Horn, 2015). Dress provides the body with an identity. A body acquires identity through dress, and this provides a basis for social interaction. It is through dress that a body is given an identity and be categorised as male, female, nurse, doctor, soldier, policeman, executive, judge or king. Without dress, it is difficult to place an identity on a body.

Research Methodology
Design
The research was conducted as a case study of undergraduate Bachelor of Education students in Textile Technology and Design at Great Zimbabwe University Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. Leedy and Ormorod (2019) 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 60 undergraduate students. The study focused on Textile Technology and Design university students because they were in the category of people expected to understand the relationship between dress and identity as they were in the field of Textiles and Clothing. A sample of 10 students was selected using convenience and purposive sampling procedures. The sample was small and manageable. Leedy and Ormorod (2019) say a small sample is recommended for qualitative research as data collection methods are time consuming and can be expensive.

Data Collection Methods
Data was generated through questionnaire, interview and observation method. Semi-structured interviews were used to enable participants to expand on topics as they saw fit, focus on particular issues and relate to their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2012; Gray, 2018). This type of interview was used to allow participants to express their views on whether dress can communicate a person's identity. The interview was also used to establish identity kits used by the participants. Observation involves systematic recording of events, behaviours, artifacts as observed (Marshall, & Rossman, 2015). 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 participants through use of words and pictures of people dressed in

various types of dress. Both closed and open ended questions were used to enable participants to provide fuller and richer responses.

Findings and discussion
The findings and discussion focused on the themes that emerged from the research.

Dress communicator of identity
The findings and literature established that dress can act as a communicator of one's identity. Dimbley and Burton (1985) indicate that dress signals people's identity. This can be through making statements of ones age, gender, role and social status (Mupfumira, 2017). Dress is a symbol of crucial social and psychological importance and serves to communicate to others an impression of one's social status, occupation, role, self confidence and other personality characteristics (Barnard, 2002; Kaiser, 2015 & Horn, 1975). From the interviews and questionnaires, the general view was that dress signals people's identity therefore a person's dress should be appropriate for his role or stage in life and situation. One participant interviewed said, "A young person can make a statement of age through clothes which the older people may not wear". Another participant expressed that, "one can make a statement of gender through dressing e.g. males generally wear trousers and women dresses. Social status is shown sometimes with the quality of clothes one wears. People of high income can afford designer labels and expensive, high quality clothes''. ''Women are deemed to wear traditional feminine clothes and men wear that which is deemed traditionally masculine" said one participant. One's gender usually shows through dress.
 It also emerged from the findings that one's dress might not coincide with the expected role in society or social situation this may cause communication challenges. If the type of dress is contrary to expectations, it can hinder or terminate interaction (Kaiser 1988, Joseph 1995). However to some participants, clothes could not always indicate the kind of person you are as pointed out by one participant, "Sometimes people dress to create the image they want". This can be termed impression management. One tries to create an ideal image which might not portray the real self.

Dress communicator of social status
It was revealed from the questionnaire and interviews that one's economic status can be shown by their dress. One of the participants said "Individuals of a higher social status wear expensive clothes of silk, wool and linen and also expensive fur. Those of lower status wear clothes made of cotton" A similar view was presented by another participant who stated "Poor quality clothes show that you are of low class". To further support the finding that dress can communicate one's identity, one participant said "Politicians, the rich and elite wear brands which are well acclaimed and very expensive to display position and financial status". However some participants were of the view that second hand clothes (Bhero) can contribute towards confusion of economic status because people of middle income can be expensively dressed in second hand clothes. Clothing is a symbol of crucial social and psychological importance and serves to communicate to others an impression of one's social status, occupation, role, self confidence and other personality characteristics (Barnard, 2002; Kaiser, 2015 & Horn, 1975).

Dress as identity kits

The study established that dress can act as identity kits (Mupfumira, 2017; Roach-Higgins, Eicher & Johnson, 1995). This was supported by one of the participants who pointed out that dress announces social position of the wearer. This was further supported by one participant who said, "For instance in Zimbabwe chiefs wear gowns as attire and the village heads wear helmets as their attire. Also police persons wear different uniforms that are determined by the rank they hold". Badges are worn on the shoulder by the army and police to show position or rank.

As Kaiser (1985: 199), points out, "Clothes help individuals to define one another's situated identities by supplying cues that are symbolic of certain social groups, thus resulting in naming and categorizing". It is not always the case that the perceived wear dress that is congruent with their role, culture and social position as pointed out by one of the participants, "Some wear clothes which do not resemble their culture or income. Some Zimbabweans dress like Indians."

Dress can be used as identity kits to communicate a person's identity. Dress can be used to establish a person's position in social terms as it is a means of transmitting information about the wearer, (Kaiser 1988; Damhorst, 2018). This is supported by one participant who said, "At graduation educational levels can be identified through dress for example doctorate holders wear red gowns and undergraduates black gowns. The diploma holders only wear the gown and hood without a cap".

The study has established that dress can be used to distinguish people in religious and other organizations. The participants had the consensus view that people in different organizations wear different uniforms from others to distinguish themselves. One participant said "People wear badges of their organization e.g. OK supermarket, Pick and Pay supermarket to distinguish themselves from other organisations". In this way people use dress as a form of visual identity. One participant expressed the view that "People from different religious groups distinguish themselves by using different dress codes. Dress in religious groups is based on set traditions. For example in the Catholic Church dress provides a distinction between the priest, nuns and lay people''.

Most of the participants felt that clothes could be an indication of the kind of person one is. One participant said "Dressing sense reflects personality, character, mood and style. Too revealing clothes give an impression that one is looking for attention and hence in our African culture gives the impression that one is a prostitute" However some of the participants were of the view that not all dress signals a person's identity. This was also noted in literature that if the type of dress is contrary to expectations, it can hinder or terminate interaction (Kaiser 1988, Joseph 1995).

The study established that dress plays a significant role in every day interactions. This was the case because participants were of the view that personal appearance was part of communication. This was expressed by one participant who said "Personal appearance is an important part of communication e.g. ministers always put on formal suits and are well dressed and rank marshals (Mahwindi) wear shabby clothes". Dress contributes towards first impressions on who you are. The way you present yourselves through the clothes you wear is very important because people can categories you by the clothes you wear e.g. decent women, thug, loose woman. People may act towards you basing on your type of dress.

Dress and social structures

It was established by the study that dress announces identities in social structures (Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013). One of the participants said "In the corporate world, uniforms are used to identify workers of a particular organization''. Also within the organization clothes are used to identify individuals in the different levels in the organization (Barnad, 2002; Kaiser, 2015). This was supported by one participant who said , "In an organization a general worker would be wearing a work suit and the managing director a business suit". From the interviews, questionnaires and observation it was noted that dress is used to announce identities in social structures. As one respondent pointed out " in Zimbabwe those who support the ruling party are identified by wearing regalia of the colours and designs of the party. Each political party has its own regalia".

Participants felt that it was important for religious groups to use dress to distinguish individuals." Dressing for religious groups will show status e.g. bishop , priest, pope, lay people. "For easy visual identity in the church, priests, deacons, clerical, wear accessories like crucifix, enclosures like robes, habits". This supports the view from literature that categorization of dress is according to social situations i.e. situated identities (Kaiser, 1988).

Dress, identity and body

The participants were generally in agreement that dress, identity and body were inextricably tied together. One participant said, 'Dress is important as it shows people who one is in society'. Another participant indicated that without clothes it was very difficult to give a body an identity. An undressed body is difficult to identify. From the literature, it was established that dress was closely tied to identity and the body (Damhorst, 2018; Kaiser, 1988; Mupfumira, 2017; Rouse 1989). This was the case because dress gives a body an identity. Without dress it would be difficult to assign identity to a body. It is through dress that the person's body is linked to his or her role. If one is wearing a police man's uniform, it is easy to conclude that one is a police man. In this way, dress provides identity kits for the roles we play in every day life. Above all, dress is inextricably tied to the body in that it helps to communicate the body's identity (Mupfumira, 2017. The participants were in agreement that without dress, it would be difficult to determine a person's identity. When the body is clothed, it is possible to assign an identity to it (Mupfumira, 2017; Rouse, 1989).

From the literature, interviews, questionnaires and observation it was established that dress was closely tied to identity and the body. There cannot be dress without a body. An identity is essential in order for the body to be furnished with the right kind of dress. It is also clear that it is not easy to perceive identity on a body without dress. In society, the body is always presented in a dressed state, and dress is said to be a second skin (Horn, 2015). Dress provides the body with an identity. A body acquires identity through dress, and this provides a basis for social interaction. It is through dress that a body can be given identity and be categorised as male, female, nurse, doctor, soldier, policeman, executive, judge or king. Without dress, it is difficult to place an identity on a body.

Conclusions

From the findings it may be concluded that dress is a communicator of a person's identity. 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. It was concluded that dress was important in reflecting different roles and identities in society. It was also concluded that dress is an important factor in role enactment. When a person's identity is established, social

interaction becomes easy. The study concluded that dress is an important factor in establishing ones identity. It was found that dress, identity and body were inextricably tied together. When a person's identity is established, social interaction becomes easy. However, dress as a non-verbal communicator may not be effective if the perceived has dress not congruent to his/her social situation. If dress symbols conflict with expectations, communication is inhibited or terminated.

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 and identity be conducted.
−Replica studies to be conducted at universities in bigger cities to see if similar results are obtained.

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