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Fashion Psychology: The Relationship Between Clothing and Self

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This exploratory article discusses the systemic influence of the law, culture, society, and Self on the relationship between a person and their clothing. The point of this article is to discuss how the influence of Self can be proportionally balanced with the law, culture, and society. This article aims to address the influence of Self on dressing choices in a system where culture and society hold most of the influence. The author aims to explore if the systemic balance of Self in the influence on dressing could aid Fashion Psychology in a humanitarian effort towards a formal study of the inner dialogue between humans and their clothing with less of an influence of external factors.

KEYWORDS: dressing, clothing, systemic influence, culture, society, fashion psychology

Fashion Psychology: The Relationship Between Clothing and Self

This article aims to explore the deeply personal relationship between humans and their clothing.

Pre-Introduction Visualization

Picture any place in the world. Decide on the season, the time of day and the exact location. Remove all people and animals. Remove their houses and their transportation but keep yours. For now, there are no memories of other people, and no other people will appear in your world. Notice the weather and yourself. What are you wearing in this image?

All your clothing, shoes, accessories, and toiletries are also available to you. Would you like to change anything about what you are wearing? Change your clothing, hair, skin products or accessories if you want to, or keep on what you have. Now picture your feet, your legs, torso, and shoulders. What's on your head, your face? Your skin? What are you carrying? What will you wear tomorrow?

Next, pick one person who you know closely and add them back into this scene. Do you want to change anything? Why or why not? Add a second person back into the scene, one that you have only met once. Would you put something else on? Add a final person, one that has the right to punish you for wearing clothing different than theirs. Do you change anything? How much of your dressing decisions are based on your relationship to the clothing? And how much was based on your relationship with other people? How many times have you purchased a piece of clothing and never worn it? Is it because it didn't fit, or because it just didn't feel right? What didn't feel right? The fabric, the fit or the way you felt in it? How does your choice of clothing help you better understand yourself? And how can we reconcile the deeply personal choice of how to dress against other influences of fashion.

How much agency do you have in navigating the world through the nonverbal language of clothing? And how much of your daily dressing is passive despite the active assumptions others make about you?

The Systemic Influences of Fashion

If the relationship between a person and their clothing can be adopted as a discussion, could there be a therapeutic application to using clothing as an avenue for psychotherapy? Could the external, nonverbal language of clothing be an unexplored bridge into a person's inner world? Can you have a conversation with yourself about your clothing to help better understand your inner world?

Definitions

Fashion is the head-to-toe representation of art, wearable art, ready to wear art, economic production of clothing, hair styles, make up, body markings, accessories, foot coverings and accessories, head coverings, visual expressions of any type worn on or near the body, and clothing of any kind made of any material.

Clothing and dress both refer to a wearable body covering usually created from a textile, but can be fashioned and held in place by any material or substance.

In this article, the body refers to the entire body and all surfaces that can be fashioned with clothing from body coverings to shoes, to hats, accessories, and body art.

The legal system is the governing body who makes punishable rules around codes of dressing. Cultural and societal influence refers to the groups and individuals in which a person engages.

The *Self* is the true, undamaged, born essence of a person (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020).

Nonverbal language in this article refers to the nonverbal language of a person's fashion.

Clothing: Legal, Cultural, Societal and Self

On the subject of fashion much has been written, but Fashion Psychology is a young field of study with very little research and written literature. As of Fall 2021, one international masters level program exists to study Fashion Psychology, no doctoral level programs exist, and professionals in the field of Fashion Psychology are asking for more research, exposure, and literature. While some Fashion Psychologists are discussing the relationship between humans and their clothing, much of the field focuses on public image, marketing, trends and the relationship between society and fashion. Despite the daily impact dressing has on humans, little empirical research has been conducted, and literature review found zero studies addressing the psychological language between humans and their clothing. With a few exceptions (Smith & Yates, 2018; Kodzoman, 2019), writing and research done on clothing and fashion has been written by marketing professionals (Jägel et al., 2012; Miller et al., 1993; Haynes et al., 1993), trend forecasters (Ayman & Kaya, 2014; Au et al., 2016), and by authors who bypass the wearers connection to their own clothing and focus on the opinion of everyone but the wearer (Cobliner, 1950; Bonnet & McAlexander, 2013; Grung et al., 2014; Küster et al., 2019). While some connections are made between the clothing we wear and the inner world of the wearer, most of these inferences are made from people outside of the mental health community. Some have religious backgrounds and investigate how clothing contributes to the overall culture of specific groups (Block, 2011).

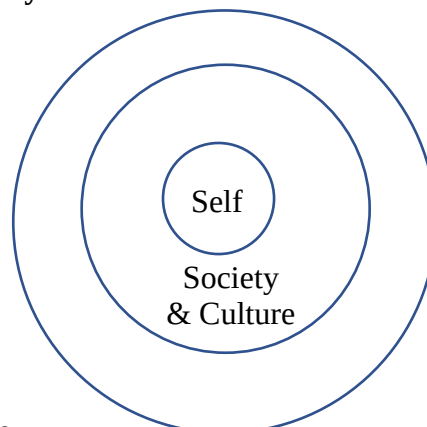
Most humans have agreed to a dressing code within their system. This system has legal, societal/cultural, and Self influences. Historically, publications have ignored the connection of Self

to clothing and instead give the power of interpretation to the majority who dictated the rules of dressing. Those rules of dressing are widespread and widely adopted, but inadequate. The past notion that “the dress agreed upon by the modest majority keeps social equilibrium” (Thomas, 1899), was hardly true then and isn’t helpful now (Jordan et al., 2021). Agreeing to allow a slowly moving group of people to set the social tone for what is desirable and acceptable way of dress in any given culture is harmful. The harm comes from giving the power of nonverbal language directly to society, cutting out the influence of Self.

A relevant example of how the Self is cut off from clothing due to the influence of the majority is high heels. Women often carry more comfortable shoes in their purses to put on after an event. The heels are uncomfortable, even the comfortable ones, and the event can often be peppered with the pain of the shoes. Yet, the pain of wearing high heels can be a badge of honor. But who is this badge for? Is the Self content to be in pain? Are the feet willing participants? Or is the badge worn for society to see? Women whose foot anatomy and pain tolerance has changed after acclimating to high heels confidently tell their friends that they are more comfortable in heels than flats. Some cultures believe that a woman in flat shoes has given up on her image. Yet, no one is rushing out to purchase hiking heels because the hiking culture does not support that option. The culture has dictated heels are appropriate for business, casual and special events but no one checked in with the Self.

A second example of how culture and society has overwhelmed the Self in the dialogue between clothing and Self is: levels of dressing. In most cultures, there are unspoken levels of dressing. For this example, we will create a scale. Level 10 can be a white-tie event, Level 9 is a black-tie event, Level 8 is a semi-formal event, Level 7 is a cocktail party, Level 6 is business attire agreed upon by the old majority, Level 5 is business casual, Level 4 is date night clothing, Level 3 is everyday casual and athleisure clothing, Level 2 is the clothing you don’t leave the house in, and Level 1 can be your ill-fitting and stained underwear. Because of this imposed scale, you may subconsciously choose to wear clothing to a first date that does not represent who you are. And you may judge the person based on the level of clothing they are wearing despite your best intentions. And neither of these impulses help further connection to yourself, or others. Eliminating Self influence on the clothing decisions we make and focusing on the Levels of dress is an appropriate social agreement but not if the Self is cut out of the system. The addition of equal parts society/culture, law, and Self back into the system can change how the changing fashion landscape changes. This idea of balancing out the system of influence on personal fashion choices has many relevant applications in psychotherapy. How do we reconcile legal involvement in our clothing? How do we benefit from, or receive harm from too strong of a cultural and societal influence on our dressing? How do we shift into a space where we have a dialogue with clothing and Self to bring balance to the system?

Systemic Influences on Dressing



Law

When the legal, cultural, and societal influences are present but the influence and dialogue with the Self is absent, the influence of the law, culture and society can obscure the relationship of clothing and Self.

Connection to the Law

Often clothing requirements and regulation are mandated by law. Many countries have laws stating that genitals should be covered for sanitary and safety reasons. Often law enforcers will respond to clothing situations based on their own interpretations of what is acceptable (Yadav, 2014). Laws concerning dress are a usually a concern for women, especially in areas with legal ties to religious dressing (Aust, 2019). But all citizens under mandated clothing regulations must face consequences if found outside of the legal accepted dress code. Often, the politicized regulation of clothing serves an agenda outside of safety and health, like with the mandating of the Hajib in some areas, and the restricting of the Hajib in other areas. If the conversation between Self and clothing concluded to go against the law, consequences would need to be weighed. But in the system of influence on fashion and dressing, being in contact with the Self on what you wear and why could balance the odds that the law brings against freedom of Self and nonverbal communication.

Connection to Society

Society does not encourage space for the Self to discover the Self. Asking the Self and clothing to reconcile would take power away from society to dictate the dress of individuals. Taking power from society is not the will of culture. Many of us do not take on the journey of understanding who we are through our dress because of lack of opportunity, capacity, and cultural cut off from understanding our own Self's character. We are dressed by our parents at an early age to fit in with the culture of our peer group, and the agreed upon aesthetic of the laws of the school. While this choice to take away the choice of dress from younger children can be seen as an act of care, taking the autonomy of dressing away from a child could also take away a child's time of cultivating how they do their daily ritual of dress, and how their choice fits into the system of social code dressing. Any failures or success in dressing lies with the parents and removes the child from the relationship with their clothing and the consequences of their would-be-choices. Identity issues arising rapidly around age 9 are already exacerbated by the lack of diverse role models in the media and leadership (MacDonald, 2014). And the author wonders if the guiding hand of parents in their children's clothing choices may be more for the comfort of the parents than for the development of the child. Looking similar to their peers and fitting in has a place for the child who chooses that path, but how is this potentially effecting a child who feels like an imposter in their clothing? And does this person walking around in nonverbal cues that are not their own help them in life, or hinder them?

The conversation of clothing is still taking place between the wearer and society with an emphasis on how to influence people to gain power. It's possible that the money motivation of

marketing on fashion psychology pushes consumption without regard to the relationship of Self and clothing. If you look around a store at any given time, patrons are usually purchasing clothing very different from the Level they are currently wearing. People purchasing clothing are having a dialogue with the culture around the marketing of their brand. If asked, they would probably tell you exactly where they see themselves wearing this article of clothing and what they will pair it with. A patron who is cut off entirely from Self and clothing may shrug and say that they just needed a new pair of pants, and this is all that was available. In both cases, the patron ignores the dialogue between the article of clothing and themselves and allows society to drive the purchase. How different would the conversation be if you asked the patron about a piece of clothing and they said, “this is what I will wear when I am confident” or “I purchase clothes that I will never wear because having the wardrobe of who I want to be is as close as I will ever get.” What if the disconnected patron noted “I don’t care about purchasing clothing, because I am part of the majority, and my privilege allows me to wear anything and still be seen as competent and acceptable.” The author notes that this form of communication is not socially acceptable, but maybe it should be. We are lonely, suffering from depression, anxiety, and disconnection. Maybe a social conversation about our bodies and the way we dress them could redistribute the power of your personal nonverbal language and place it back in balance with Self.

Society is concerned with how to read your nonverbal cues but refuses to look inward. Instead, they use clothing to assess if a librarian is approachable (Bonnet & McAlexander, 2013) or how to dress while giving a speech to appear more competent (Gurney et al., 2017). A small pushback in the power distribution of society’s influence on the Self versus the Self’s connection to clothing as a nonverbal language sits with the issue of gendered clothing.

Society Attempting to Balance the Presence of Self

Inherently, clothing is not gendered. While body proportions and fit should be considered in any garment, the separate gendered sections are more alienating than helpful. These gendered clothing sections could help direct a shopper, but pre-determining the gender of clothing and what section the clothing is sold in undermines the conversation between the clothing and the wearer as there is an obstacle associated with shopping in a section not advertised to you despite your need for a briefcase one day and a purse the next.

This issue of gendered clothing is polarizing for people who identify with these garments and alienating to the ones who don’t. A woman who wants a bra feels especially catered to, while a man who may need a bra feels alienated. And the issue of gendered clothing is different in many cultures. Gendered clothing is viewed through the lens of social assignment and self-socialization. In cultures where language is less linear the lines in typical gendered clothing also are less rigid (Gutierrez et al, 2020). With the connection of Self and clothing, gendered clothing could be neutral. If the wearer is connected to the Self, they understand the labeled gender of the clothing is a marketing strategy only. Wearing the clothing from any section could be emotionally safe like picking food from any section of the grocery store. Again, the purpose of this article is to explore if there should be a therapeutic avenue connecting Self and clothing, not to villainize gendered clothing, marketing, or culture. The awareness of the choice to dress despite the marketing, and pressure of society is the concern. Opening the dialogue between Self and dressing to notice small changes in your mood, increase self-awareness, privilege, inner mapping, and social injustice is the concern.

Connection to Self

Many people believe they can dress passively and still have a strong sense of Self. However, the author argues that clothing as utility or necessity is a strong indicator about the persons inner world and their disconnection from Self. For example, a man recently noted that he does not wear white. When asked why, he said that white gets too dirty. But dirt is not specifically attracted to one color or another. A white shirt or a navy shirt will have the same opportunity to be soiled through the course of the same day on the same body. However, the navy shirt will show less soil and allow the wearer to appear cleaner. So, it's likely that the man isn't worried about the actual dirt, but his appearance as dirty. The comment was about a white shirt showing dirt, not the need for the man to find a way to stay cleaner during the day. If the man had noted that he hated looking dirty and appreciated the concealment of the navy color of dirt, that would be a different level of self-awareness, rather than passively noting that white gets dirty. If the man truly prefers navy shirts over white, then the issue of how the man associates himself with being dirty is not important. But the insight into the reasons we chose what we chose to wear, and how we have the right to do so is the issue.

Disconnection from Self and Clothing: Consequences

Several studies have shown society judges a woman's deserving of aid during public assault based on how closely she adheres to the cultural code of moral dressing (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2019; Gramazio et al., 2021; Osborn et al., 2021). Other inquiries have been made into how much a woman is to blame in her own assault based on what she is wearing (Osborn et al., 2021). The author believes these cultural and legal assaults on women have been allowed partly because of a female's disconnect to the way they dress. For example, if a woman allows herself to wear shoes that are difficult and painful to walk in, such as high heels, she is accepting a one down position in society. For this example, picture every gender of person wearing the exact same outfit. Then picture Person A offering Person B praise, acceptance, and social currency if person B removes the original outfit and replaces the outfit with a smaller, stiffer, more uncomfortable version. Person B has the option to check in with its Self about the function of the new outfit, how they relate to the outfit and how the outfit fits into the inner and outer world view. Person B has the option to keep or refuse the new outfit, and if they are in connection with their Self the choice is compassionate towards Self and Person B. Person A now turns to Person C and allows them to remain in the original outfit. But person C resents being "allowed" to do anything and wonders why Person A has an influence in what they wear. Person C can go inward and check with Self on how they want to relate to the outfit and decide to stay or change as a response, not as a reaction to Person A. But as of now, the above scenario is usually carried out without Self as the power is usually in the hands of the culture and society.

When research is externalizing the psychology of fashion, and asking what color you should wear for others, and not for yourself there may continue to be injustices based around the disconnect of clothing and self-regulation (Sidhu et al., 2021). Some studies have noted that psychological balance can be achieved through certain clothing (Jordan et al., 2021). However, the focus is how dressing can allow you to be someone else, instead of own how you are fully yourself within the limits of the law and your contract to society.

Please note the studies referenced above are focused on people who identified as women, and do not represent an appropriate sample of society who is subject to bias based on the way they dress. As the field of psychological research opens to include researchers of all demographics and subcultures, much needed research on many underrepresented populations will have a chance to be conducted.

Discussion

Exploring if the psychology of dressing has a place in psychotherapy as an avenue is important because of the injustice, disconnection to self, and trauma that has come out of allowing the influence of the law, culture, and society to greatly outweigh the influence of Self on the nonverbal language of dressing. The author notes that freely dressing is a privilege of certain societies and the privilege of knowing your Self is secondary if you do not have basic human needs or the level of freedom necessary to thrive. We also see that the unbalanced influence of society and the law over dress has led to awful atrocities such as rape, and moral judgements of total strangers as amoral based on their clothing. There has been an acceptable code of dressing created by a certain group that may no longer be appropriate moving forward. We do assign emotions to clothing like military and nurses' uniforms, so we can infer that we also assign emotions to other clothing, all clothing (Küster et al., 2019). Information gleaned about others based on non-verbal cues, like clothing, will be gathered by those people around you regularly. The study above was about gender identity, but that study is based on a societal baseline of how gendered clothing that is shifting due to the emergence of mainstream non-gendered clothing. Allowing the impact of clothing as a non-verbal cue to go unnoticed within your authentic self is a missed opportunity to create safety in your inner world and understand your own choices in the inevitable scenario that another person mis-reads your nonverbal cues or reads them correctly and rejects the information. We need to balance the power dynamic between wearer and viewer, between yourself and the contract you signed with society around the clothing you wear (Rule & Rule, 2017). The psychology of fashion is not for profit, for marketing or for society. The psychology of fashion should be to strengthen the internal connection between you and your choices so we can balance the influence of the law and society on ourselves and answer a serious question. Do we assign value to clothing based on its value, or our own?

Conclusion

It's possible that you know why you wear what you wear. It's possible that in your empty world scenario from the pre-introduction, you wore a dress that's too tight to sit in and heels that are too uncomfortable to stand in, but maybe you wore the oversized jacket and pants you saved from your father's closet. Maybe you know why, maybe you don't. It's possible that you are already harnessing the nonverbal language of clothing to better understand yourself day to day. But some of us still don't know why some clothing is too special to wear, and too special to throw away.

Some of us may feel that we dress for others, to gain respect, or to look competent though we feel disconnected to what we are wearing. Or more commonly, some of us may never think about our connection to clothing until our spouse dies and we can't seem to handle their clothing.

No level of connection to our clothing is necessary but realizing how we see ourselves based on how we think others see us can be valuable. No level of expense is valuable without the understanding of how our relationship with clothing can bring us closer to ourselves.

Maybe the purpose of connecting to our clothing is to create less of a narrative about who we believe we are, and more of a daily connection to ourselves as we change daily. Psychology of dress can help balance the power between the law, society, culture and Self in our nonverbal language. While narrative can be a helpful tool in organizing meaning, narrative can be problematic when parts of our authentic self don't fit a cohesive story. We have the choice to squeeze ourselves into a neat template or and abandon our complicated evolution. The addiction to competency and neatly told stories surrounding your journey help prop up the decisions of your non-linear mind. Clothing may be a bridge to help create freedom from perfectly told narratives about yourself.

Maybe we haven't moved forward in the personal psychology of clothing because we haven't reconciled our relationship with clothing in the past and now is the time to check in with our Self and see if we should.

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