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Cultural Impact on Identity and How it is Expressed through Dress

Jenifer Thao
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Abstract

This study examined how students at the undergraduate and graduate levels at the University of Arkansas incorporate their cultural background into their clothing as a form of self-expression. The study included an online survey platform, Qualtrics, created with a series of Likert-type and open-ended response questions to gather data regarding student opinions on clothing impacts. Results indicated that there were no significant associations when it comes to cultural influences on identity and how it is expressed through dress.

Keywords: culture, cultural groups, clothing, dress, ethnicity, self-expression, identity

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Introduction

Background and Need

There are approximately 7.8 billion people on Earth (US and World Population Clock, 2021). Each person has different characteristics and carry their own identity. According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000) identity is "used to highlight non-instrumental modes of action; to focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest" (p. 9). To build this focus on self-understanding, one must understand the multiple components of identity, mainly one's social and cultural identities. Appiah (2005) states that "some people would have the content of their identities determined in part by others; namely, those of the same identity" (p. 67). This concept supports the idea that one's identity can be sourced from belonging to a group.

Therefore, culture plays a key role in one's identity. Culture is made up of values and norms that are shared with a group to create a way of life (Gupta, 2015). There are approximately 3400 cultures in the world (Foley & Lahr, 2011), each one impacting the identity of its group members. Cultures can be seen through details in the community through how one chooses to dress for the day. As the world population continues to increase, different forms of expression will increase through clothing, which is how people are able to form a new way of expressing the self-concept of their identity and culture. Expression, as defined by Kim and Sherman (2007) is "a way to express one's selfhood" (p. 1). This reflects on one's self-concept and perception of their identity. Therefore, expression is interpreted differently from person to person. Kim and Sherman (2007) found "the significance of self-expression depends on the concept of the self because the act of self-expression involves projecting one's own thoughts and ideas into the world" (p. 1). Therefore, one way that people may express themselves is through

clothing. Clothing is a way for people to express what they want or to send a message to the public.

Problem Statement

At the University of Arkansas, there are 29,068 students that have enrolled for courses for the fall 2021 semester. According to the Office of Institutional Research Assessment (2021), about 21.5% of students identify as underrepresented students, while the rest of the students identify as white. These students have different cultural backgrounds from one another that form the diversity of the campus. On campus, it is difficult to distinguish the impact students' identities have on them based solely on their inherent characteristics. Through their own choices of self-expression and identity, students are able to showcase various aspects of identity through their daily dress.

People have different cultures and/or identities that allow them to express these ideas through clothing. Clothing is a powerful way for college students to incorporate their culture and identity into their everyday style as they walk through campus. However, it is difficult to understand and recognize how people are using clothing as a form of self-expression when walking through campus since there are many unique styles that make it difficult to understand what they are trying to express. Self-expression is a way for individuals to display their point of view signals (Green, 2007). Hence, more information is required to be able to recognize and identify if and how college students incorporate culture, self-expression, and/or identity into their everyday clothing.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to identify to what extent college students at the University of Arkansas incorporate their culture through their own self-concept of their identity and how they may express it through their clothing.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- How do college students incorporate their culture in their everyday wear?

- How does culture impact college students' identity through their clothing?

- How do college students perceive their own identity and express it through clothing?

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Literature Review

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To gain a better understanding of the relation of culture, identity, and dress, previous research will be discussed in this chapter. First, a review of the importance of culture on identity will be explored. Next, are literature related to identity and the main categories that make up identity. Lastly, are literature on dress as a form of communication. The reason for this review is to provide an understanding of how culture influences one's identity and how that identity can be expressed through choice of dress.

Culture

Culture can be defined as behaviors, attitudes, values, and beliefs (Ahrndt, 2015). Culture is also tied to the locations of where people live (Kim & Sherman, 2007). Culture is dynamic such that it is always evolving with time. Therefore, culture must be learned through peers, social media, or school which allows people to grasp new cultures and try to gain an understanding of them (Ahrndt, 2015). Culture can influence people's decisions and points of views. The

influence that culture has on individuals is the reason for the formation of identities (Ahrndt, 2015).

Forms of Identity

Identity can be conceptualized as self-understanding rather than the variety of self-interests one has (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Three main forms of identity are personal, cultural, and social identity (Ahrndt, 2015). Personal identities are made up of mostly personal thought processes and lived experiences (Ahrndt, 2015). Personal identities are also subject to change, as people are experiencing and discovering new things daily (Ahrndt, 2015). Cultural identities are defined by the behaviors and living styles of their social groups (Ahrndt, 2015). Also, as the world becomes more diverse, people are starting to identify themselves as cultural beings (Schwartz et al., 2010). Social identities are fragments of the self that come from social groups that they are involved in (Ahrndt, 2015). Social identities are different from personal identities because the membership has been formed externally (Ahrndt, 2015). Examples of groups that people form memberships with are their own family or a fan-based community for a sport (Ahrndt, 2015). The recognition of being a member of groups also influences the development of labels (Appiah, 2000). It is suggested that individuals utilize clothing to communicate and establish their social identities to other people (Feinberg et al., 1992).

Dress as a form of Expression/Communication

Dress can be used as a form of expression and communication on many different levels for all genders. The clothes that people wear make a statement and allow people to portray a message (Davis, 2008). The way people dress displays nonverbal communication (Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977). Individuals choose their way of dress based on comfort, conformity, sociability, decoration, insecurity, submissiveness, or economy (Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977). The findings

concluded that individuals dressed according to their interests. Clothing can express what social class someone may be in since it is a visual cue that can allow others to make a determination (Crane, 2009). The clothing people choose to wear becomes the signal that reflects who they are, and their self-expression is closely related to communication (Green, 2007).

This chapter reviewed different pieces of literature on culture's influence on identity and how identity influences one's dress. It was found that individuals are influenced by their culture hence also influencing their identity. Therefore, individuals are utilizing dress as a form of self-expression and nonverbal communication. Using previous research, the current project will explore how each of these overarching themes influences college students.

Methods and Materials

Participants and Procedure

The project used an online survey to obtain information that was supplemental to the success of this study. The data collected was sampled from the University of Arkansas college students from the fall 2021 semester. This study followed a quantitative non-experimental approach that was conducted through an online survey. The online survey allowed students the flexibility to take the survey at any given period before the deadline provided (Evans & Mathur, 2005). A convenience sample of undergraduate and graduate college students over the age of 18 were asked to complete an online survey. The population of students included undergraduates and graduates enrolled at the University of Arkansas during the 2021 fall semester. The sample included students from the School of Human Environmental Sciences department in the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences. According to the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences (2019), it offers 14 majors and 24 minors through eight departments, the School of Human Environmental Sciences being one of them.

Current undergraduate and graduate enrollment in Bumpers College at the time of the study was 2,219 students (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2021). The majors in the department are Apparel Merchandising and Product Development (AMPD), Birth Through Kindergarten (BRKD), Food, Nutrition, and Health (FNAH), Hospitality Management, Human Development and Family Sciences (HDFS), and Human Nutrition and Dietetics (HNAD).

Instrumentation

The researcher developed an online survey with the assistance of the thesis committee to collect data. The survey included researcher-developed questions and it did use a preexisting survey called the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (see Appendix A). Questions were posed to students regarding what social and cultural groups they were involved in, their age, major, current student status, ethnicity, and close-ended Likert-type questions regarding dress. Open-ended questions were also included to gather more information on the impact of culture on their identity.

Data Collection

The data collection process began with gaining approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B). After it was approved, the researcher contacted a Project Specialist to forward the email to all students in the School of Human Environmental Sciences department. All participants were students from the Human Environmental Sciences department. The survey was available to students for a one-week period. This allowed ample time for students to find a time that worked best with their schedule. When the data was collected, the answers to the questions were reviewed to ensure that there were no inappropriate answers that would skew the data and to verify that each participant used the minimum time allocated before submission. Inappropriate

answers consisted of blank answers, unreadable words (e.g. aldsk) and numbers only; these were removed.

Results and Discussion

Participant Demographics

When students were asked questions about their ethnicity and given choices to choose from, the results showed that of the 111 responses recorded, the majority (86.67%) identified as White or Caucasian, while 5.71% identified as Hispanic, 2.86% identified as Black or African American, 1.90% identified as Arabian, 1.90% identified as Native American, and 0.952% identified as Asian. In this department, the majority of students (78.38%) were majoring in Apparel Merchandising and Product Development (AMPD), while the least responses were students majoring in Birth Through Kindergarten (BRKD; 0.90%).

Likert-type Question Results

Students were given multiple statements in Likert-type form about their ethnicity. They were given statements such as, "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me" and "I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to" (see Appendix C). Many of the students agree that they understand their ethnic backgrounds and do enjoy being a member of the group. Many students also agree that they understand what their membership in their ethnic group means to them as well as agreeing to have a lot of pride in their ethnic group.

Open Response Question Results

Also included in the survey were questions about cultural traditions within their ethnic groups. The open response questions asked were based on students' cultural traditions. The questions were stated as follows, "The following questions are going to be about your cultural groups, traditions, and clothing. Please describe clothing traditions you had or were aware of

while you were growing up." and "What influences did your cultural groups, past or present, have on your clothing?". The responses to the prior question had a variety of answers. Some responses stated that clothing traditions they had were wearing long white dresses for holidays such as Easter and Christmas to their church services. The white dress symbolizes purity before the Lord. While other students responded that they mainly dressed up for holidays like Halloween, Thanksgiving, Easter, and Christmas because it was a tradition in their households which is not necessarily their cultural group. Most of them responded that they did not have clothing traditions growing up or there were none that they were aware of. The responses to the second open response question had responses such as incorporating modest dress in their everyday attire and wearing clothing pieces that represent the southern culture that they grew up with such as wearing camouflage.

Many of the responses say that their cultural groups did not have any influence on how they dressed because they were influenced in other ways such as social media and their peers. The responses collected showcased that cultural groups did not have a high influence on their dress for many of the respondents, however, family members, peers, and holidays, and religious beliefs tended to influence their dress more. It also showed that most of the students did not incorporate their cultural traditions into their everyday life.

Approximately 24 students selected "Yes" when asked if they were a part of any cultural groups, while 76 students answered "No". To help students further make sense of what cultural groups were, a definition was provided stating that "Cultural groups are described to be "simply as a collection of individuals who share a core set of beliefs, patterns of behavior, and values".

Later in the survey, students were asked to complete more Likert-type questions but this time regarding clothing (see Appendix D). Of the data collected, 35.71% of students strongly

agreed that clothing has a close connection to their identity. Students were also asked if they believe that clothing gives them a sense of belonging to a group, about 32.65% responded that they neither agree nor disagree, while 24.49% strongly agreed with that statement. The data collected regarding the question represents that clothing does not create a sense of belonging to a group, inferring those cultural ties do not influence what students wear. When students were posed with the statement "I use clothing as a form of self-expression.", 55.10% revealed that they strongly agree with the statement and 48.98% strongly agreed that social settings influence their clothing choices. This showcases that some students believe that identity and clothing do have a connection when it comes to self-expression.

Conclusions, Discussion, and Implications

The current study found that most students are able to utilize clothing to their advantage to showcase their identity as a form of self-expression, but they have little to no recognition about the cultural influences on their identity, especially when they try to express it through dress. The finding that students are using clothing to showcase their identity aligns with research from Feinberg et al. (1992) and Green (2007) showing that clothing can be a form of communication and expression.

Many of the students who responded to the survey identified as White or Caucasian which leads to the inference that many White or Caucasian students may not be aware of their cultural influences or do not understand if the groups they belong to are cultural. Overall, this study showed that there was a potential link between identity and expression when it comes to cultural influences on identity and how it is expressed through dress.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Throughout the process of conducting the research and collecting the data, there were several limitations. One of the main limitations throughout the research project was the amount of time available to be able to conduct a research experiment that would allow for a complete evaluation of the topic. Time did not allow for a larger population to be sampled. The population set included only undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Arkansas in the School of Human Environmental Sciences. The ideal population set would be sampling multiple colleges to include a variety of students to receive a broader understanding of the campus rather than focusing on only one department. In addition, the survey was not open for a long enough duration to include students who may have not been available during the minimal time frame that people were given access to the survey.

Regarding future work when conducting a survey on this topic, including more Likert-type questions could encompass and produce more valuable data than open-ended response questions. Also, including questions related to how aware people are of their identification with cultural groups would have been beneficial since the results showcase that many of the people are unsure of their association with a cultural group. There are more approaches that could be utilized to survey how culture and identity are related to dress. A possible route of investigation is to conduct face-to-face interviews that would allow for a qualitative approach to determine how culture influences the way that a person may dress. In addition, an in-person interview would allow for the opportunity to sample all ethnic identities among students, especially those who are members of underrepresented populations. To further this approach, the interviews could be conducted throughout multiple colleges to help broaden the data set to receive a complete understanding of the topic.

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Appendix A

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) survey questions

In this country, people come from many different countries and cultures, and there are many different words to describe the different backgrounds or <u>ethnic groups</u> that people come from. Some examples of the names of ethnic groups are Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, Asian American, Chinese, Filipino, American Indian, Mexican American, Caucasian or White, Italian American, and many others. These questions are about your ethnicity or your ethnic group and how you feel about it or react to it.

Please fill in: In terms of ethnic group, I consider myself to be _____

Use the numbers below to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

(4) Strongly agree   (3) Agree   (2) Disagree   (1) Strongly disagree

1- I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as

  its history, traditions, and customs.

2- I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members

  of my own ethnic group.

3- I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me.

4- I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership.

5- I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to.

6- I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.

7- I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.

8- In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked

  to other people about my ethnic group.

9- I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group.

10- I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food,

music, or customs.

11- I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.

12- I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.

13- My ethnicity is

(1) Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, and others

(2) Black or African American

(3) Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, Central American, and others

(4) White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American; not Hispanic

(5) American Indian/Native American

(6) Mixed; Parents are from two different groups

(7) Other (write in): _____

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS.

To:	Stephanie K Hubert
From:	Justin R Chimka, Chair
	IRB Expedited Review
Date:	10/26/2021
Action:	**Exemption Granted**
Action Date:	10/26/2021
Protocol #:	2109359466
Study Title:	Cultural Impact on Identity and how it is Expressed Through Dress

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Isabel M Whitehead, Investigator
         Jacquelyn Dee Mosley, Investigator
         Jenifer Thao, Investigator

Appendix C

Likert-type statements and percentages on Ethnicity

#	Field	(4) Strongly Agree	(3) Agree	(2) Disagree	(1) Strongly Disagree	Total
1	I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.	8.41% 9	36.45% 39	47.66% 51	7.48% 8	107
2	I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.	19.63% 21	36.45% 39	34.58% 37	9.35% 10	107
3	I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me.	19.44% 21	58.33% 63	17.59% 19	4.63% 5	108
4	I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership	14.02% 15	33.64% 36	42.06% 45	10.28% 11	107
5	I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to.	28.04% 30	59.81% 64	7.48% 8	4.67% 5	107
6	I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.	25.23% 27	52.34% 56	19.63% 21	2.80% 3	107
7	I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.	19.63% 21	62.62% 67	15.89% 17	1.87% 2	107
8	In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.	6.54% 7	42.06% 45	38.32% 41	13.08% 14	107
9	I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group.	14.02% 15	47.66% 51	26.17% 28	12.15% 13	107
10	I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs.	19.63% 21	42.06% 45	30.84% 33	7.48% 8	107
11	I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.	18.87% 20	40.57% 43	32.08% 34	8.49% 9	106
12	I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.	21.50% 23	42.06% 45	30.84% 33	5.61% 6	107

Showing rows 1 - 12 of 12

Appendix D

Likert-type statements and percentages on Clothing and Identity

#	Field	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1	Clothing has a close connection to my identity.	13.27% 13	8.16% 8	15.31% 15	27.55% 27	35.71% 35	98
2	Clothing gives me a sense of belonging to a group.	11.22% 11	15.31% 15	32.65% 32	16.33% 16	24.49% 24	98
3	I use clothing as a form of self expression.	11.22% 11	6.12% 6	5.10% 5	22.45% 22	55.10% 54	98
4	My clothing represents who I am.	11.34% 11	4.12% 4	18.56% 18	30.93% 30	35.05% 34	97
5	Social settings influence my clothing choices.	12.24% 12	3.06% 3	10.20% 10	25.51% 25	48.98% 48	98