

# **Impressions Management and Judgments using Clothing Styles**

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## **Abstract**

Shakespeare wrote “For the apparel oft proclaims the man” (Hamlet, 1:3) suggesting that even centuries ago clothing and impressions were intimately intertwined. The purpose of this paper is to present the results from a qualitative study on clothing styles and the individual’s impressions management. The philosophical foundation of this research is that consumers draw specific conclusions about other people based on their clothing. In particular, this study focused on the judgment process during the rite of passage as teenagers become *emerging adults* and how they use clothing. The conclusions of this study are that consumers are able to instantly judge others because of their clothing choices. These judgments can be made with and without brand knowledge and that the consumer is aware of the judgment process as they present their own adult identity by wearing personally interpreted clothing styles.

## **Introduction**

Clothing is a medium of communication (Holman, 1980; Jamal & Goode, 2001) that consumers use to say something about themselves to others. The choice of clothing styles can help the individual to become a member of a desired group, project self image as well as boost self-esteem and confidence (Barnard, 2007). Consumers can also make judgments about other people based on their clothing style (O’Cass, 2002). Thus, clothing is a dual communication tool for consumers; to both send and receive messages. Consumers can influence the judgments of others through a process of impressions management. Impressions management can be defined as a process of controlling and monitoring self presentation (Hogg, Cox, & Keeling, 2000; Leary et al., 1994). Consumers deliberately try to control how other people see them by presenting certain purchasing behaviours. For example, a consumer may purchase fashionable clothing to be *seen* as trendy. In this way, clothing can be a visual prop— matching the product to the consumer’s identity (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Goffman, 1990; McKillop, Berxonsky, & Schlenker, 1992; Sirgy et al., 1997). Thus, because clothing can communicate a specific image, consumers may buy certain clothes styles as part of their impressions management to make a desired impression. The purpose of this paper is to first discuss the process of consumer judgment. The second purpose is to explore *emerging adulthood* (ages 18-24) in relation to role transition and the use of clothing. Finally, the results of a small qualitative study into the use of clothing by university students are presented and conclusions are drawn.

## **The process of judgment**

Consumers make judgments about other people as part of social interactions (Goffman, 1990). The foundation of the judging process is often a *glimpse* or *thin slice* of expressive behaviour that others use in order to draw conclusion (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). Instant judgments are possible because the consumer is focused on identifying the other person as easily as they can using certain cues (Manis, Paskewitz, & Cotler, 1986). In fashion terms, the expressive behaviour cues are details on the clothing such as colours, patterns, brand labels and style of cut. The issue is, does the clothing style of the individual provide enough information in a thin slice of time for judgment to take place?

Judgment can also be based on the schematic self knowledge of the individual and the clothing codes (Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985; O'Cass, 2002; Peracchio & Luna, 2006). That is, the more the individual feels they know about fashion the more likely they are to categorise and judge other people based on their clothing. This form of judgment is based on knowledge and experience which is developed overtime.

In this study, the concept of judgment is considered in terms of the ease and speed at which consumer can make judgments about other consumers based on their clothing style.

### **Emerging adulthood and evolution of clothing styles**

*Emerging adulthood* is a term given to the rite of passage when a teenager becomes an adult (Arnett, 2000; Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). This process is seen as a distinct stage where the individual is no longer an adolescent, but not yet an adult. It is a point of transition that is unstable where social roles are being adopted and discarded. During this process the consumer explores different ideas and identities. As they engage with their *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) the emerging adult uses clothing as a way to express self to others as well as to identify other people, but their lack of experience affects their judgments.

Clothing becomes more important to consumers during points of transition because the consumer is developing new social roles. That is, the clothes help the consumer to adapt to the new situation by providing the appropriate visual cues (Solomon, 1985; Workman & Studak, 2006). In terms of university students, they are adopting various roles such as being independent from family (possibly living away from home for the first time), being a member of social student groups and an academic student. It is at this point that clothes begin to show them as a member of their selected college groups. For instance, a student may begin to wear items such as dormitory jumpers. As the student progresses through their university career their roles change; as final year students begin the process of looking for full-time work they may begin thinking about clothes in terms of job interviews.

For this research, the focus was on how university students use clothing styles as part of their impressions management and judgments.

### **Methodology**

This research consisted of four focus groups. Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour. Focus groups were chosen as an appropriate methodology because they provide an energising force to the discussion (Greenbaum, 2000; Wooten & Reed II, 2000) and the groups provide benefits such as exploration, shared understanding, interaction and insights (Litosseliti, 2003). This study was intended to be a small preliminary exploration.

A limitation of this study is the sample. The sample was only a small exploratory size collected with a snowballing technique on one campus. Each participant was given a one dollar lottery ticket as an incentive. In all there were 27 participants. The age range was 18-28 years old and all the participants were students. This sample was specifically chosen to study the opinions of first, second and third year students from a regional university. Group Two contained only male members to see if there was a different approach taken by an all male cohort because many clothing studies have a female skew. The other groups were a mixture of females and males. Group Four were all second year students. Groups One and Three

contained a mix of first and third year students. The separation of the ages was designed to see how the student's views might vary between their ages. The mixture of the year groups was designed to see how older student's views might influence younger students and vice versa.

Each focus group followed the same protocol to minimise application differences and to develop a level of consistency necessary in qualitative research especially for cross case analysis. Projective techniques were used to stimulate discussion and develop richness in the responses (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000). In this research, pictures were used as stimuli for discussion of clothing style to provide the same focal point for the judgment process. The pictures were a random sample taken of students around campus, but their faces were hidden to avoid identification. For the first set of pictures the participants were asked to write down privately how they felt about the clothes. Then the private reflections were discussed. For the second set of pictures the participants had to create stories about the person in the picture; describing their life at an event such as a concert or job interview. These situations were discussed without personal reflection time. Groups One, Two and Four were able to see the pictures for as long as the participants wanted. Group Three were given a specific ten second time limit to set up a *thin slice judgment* situation.

## Results

The results of this small qualitative study tentatively suggest that consumers use clothing as an external cue to instantly judge others. The participants suggested that they use clothing as a surrogate to judge others in terms of personality, social status, and social acceptability. They also use clothing as a means of self expression, recognising that they change their clothing styles as their identity changes. The results will be presented in two ways. First, the results of this study are present as a summary of the groups given the designed controls of gender specific (Group Two), time specific (Group Three), age specific (Group Four) and Group One which was not controlled. Second, the results are presented in the three important themes that were evident in all the groups and developed during cross case analysis.

### **Group One** (G1-a mixture of males/females and ages no time constraints)

This group focused on the way clothing styles could communicate information. The participants expressed the general feeling that the communication process using clothes could be easily misinterpreted by the receiver. This is because *clothes aren't enough to completely identify a person* (Sarah). However, the group agreed that they judged other people based on their clothing even though they believed the judgment may be flawed.

### **Group Two** (G2-only males)

The assumption made by the researcher when organising a male only group was that there is a trend towards men focusing on clothing styles. This group were the most critical in their judgments. They confidently commented on the pictures of clothing saying that they were inappropriate either *out- of -fashion* or *too fashionable* (Simon). In this way, they were the most conscious of the meaning of clothing in terms of judging other people. They were especially brand conscious and changed their style to create appropriate impression such as dressing to meet new people *I am most conscious of what I wear when I am single* (Phil).

### **Group Three** (G3-males and females, differing ages, but restricted time)

This group could only view the images for 10 seconds before the image was removed. This control was intended to explore the speed at which the judgments could be made. The participants had no difficulty in creating judgments about the people in the photographs. Moreover, the comments and judgments were in general very similar to the other groups. This suggests that the time needed to make a judgment is very quick; *it's an instant judgment call* (Paul).

### **Group Four** (G4-males and females only second year)

This group was chosen based on their year at university. We assumed that these students had settled into the role of a university student, but were not yet focusing on their life after university in comparison to first year (settling in) and third year (looking ahead). This control was designed to see how much the *emerging adult* role had stabilised. This group presented the most confidence in relation to their identity and the clothes they wear to express that identity by suggesting that they interpret and create their own style rather than just following trends-*they put their own tweak on it* (Imogen). This group focused on how clothing can give people independence and self-assurance.

### **Cross group analysis**

Despite the restrictions placed on three of the groups there were several themes that were evident in all the groups.

### **Judging me and judging you**

The participants suggested that the process of judgment is continuous, instant, natural and almost unconscious as *you catch yourself doing it all the time* (Hannah G3). Many of the participants felt it is a natural process to make judgments saying that *you're going to make judgment on that* (the clothing) *and it's only human I guess* (Krystal G1). This suggests that judging people based on their clothing is a widely acceptable and expected practise. Moreover, people know others are judging them. However, they also conceded that clothing may not be sufficient to truly judge a person- *I'm like you're totally not the person I thought you were* (Paul G3). The judgment, for clothing styles in particular, can be *purely on what you are wearing how you look that day ... just little things that aren't about your personality* (Cassey G4). This implies that the process of judgment cannot be easily stopped and that although clothing doesn't provide complete information, it is comprehensive enough to judge others. The clothes are providing self presentation information designed for others to use to make judgments.

### **Personal interpretation; is it fashionable or your own style?**

There was a strong sense that wearing fashionable clothing is very important, but it is not enough to form a sense of identity as they become adults. The participants suggested that clothing styles must be interpreted for the individual to develop their own image because *fashion is like what everyone else wears- the industry depicts what to wear, whereas style is more what your take on fashion is* (Alex G4). This suggests that as they try to present an image the participants are aware they must have their own style of clothing and not just be fashionable. The participants were particularly critical of the pictures where they felt the

subject was just following trends rather than interpreting clothes for their own style suggesting that this meant the person was *trying to be trendy, like she has basically taken the clothes off the mannequin at supre and put them on* (Nik G1). Moreover, it showed a lack of identity because *it's like she's wearing what she's been told to wear rather than interpreting fashion in her own way* (Peta G1). Thus, suggesting for these participants in order to develop meaningful adult self presentation you cannot just wear clothing that is fashionable or that you have been told to wear; you need to have your own style.

### **Brand Knowledge**

The participants argued that brand knowledge was important, but only a few seemed confident that they could identify a brand easily. For instance, Tim's (G1) knowledge of brands was *that is consisted of a scale* knowing that some brands were better, but he needed the logo to identify it. Whereas, Phil (G2) argued that *if you go out with people that know the brand then they can identify them instead of having like a little or big logo*. In this instance, the brand was seen in the cut and style of the clothing. The participants also strongly suggested that the brand wasn't as important as the how the clothing style looked on the individual arguing like Andy (G2) that *we don't know the brands...I wouldn't be able to tell just be looking at the girl's dress* and Mike (G1) that *I think if something looks nice; if the girl's dress is so that you can't tell what it is, then it's not about the brand at all*. This implies that brand knowledge isn't as important in the judgment process because the participants were judging the person based on if the clothes looked good rather than trying to identify a brand. This was particularly clear with higher end brands of which they felt they had limited experience arguing that as their experiences changed so did their perceptions of the brand.

### **Conclusions**

This research was limited to a preliminary exploration, with a small sample, of the way consumers use clothes to communicate. In particularly, the focus of this research was the speed of the judgment and the use of clothing as a prop during an emerging adult role adoption process. The principal conclusion of this research is that the participants are aware of the importance of buying and wearing the *right* clothes. They use clothing to judge other people in an instance. They are also aware that as they *become* adults that clothing offers them an opportunity to stabilise their identity and to project that identity to others with confidence as long as they have their own style. Another important conclusion to this research is the role of brand identification. Many of the participants recognised the importance of brands, but felt that they had limited knowledge of the difference between brands. Moreover, at this age if the clothing suited the individual the brand become a secondary part of the judgment process. This suggested that brand knowledge is not vital in the judgment process for these university students and that at this age the consumer can judge others without knowing brand labels. For the fashion industry the conclusions of this study imply that younger consumers are not completely reliant on fashion brands to express their identity or judge others. Thus, the brand may not be as important as the personal style and how it looks to the consumer as they emerge into adulthood. In summary, clothing styles are important to the identity of the participants both for their own impressions management and role adoption— clothes help emerging adults to judge and be judged. Future research using a larger sample could add to these initial findings.

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