

What to Wear Where: Mishaps in the Presentation of Identity Across Cultures

We transmit signals about who we are in countless ways — including fashion and physical appearance. Bright colors vs. black, neatly trimmed hair vs. scruffy-chic, modest vs. revealing clothing – all of these choices send a message about our identity.

“Coming from Hungary, where even poor people dressed nicely for going to each others house, I was amazed how little care these folks in the US take to even try color coordination, or put on jewelry etc. It is not the lack of money but a choice. Mostly I am overdressed and I feel uncomfortable, because of that. If I dress like them, I still feel uncomfortable because my usual “normal” way is so far from that.”
(Hungarian woman)

When crossing cultures, however, these signals can get misinterpreted. The message received may differ from the message we intended to send. Finding ourselves in a situation where we’ve lost this non-verbal mode of communicating our identity can be unsettling, especially when it takes us by surprise.

Goals of the Research: This research study begins to quantify this issue and highlight its importance both for

those living an expatriate life and those seeking to support them.

Participants were 152 adults who had lived 3+ months outside their passport countries. They ranged in age from 20s to 70s. Half were US American, the others were from 31 other countries. They had lived an average of 11 years abroad.

Methods: Participants completed an online survey in which they rated their first impressions of women in six photographs, rating the appropriateness of their outfits, and the models’ likely personality, skills, beliefs, and careers. Then, they wrote answers to these three questions:

- o Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt your clothing/appearance was out of place?*
- o Have you ever felt mis-understood because of how you were dressed or how you looked – that is, that others were making assumptions about you that were not true?*
- o Think of a time in the last six months when you felt good about how you looked. What are three words or phrases you hope people might have thought about you if they met you for the first time that day?*

“One of my first tasks upon arriving in the country was to check in at the American Consulate. I was told that I was dressed inappropriately and could not go out in public like that. Why? Because my wrists and ankles were exposed! Needless to say, I couldn’t wait to get home and quickly made plans to buy some pre-fabricated shalwar kameezes. I felt vulnerable and exposed when I left the consulate, feeling that others were regarding me as a Jezebel!”
(US American woman)

Findings

- ♦ *The fundamental hypothesis that people make assumptions about others based on their physical appearance was clearly confirmed. The clothing “code” is strong.*
- ♦ *Participants most often described wanting to project an air of elegance, competence, and beauty.*
- ♦ *Participants judged appropriateness more leniently if they were from cultures that value individual freedom; that emphasize egalitarian and positive relationships with peers and superiors; and that are comfortable with ambiguity.*
- ♦ *When faced with an appearance we do not have internal rules about, we revert to cultural values in shaping our judgments about others.*
- ♦ *Participants felt out of place when their clothing was unlike others’ in terms of formality, modesty, chic-ness and color.*
- ♦ *Those from individualistic cultures were less concerned with formality and more with a strong presentation of self-confidence, competence, neatness. But fundamentally, clothing was disjointed from core identity for this group, whereas it seemed an inherent aspect of identity, to be protected and defended, for those from collectivist, communitarian cultures.*



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Responses were coded and compared to the participants’ citizenship countries’ scores on the cultural dimensions described by two classic research studies.

For a copy of the full report of this study, visit www.interchangeinstitute.org or contact Dr. Anne P. Copeland: copeland@interchangeinstitute.org.