The Relationship Between Clothes And First Impressions: Benefits And Adverse Effects On The Individual

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Abstract: Because light travels quicker than sound, people are seen before they are heard. That is why, even before a person utters a word their appearance tells a much about them in terms of their competence, perceived level of intelligence, affability, self-esteem, self-confidence, success, authority and beliefs. This qualitative study aims at exploring the basis on which people form first impressions of personalities they meet based on their clothes. A total of 31 respondents were purposively selected to participate in the study. Data was collected through interviews. The results of the study indicated that people form first impressions based on their moral inclinations, economic, non-conformance to current fashion, health, fashion changes and much more. The investigation supported findings of earlier studies that clothing and first impressions are related.

Keywords: First impression, clothing, fashion

I. INTRODUCTION

It is never possible to wear clothes without transmitting some form of signal. Substantial research has established the significance of first impressions and at the same time examining a diversity of circumstances that contribute to their formation. For example, Naumann et al. (2009), found that factors ranging from clothing style to posture, play a vital role in how impressions are formed. Morris (1977) affirms that 'every costume tells a story, often a very subtle one, about its wearer' (p. 213). As Ngo & Smith (2013) rightly points out, clothing preserves history embraces traditions and connects many generations collectively. Possessing the ability to communicate non-verbally, clothing conveys an image and transmits some message regarding its wearer to observe. Consequently, clothing can create first impressions for onlookers. Anytime we meet someone; we form first impressions.

First impressions are all initial evaluations based on nonverbal communication signals. A range of investigations conducted by Willis & Todorov (2006) shows that it takes approximately about a tenth of a second to form an opinion of a stranger's appearance and that not even prolonged can substantially alter those impressions. In a flicker of an eye, people take an insignificant sample of an individual and believe it represents 100 percent of their personality. They then decide based on that to trust them, like them or want to maintain interaction with them. Research has confirmed that people make a comparatively accurate assessment based on rapid observations of less than half a minute (Nauert 2009). An individual must demonstrate they are honest, trustworthy or decent with nonverbal communication (in this instance

clothing) in one tenth of a second or interaction may be terminated.

It is widely acknowledged that whenever people encounter each other for the first time, they know very little or nothing at all about each other. However, Gille & Mittag (2008) found a correlation between clothes and perceptions of intelligence. They did this by examining conservative and provocative dressing of female students. Gille & Mittag's findings suggest that females who dressed provocatively were perceived to be less intelligent than those who dressed conservatively. Inferring among other things that, females who clothed themselves conservatively inspired a positive image of intelligence. However, dressing provocatively demonstrated unprecedented levels of self-expression, freedom and exposure to sexuality. Furthermore, Lightstone et al. (2011) assert that students perceive higher education lecturers wearing informal or semi-formal garment to be less credible that ones in formal clothes.

So what precisely are first impressions? These ordinarily imply the way people perceive others for the first time by applying assumptions to some characteristics that the individual has. Admittedly, first impression according to Hubbard (1994) contributes to how an individual respond to another or the type of relationship that will advance between them. As Miller-Spillman et al. (2012) specify, people's clothes, or their particular ways of dressing, may influence others assessment of them.

A first impression is simply defined as a consideration or judgment. In psychology, a first impression according to Flora (2004), is the event when an individual first encounters another individual and forms a mental picture of that person. Impression accuracy differs depending on the perceiver and the target being perceived. When an individual encounters somebody for the first time, they automatically form an impression of that person. These first impressions are based on a series of attributes such as; gender, age, culture, physical appearance, posture, voice, and especially the way the person is clothed. These impressions are made from the way the individual is composed or clothed (Bhargrave & Montgomery 2013; Biesanz et al. 2011; Forsyth et al. 1985). The first impressions created by people can to a large extent influence how they are perceived and consequently treated in many circumstances of daily life (Wood 2014).

In an environment that is currently controlled by the multimedia, the possibility of personalities being judged based on glimpses of their looks is unavoidable. Dating websites, social networking, and other online systems feature people's images and subsequently convey a visual message. Although some facial features are prominent and well documented as aiding in the formation of first impressions, other factors, such as clothing, also play a crucial part in impression formation. Garments in many ways can communicate a comprehensive and multifaceted information about an individual, without the observer having to meet or interact with the wearer. Todorov et al. (2009) assert that a person's garment has been shown to transmit qualities such as personality, affability, competence and intelligence, with first impressions being formed in a fraction of a second.

According to Damhorst (1990) 'dress is a systematic means of transmission of information about the wearer' (p. 1).

A person's preference for a particular clothing can profoundly affect the impression they convey and are, consequently, an effective communication tool. The increasing significance of clothes is apparent. Admittedly, a person's clothes play a major role in transmitting an impression; this may be positive or negative, and this affects the way people perceive each other. McCracken (1988) is of the view that clothing conveys cultural significance and that the message is transferred from the "culturally constructed world" to garments, through publicity and fashion. Apparel designers may, through branding and marketing, relate a new style or specific designs with an instituted cultural standard. Nevertheless, how successful a design is in communicating a message is contingent on the knowledge of the public. As McCracken & Roth (1989) specifies, the influence of clothing communication relies on some principles. These principles represent the understanding regarding social and cultural norms that members of a community or social groups share. The more people appreciate the code; the more adequate the clothing will be at communicating a message. However, there remains a pertinent issue concerning the type of garment features that make an impact on first impressions.

Naumann et al. (2009) indicate that clothing communicates a variety of personality, professional and cultural functions. Hence, clothing has been confirmed to express accurate impressions of a personality. Johnson et al. (2002) explored the specific items that informed respondents' first impressions. Their findings indicated that clothing, type of suit, shoes, colour and fit of garments constituted the basis on which the observers based their assessments.

Again, Behling & Williams (1991) and Behling (1995) affirm that educators' assessments of student's intelligence, academic ability and behaviour are all affected by the students' clothing. In addition to communicating individual attributes, such as sociability and cognitive abilities, Damhorst (1990), emphasises that clothing carry a message that people utilise to make assumptions regarding others' personality. Garments have also been proved to promote the wearer's self- perception on a spectrum of work relevant attributes. For instance, Kwon (1994) interviewed respondents on the impact of clothing on assessments made in a working environment. Males held stronger views than females regarding the influence of appropriate clothing in a professional setting.

Males believed that wearing the right work attire improved the possibility of communicating intelligence, competence, honesty and reliability. Reinforcing this point, Bell (1991) established perceptions of men dressed in four (4) different styles of clothing – daring, conservative, formal and casual – on dimensions of charm, intelligence and reputation. Any design variation conveyed a definite information resulting in a complex combination of character traits. The formally clothed males had positive evaluations – charming, smart and successful – while the casually attired males earned the least commendatory impression – unattractive, ignorant and obnoxious. Albeit fascinating, the influence global fashion innovations have on an individual's judgment is extraordinary, granted that the variations in garments are essentially striking and very much enlightening.

Though the impacts of clothing changes on first impressions have remained the core interest of current studies,

the methodological constraints have restricted the establishment of precise outcomes. In presenting visual stimuli to participants, they either did not employ actual samples, did not experiment individual perception or did not disguise facial information while displaying garments on models. In several real- world conditions, first impressions are formed within a pretty short period, usually in a matter of seconds; therefore, there is a need for validity in an empirical investigation such as this; hence, the effort should be made to replicate such studies.

First impressions are formed of others every day, and this is done rapidly and effortlessly. As Olivola & Todorov (2010) put it, complex assessments are made based on clothes in less than a second. For instance, judgements regarding whether a person is honest or not can be made in a fraction of a second (Todorov et al. 2009). Furthermore, these assessments are usually consistent with those formed even after long periods of engagement. Bar et al. (2006) suggested that development may have equipped us with such prompt evaluation tools since inferences about potentially dangerous issues are formed more rapidly and consistently than other less threatening situations.

These immediate impressions according to Willis & Todorov (2006) can guide peoples' assumptions regarding the attributes a person has. These may include their attractiveness, likeability, competence and aggressiveness A wide range of complex decisions, from the choice of a partner to which candidate to vote for in an election, are profoundly affected by appearance (clothes). A significant amount of information is juxtaposed to form these impressions, and it can be convincingly argued that subtle manipulations of clothing affect these impressions. Again, some of these assessments can be influenced by the characteristics of the perceiver.

As McCracken & Roth (1989) asserts, assessment of others, are frequently made relative to self, as well as a person's own status. Consequently, in investigations such as these, it is necessary to consider the incomes of respondents since it can play an essential part in the judgements of others based on their clothing. For instance, when the target clothing is a suit, forming an accurate opinion may be different for higher income respondents whose occupation affords them greater familiarity with this style of clothing. Also, as Oliver et al. (1993) emphasise, couture suit patrons are likely to work in high-level professional jobs that attract higher salary.

The field of social psychology has a vast literature related to person perception, attribution, categorization, and impression formation (Davis & Lennon 1988; Gilovich, et al. 2011). However, how garments are utilised in forming impressions and making attributions about individuals has great implications for understanding and challenging prejudice. This study, therefore, attempts to explore the contribution of fashion clothing on first impressions and its benefits or otherwise of an individual.

II. METHODOLOGY

First impressions are subjective because they based on individual perception and preferences. Qualitative research approach was used to determine how individuals react to other people with whom they are not familiar with or during their first meeting. The approach was selected given the fact as Farber (2006) pointed out, qualitative approaches are used when researchers want to add richness or thick descriptions to their findings. The Kumasi metropolis was chosen as the scope of the study. The Metropolis is located centrally in the Ashanti Region, with a population of about 2,035,064 inhabitants (GSS, 2014) and the 9 sub-metros within its Metropolis fuelled the selection of Kumasi as the study area. The population of the study covered all inhabitants of the Kumasi Metropolis. The sample population was then limited to three suburban areas of the Metropolis. A total of 31 respondents were purposively selected to participate in the study. Data was collected through interviews from selected subjects of the study. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, which was subsequently used to support the analysis of the study.

III. FINDINGS

'He looks friendly, I can tell she is an extrovert, she might be from a wealthy home, he is not my type, she looks efficient, she might be a Christian'; all these are snap assessments we make about people mostly based on the clothes they wear. There is much more to people's clothing choices than they might imagine. For many, what they wear is simply a matter of habit, but it pays to be more cautious about our garment choices. Wearing the appropriate clothes at the appropriate time to the appropriate occasion might change the first impression others have of you.

Conventional wisdom holds that whenever people meet for the first time, they know close to nothing or very little about each other. As people dress up for to carry out their normal activities, they leave trails of impressions and dispositions with people they meet. Many people including psychologists think it is all to do with facial features. However, latest research has revealed that clothes make a huge difference to these first impressions. That notwithstanding, when respondents were asked about things that influence their first impressions about people the following themes emerged;

A. MORAL VALUES

People form their impressions based on their moral inclinations. Individuals with high moral standards have high tendencies of having their first impressions about people they meet for the first time influenced by their moral values than those with low moral standards. The responses show that the majority of individuals find people who dress indecently as being immoral whereas people who are decently dressed are characterised as being morally upright. Selected responses have been given below;

"...from that perspective am able to tell whether the person is of high morals, well bread, decent and well-groomed and it is the person's outlook that will make you see..."

The respondent was, however, quick to add that;

"...for women, when they wear very short dresses, wild makeups and the kind of high heels (footwear) that she is wearing, determines her pattern of walking, bangles on the

feet and hands; nobody will tell you that she might be a street girl or she is coming from a bad home. Some even expose parts of their breasts and other vital parts of their bodies and when I see that I only tell myself she's advertising herself. For the boys, I see you and right away from the way you are dressed I suspect whether you are a playboy or a gentleman."

B. ECONOMIC STANDING

Again, under the economic theme, the results showed that respondents are able to form first impressions in terms of the economic standing of the individual based on the individual's appearance. That notwithstanding, some of the respondents sounded the caution that this is highly deceptive because people have taken undue advantage and swindled people because they know people think highly of and trusted individuals who were well dressed or appear good. Below are some of the responses;

"...you see when people dress well; it tells you they are able to afford the best of apparels for themselves, and you know the kind of dresses that moves are very expensive. Hence, if someone is seen in a very sharp suit with nice tie or even just casual wear, but drives the latest car in town or use the most sophisticated mobile phone it tells you something."

"...Yea! normally when I meet people for the first time I look at their appearance and from that, I tell myself this guy has money or not. You know rich guys portray themselves in a certain standing, so when you meet them, you can see it. Nice watch, well ironed outfit with a little swag nice hair cut to fit the face you can tell; they keep themselves well. However, when you are shabbily dressed, unkempt hair, wow I know right from the word go you are struggling just like me haha!"

Others were just cautious about drawing impressions about people regarding their economic standing based on their appearance;

"...normally it is difficult to tell because people do not walk about with their bank account details on their foreheads so for me, I don't get the impression of whether someone is well to do or not based on their appearance. This is because it can be dangerously deceptive. I know people who borrow clothing from their friends so they can also look good, so you can't actually base on that..."

"...Hmm! I have fallen victim to swindlers who came in sheep clothing but were in wolves' clothes. Nicely dressed, soft spoken; so, I thought they were in good standing financially to pay for these products I sell and it was the first time of seeing them in the area. I guess I didn't reason properly because it was after they'd left the shop that I realised I've acted foolishly...up till now nobody has shown up..."

C. NON-CONFORMING

When asked, most of the respondents agreed to the fact that sometimes they form their first impressions based on the current trends of fashion. However, some believe that individuals who do not necessarily follow fashion trends are self-made individuals. The responses give the impression that first impressions are mostly formed on the basis of what is trending and by that assertion are able to tell whether the

individual is out of touch with fashion, current or are just autonomous.

These findings collaborate Bellezza et al. (2014) assertion that persons who deliberately wear nonconforming clothes appear to have higher status and competence. Over a range of laboratory and field investigations, Bellezza and her colleagues discovered that nonconforming clothes could give the impression that the wearer has competence and higher status. According to the authors, observers bestowed greater status and competence to nonconformity compared to conformity since they believe that the nonconforming person has the necessary level of autonomy to pursue his/her own inclinations and endure the cost of deviating from the norm. One respondent noted that;

"When I see you, I can tell whether you are old fashioned or current, but that is always difficult to do because of late things come and go quickly. So if you are not careful, you might pass wrong impressions about people..."

"...Oh! occasionally you meet someone, and you can tell by their appearance that they enjoy trendy fashion. Some of them are really awkward, but you can tell from their confidence that they like it..."

D. HARMFUL TO HEALTH

Regarding first impressions in terms of fashion traits that are harmful to health, respondents think of the kind of harm individuals are causing themselves by appearing in some kind of fashion behaviours. Selected responses from the respondents are outlined below;

"...Yea that is true especially the ladies who bleach their skin. They are only causing harm to themselves because I hear the chemicals are very harmful..."

Another was quick to state that;

"When you look at the ladies at church, wearing shoes with long heels you just get the impression they might be hurting themselves because in no time they will develop knee and waist pains..."

E. FASHION VICTIM

Also, in forming their first impressions, respondents regard people who wear very fashionable clothes even though it makes them look awkward. One respondent put it as follows;

"...some of the ladies follow fashion blindly. Anything that comes, they want to try it even if looks so bad on them. They do not think about their shape, whether it is 'coca cola' or 'voltic' bottle shape they just pick anything and put on..."

F. FASHION CHANGES

Fashion is dynamic and notoriously transient, so people either get in-tune or out-dated with it. In that regard when respondents were asked about their first impressions in terms of fashion changes, most of them maintained they are able to tell whether the fellow is in tune with current trends of fashion or not. However, some of them indicated they pay less attention to this because it does not really have any significant

effect on how they see the person. Selected responses have been given below;

"Yes of course, of late people dress to kill just to show that they are on top. We see that all the time, sometimes I meet people for the first time and am able to tell this guy is current because I watch television and celebrities a lot and I know what they wear…"

"…for me it doesn't really tickle me whether he/she is current or not with changing fashion because that won't change the way I relate to the person. If I have to deal with him/her and that is the most important thing, then I can actually overlook that, because people come in different shapes if you let yourself loose hmm you are in trouble…"

G. THE IMPACT OF HOW PEOPLE DEAL WITH OTHERS BASED ON THEIR FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Reference	Mean Rank	Freq. (n)
Approachability	5.30	31
Openness	5.11	31
Trustworthiness	4.80	31
Self-esteem	4.78	31
Attractive	4.76	31
Youthfulness	4.67	31
Dominance	4.49	31

Kendall's W^a=.055, $\chi2$=(8)155.284, Sig=.001

Table 1: Kendall's W^a mean ranking of the impacts of first impressions

Kendall's mean ranking was carried out to determine how people relate to others based on their first impressions. Respondents were given a list after their interviews to select from, relative to how they relate to people based on their first impressions. From table 1, it could be perceived that respondents find people they meet more approachable with a mean of (m=5.30) hence ranked 1st on the mean rank. Additionally, with a mean of 5.11 the respondents find people they meet to be open. Furthermore, with a mean of 4.80 the respondents find the people they meet to be trustworthy. However, the least impression respondents have about people they meet for the first time is dominance (m=4.49) hence ranked last in the ranking order. Kendall's coefficient of concordance statistics shows that there was statistically significant degree of agreement among the learners, however, the degree of agreement, however, was found to be low with (W^a=.055, $\chi2$=(8)155.284, p<.05). From the discoveries, it can be concluded that from the first impressions; respondents find people more approachable.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is adequately documented that individuals can form quick opinions, with much accuracy, and can do so from a single meeting (see Olivola & Todorov, 2010). These first impressions are mostly based on visual cues such as clothing. In particular, the study suggests that people form their first impressions based on their moral inclinations, economic, non-conformance to current fashion, health, fashion changes and much more. These were evidenced by their responses to

questions posed to them and the responses given. These they indicated impacts the ways they see them in terms of approachability, openness, trustworthiness, self-esteem, attractiveness and youthfulness among others. These they also specified influenced the way they perceived and relate to them.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Clothes play a vital role in forming first impressions, and since this may impact positively or negatively on the individual, it is important to choose clothes carefully because people make different assumptions and take decisions about individuals without proper evidence. Dressing appropriately to impress is worthwhile and can indeed be the answer to recognition, acceptance and success.

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