

# CLOTHING THE FAMILY FOR QUALITY LIVING

## Abstract

*Clothing is but one of the many elements that comprise the total culture of a group of people; yet it is one of the most visual expressions of the habits, thoughts, techniques and conditions that characterize a society as a whole. Society is made up of families and their members. The basic needs of the family include clothing which is also used to promote a sense of security. Families and their members portray their culture, mood and ideas in the clothing they wear. Clothes can be seen as the second skin of man which are seen as pieces of visual propaganda that shape our ideals of the good and the bad, the sensible and the stupid, the moral and the immoral, the right and the wrong.*

## Introduction

Humans are the only animals apart from the chameleon that can change their 'skin' to suit their background, in order to function successfully. The individual whose clothes do not fall within recognized range in a situation attracts attention, which most often is negative. It is clear that clothes can give the individual satisfaction, self-confidence and respect if the individual is able to choose clothes to fit his or her figure and occasion.

Kaiser (1985) defines clothing as any body covering related to the concept personal adornment, which encompasses any form of body decoration or alteration.

A family can be freely defined as a social institution made up of people related through marriage, blood or adoption, living with a common belief, norms and values. The family being a social setting seeks to socialize its members by inculcating in them the societal and family norms and values which include clothing and personal adornment.

Clothing serves a social purpose just as food serves a health purpose. From this perspective, clothing and food can be put on the same level, and be

seen as important aspects of life. Clothing, if well chosen and used, enhances one's appearance and gives a 'sign language' or impression to onlookers and also makes one confident and poised. Clothing is an important clue used by people in first impressions and plays a part in the selection of friends and acquaintances (Ryan, 1991). It is, therefore, necessary that care is taken in the choice of clothing in order to create good and lasting impressions. Tarlo (1996) asserts that choices that a person makes in selecting what to wear, especially to fit his or her figure type is a dilemma faced in a rapidly changing world, therefore, there needs to be a reliable way of choosing clothes to fit one's figure type. Indeed, clothes or dresses are 'surface pointers', which make recognition at a distance, or a fleeting instance possible and as such, are themselves often barriers to more intimate contacts.

### **The Theoretical Concepts of Clothing**

Clothing has great relevance to life and is of intimate concern to the individual's physical and psychological well-being. It is universally accepted that clothing ranks with food and shelter as basic needs of mankind. Horn (1968) claimed that clothing reflects the values and development of a society within a period of time, and that culture dictates what is acceptable as clothing behaviour. For example, among the traditional Ghanaian societies, females are expected to cover their bodies properly with clothes forbidding any indecent exposure of the body. But gradually due to science and technology, and the infiltration of foreign culture, the lines between decency and nakedness especially among the youth have become blurred due to fashion.

Theories of clothing emphasize that the basic concept of clothing is to satisfy individual personal needs such as physical, physiological, psychological, socio cultural, economic and aesthetic needs. Many principles guide us to meet these personal needs. The basic principle of clothing is that one must dress to enhance one's appearance and personality and also to show excellence of taste in terms of size, fit, comfort, utility, and modesty. Based on these principles of size and fit, Bray (1970) proposed that garments must be constructed in three dimensions since the human body is three dimensional. That is, it must comprise the length, width and depth employing the principle of solid geometry which is the study of three dimensional figures.

The human figure is not only three dimensional but also characterised by curves, bulges, and hollows which must be taken care of in designing clothes for the figure. Forms of dress have been described in aesthetic terms or concepts as sleek, classic, dainty, and romantic. These aesthetic characteristics of dresses are always seen in relation to body forms. Roach and Eicher (1963) theorised that an item of dress is really a part of dress only when it is viewed in relationship to the body. This statement implies that style lines must fit in proportion to the body contour in order to relate satisfactorily and present a pleasant form or silhouette.

Williams (as cited by Rozencranz, 1972) has observed that clothing, whether covering or ornamenting the body, for work, play or leisure is as much a part of the self as the body itself. This statement has stood the test of time as Horn (1968) had corroborated that clothing as part of the body image acts as a

second skin in establishing the physical boundaries of the self. These physical boundaries of the body can be established when well-fitted clothes are designed to ensure true representation of style lines that match the body contours, curves, bulges and hollows. It is in this concept of fit that a pleasant appearance is established, hence Horn (1968) asserted that clothes reflect our personality and impart value to the wearer both in the eyes of the wearer and the beholder.

The expressive function of dress involves its emotional and communicative aspects as stated by Roach and Eicher (1963). They noted that visually perceptible clothing can as a rule be easily understood more than abstract non-material elements such as beliefs, sentiments and norms. All the aforementioned qualities and characteristics of clothing are dependent on the quality of workmanship, which to a greater extent, is dependent on the identification of figure type and garment size.

### **Theories of clothing**

Clothes worn by an individual influence the person's appearance and so serve as the "silent language" which communicates through the use of visual and non-verbal symbols (Horn & Gurel, 1981). The importance of clothes among the peoples of the world has been analysed by Jones (1990) under the common reasons for wearing clothes as protection, modesty, social status, attraction, occupational identity and traditional identity.

#### Social Status Theory

Distinguished personalities in societies usually wear garments or dresses that mark them out. The noble and the rich normally dress in designer label clothes made from quality fabrics so as to conform to their status in the society. In this category are the 'First Ladies' at national and state levels and the members of their families. As pointed out by Simmel (1973), the upper socio-economic groups adopt fashion as symbols of distinction and exclusiveness. Socio-culturally, we wear clothes so that we can be identified to belong to a tribe, religious sect, an association or a clan. In doing so, we are conforming to the acceptable way of dressing of that particular group. Conformity is the process by which individuals adapt their behaviour to some pre-existent norms including mode of dressing. Horn and Gurel (1981) argued,

*All people seek an identity and a sense of belongingness through conforming to a given set of norms, and yet at the same time they strive to achieve some distinction as individual human beings (p.175).*

Many women dress in conformity with religious beliefs. Christian women, for example, are enjoined to cover their hair in places of worship and Muslim women are expected to wear veils. The whole body of the woman is said to be eroticised. This emphasizes the need for covering the most erotic parts for modesty. On the contrary, there are individuals who are non-conformists in that they constantly seek to be different from others. Spenser (1998) is of the view that, such women are more "independent and discerning". It really requires an independent thought and action for a woman to wear what may appear unfashionable or a dress in which she looks rather ridiculous.

Aesthetically, the human being will want to appear beautiful and attractive, and one important function of clothes is to decorate the body for attraction. History documented that in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, men wore silk and velvets trimmed with lace and frills for attraction. This was very fashionable among the men then, hence this theory of clothing is also known as fashion leadership theory. Today, women have taken over the attraction role. This explains why beauty contests which are based on attraction are organised only for ladies. Among African women, the saying that “dress makes the woman” is because of the attraction associated with dressing especially with regards to clothes for festivals and social occasions. Olaitan and Mbah (1991) observed that, women wear clothes to look presentable and well groomed and that each occasion requires its own appropriate clothes and style of dress.

### Traditional Identity Theory

Drever (1964), in his Dictionary of Psychology defined tradition as “body of law, custom, story and myth, transmitted or handed orally from one generation to another” (p.677). Individuals identify with the tradition of their people as regards clothing because of what Horn and Gurel (1981) explained as “positive sanctions (appraisal, acceptance, admiration)” or “negative sanctions (ridicule, indignation, dislike, rejection)” Traditional identity theory can, therefore, be said to depend on social expectations. The interest in cultural values and clothing expectations make women to wear designs that are traditionally associated with certain groups of people. It becomes clear that societies maintain some differences in clothing norms as an aspect of tradition. From this has emerged the concept of traditional

dress as we have among different ethnic groups across Africa. In Ghana for instance, among the women in the Southern sector, double 'ntama' or slit and 'kaba', 'kaba' and cover shoulders are worn; women from the Volta region area appear in 'ayigbe kente' with lace or satin blouse. When one gets to the Ashanti region area, 'Asanti kente' and blouse or black short wrapper and red cover shoulder without a blouse is what a woman will appear in during traditional functions, and getting to the Northern sector, women are seen clad in their traditional woven clothes. In Nigeria, while blouse and double wrapper is traditional to Igbo women, buba and single wrapper is traditional to Yoruba women. To Fulani women, traditional dress consists of wrapper tied around the waist, girded with beads called 'jigida' and a short, tight and sleeveless blouse that barely covers the busts.

### Symbolic Interaction Theory

Goffman (1963) cited by Horn and Gurel (1981) described clothing as "sign vehicles" or "cues" that help onlookers to assign status to individuals as well as influence how they will be treated. This implies that clothing symbols convey certain meanings about people. The symbolism theory of clothing influences the first impression people establish about others at first meeting. According to Horn and Gurel (1981), clothing is used "as a non-verbal communicator" and "appearance carries symbolic meaning to the observer".

Furthermore, the symbolic interaction theory states that people live in a symbolic environment as well as a physical one and that behavior is stimulated by symbols as well as physical acts (Horn & Gurel, 1981). Thus, the clothes worn

by a woman can serve as a signal for interaction with the opposite sex in most cases. For instance in the African community, a woman dressed in "hot pants" is probably looking for a sex mate. On the other hand a Moslem woman dressed in "hijab" wants no interaction with men. Horn and Gurel (1981) however cautioned that the symbolic message of clothing may not always be the intended message since the symbolic message may be incorrectly interpreted. For instance, cultural stereotypes often result in false interpretations of clothing cues.

### **How does clothing promote quality living**

Physically, people everywhere put on clothes to protect themselves from extreme cold and from injury during accidents (Priest and Pullen 1990). Proper dressing protects us and at the same time provides decency for purposes of hygiene especially for people working as chefs in big kitchens. In view of this, Rouse (1989) affirms Horn (1968) assertion that clothes are a kind of second skin or an extension of our bodies.

Psychologically, clothing is worn to cover our nakedness, to appear decent, modest and to have a body image. Horn and Gurel (1981) defined body image as the 'picture individuals have in mind about how they look to others'. Modesty is defined as the shame that follows improper dressing. It can be explained further that body image is influenced by the culture of a people. The virtue of modesty in dressing varies according to the culture of a people but generally, dresses hide the body shape so that the erotic parts are not offensive to the eyes of the moralists. Rouse (1989) traces the Body Image theory to the Biblical Fall of Adam and Eve who were not ashamed of their nakedness until



they sinned by eating the forbidden fruits “ *the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked*”(Gen. 3:7). Rouse (1989) also noted that a Muslim woman would be embarrassed without her veil. However, modesty or shame she emphasized was not a casual factor in the initial development of clothes. In conclusion Rouse (1989) added that children brought up in societies where little clothing is worn, are not embarrassed by their near- nakedness.

Socially, clothing is often used to indicate social worth or status and people often make judgments concerning other people's social worth or status on the basis of what those people are wearing. Status may result or accrue from various sources, from occupation, the family, sex, gender, age or race, for example. It may be fixed or changeable. Status as a result of one's sex, race or family position is fixed and cannot be changed easily. Occupational or marital status is more easily changeable. All cultures take great care to make different status show clearly and will use clothing for the distinction. Major changes in status, like being married or being a widow or widower, are mostly marked by all cultures and often accompanied by the most elaborate and costly changes in clothing. In many countries, both western and eastern, the transition from being single to being married typically involves the bride wearing white, and being marked by something like a honeymoon.

A person's social role, then, is produced by their status and refers to the sorts of ways in which they are expected to behave. All people are expected to behave in certain ways. Clothing may also be used to indicate or define the social roles that people have. They may be taken as signs that a certain person

occupies a certain role and may therefore be expected to behave in a particular way. It has been claimed that the different clothes and the different types of clothes, worn by different people enables social interaction to take place more smoothly than it otherwise might. Knowledge of the person's role is necessary in order that one behaves appropriately towards them. Like the secretary would like to wear female boss's clothes in order to appear, and be taken seriously, as a businesswoman.

Economically, clothing may indicate productive or occupational roles within an economy which can also be seen in the family. Clothing may reflect the sort of economic organization that one lives in, as well as one's status within that economy, society or family. It may also suggest the level at which people operate or work in an economy.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that if the family is able to orientate its members, individual family members will be able to use clothing to show who they are, what they do, the position they hold in the society and above feel satisfied in themselves as being able to portray to onlookers the kind of impression they want to.

Furthermore if the family is able to provide proper clothing for its members, the individual, family and society will have quality and satisfying life or living.

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