

Cultural Markers in Dress: Decoding Meanings and Motivations of College Students

Veena Chattaraman

The millennium began with talks about the changing ethnic and racial composition of the United States and how cultural diversity will increase over the coming decades. A decade into the millennium, and these predictions are revealed as facts. U.S. demographic evidence from cities, towns, and even rural areas documents that cultural pluralism is an all-pervasive phenomenon in the U.S. and is here to stay. Within this pluralist context, where racial and ethnic differences vary in their external visibility, due to color of skin, language, neighborhood, and other factors—dress serves as an important visibility factor in externalizing cultural pluralism. Beyond externalizing ethnicity, dress as visual communication also facilitates the construction and maintenance of cultural identities among diverse subgroups in the populations and becomes the critical locus for realizing the cultural self. The purpose of this paper is to decode the social meanings

and motivations attached to the use of cultural markers in dress among college-aged multicultural students.

The paper employed a qualitative strategy of inquiry through an open-ended survey conducted among a convenience sample of 106 male and female students belonging to minority ethnic groups, who were enrolled at a large Midwestern university. A college campus provided the right setting for the research questions examined in this paper since it represents a truly diverse and pluralist environment, where self-expression in thought, dress and appearance is encouraged, and where a diversity of clothing styles coexist. Four ethnic groups were represented in the sample: Asian or Asian American (55.7%); Black or African American (20.8%); Hispanic or Latino (5.7%); American Indian (1.9%); and Others, chiefly biracial (16%). The mean age in the sample was approximately 25 years and a majority of the participants

Original for this text.

was female (77.4%). A majority of the participants, reported owning cultural dress (69.8%), of which 67% reported wearing cultural dress in casual occasions, 79% reported wearing cultural dress for ethnic celebrations and festivals, and 64.8% reported wearing cultural dress for non-ethnic special occasions. The open-ended data provided by the respondents addressed two questions: (1) what does wearing ethnic or ethnic inspired items of dress mean to you? (2) when you use ethnic or ethnic-inspired items of dress, what emotions do you tend to feel? Participant responses were content-analyzed to identify underlying thematic meanings and motivations in the use of cultural dress.

Cultural Dress: Themes

Cultural Connection and Belonging

This was an important theme that repeatedly surfaced in participant responses while identifying the meanings ascribed to wearing cultural dress. The college students articulated that they used cultural dress to form, express, or sustain cultural connections and belonging to the culture, ancestry, or the ethnic group. Some students expressed using cultural dress for both the self and for communicating to others. The following statement articulates this theme:

"It shows that I have a sense of culture that I enjoy and am willing to share with others."

Others expressed using cultural dress to showcase cultural support:

"Belonging to my culture. . . showing support for Asian Awareness."

Some students used phrases such as "feel rooted" and "sense of nativeness" when discussing their relationship with cultural dress. A majority perceived that they could create a meaningful bond with their culture by wearing cultural dress:

"It creates for me a strong sense of belonging and a closeness to my people and culture."

"It makes me feel as if I belong. I belong to a specific group that no one else does."

"Going back to my roots, gives me that connection with my ethnicity which is not there in daily life."

"Culturally connected to my ancestors."

"I feel good, and comfortable. Especially when I go to certain events involving people from my ethnic group, I feel like that is where I belong."

Cultural Pride and Celebration

A closely related theme to the above and one that was equally mentioned by the multicultural participants was the demonstration of cultural pride through wearing cultural dress. Respondents emphasized pride in the accomplishments of the culture, their nationality, and respect for the struggle of their ancestors. The following quotes illustrate this theme:

"Adorning the cultural dress reminds me of my heritage and the pride of all the accomplishments made and the ancestors who made it possible. This gives me great PRIDE!"

"I respect my own country, pride."

"I feel very prideful, to think of what my ancestors went through so that I could live here in America. . . I also, hold on to the past, and link it to the future. . . I feel, proud, happy, strong."

Respondents also remarked on their feelings of pride or moderated pride in their cultural dress. One of the respondents interestingly noted that he/she did not feel too proud, rather grateful that his/her ethnicity "has decent traditional clothes." Others were more emphatic in their expression of pride in their dress:

"Proud and beautiful, truly like a nubian queen—from earrings to a formal, dress."

"I feel pride in the ethnic-dress of my country. . . It gives me a sense of belonging to a rich heritage and tradition."

"My ethnic dress is the most beautiful in the world. . . I used to feel that I became a special person. I try to behave very calm and elegant when I wear my ethnic costume."

Some respondents linked the sense of pride in cultural achievement to external celebration of the culture represented through cultural dress. For example, participants used phrases such as the following in discussing their emotions on wearing of cultural dress: "special, joyous, celebrated."

Identity, Expression, and Distinctiveness

Stryker and Serpe (1982) define identities as "reflexively applied cognitions in the form of answers to the question 'Who am I?'" (p. 206). This definition applies to personal or role identities. Ethnic identity on the other hand, is a group identity, and has been defined as the shared identity of a

group of people based on a common historical background, ancestry and knowledge of identifying symbolic elements such as nationality, religious affiliation and language (Forney & Rabolt, 1985–86). Respondents voiced that cultural dress serves to express both their personal identity and group identity. The following statement from a respondent well-reflects both these dimensions of identity: "It means knowing WHO I am and WHO I represent."

"It means respecting my heritage and background. I do not usually wear ethnic dress, so when I do, it is a special occasion and I feel that I should remember where I came from because it is part of who I am."

"That identify with the traditions and customs of my culture."

"It's a representation of who I am."

Some respondents perceived that wearing cultural dress went beyond personal self-expression and expressed stories of the group's cultural history, and served to initiate cultural education. The following quotes illustrate these complex themes of identity and expression:

"It tells a story of all the goals accomplished and the trials and tribulations they had to go through for us."

"I feel that it is a good way to inspire others to learn about other cultures and ask questions."

Another important sub-theme that emerged in the context of identity is distinctiveness. Distinctiveness is defined as an individual's numeric (minority status) or social traits that are distinct in relation to the environment (McGuire, 1984). Being persistently different from the reference group's ethnicity, makes the ethnic identity salient or important in a person's self-concept (McGuire & McGuire, 1981). Numerous respondents voiced the theme of distinctiveness either from a personal or a group perspective in using cultural dress to externalize differences from the mainstream. To some respondents, this externalization of ethnic difference was a way to reject assimilation into the mainstream culture and maintain and strengthen linkages with the ethnic culture. The following quotes from two respondent capture the deep personal and social struggles involved with their display of cultural distinctiveness through dress:

"It means to me that as an African, wearing clothing that can allow others to identify me as an African even if it is just one article of clothing sets me apart from other people. I feel complete and whole as an

individual but I also become alienated from others and I become categorized and classified in negative ways. I have been discriminated against because my clothes made my ethnicity identifiable to others. Ethnic inspired items are also a way of expressing my rejection of assimilation and maintaining my own unique ethnic identity."

"When I wear ethnic clothing/items I feel complete, whole and satisfied. When I dress in clothes that are too mainstream and not ethnic, I feel distressed, dissatisfied and uncomfortable. I am so used to standing out and being recognized because of my ethnic dress that when I wear mainstream clothing I feel like I am betraying my identity and myself. Also, when I do not wear ethnic dress I become alienated and feel unwelcome in my own ethnic community. After living in a non-ethnic relatively homogenous environment and having to make the difficult choice of assimilating or not I had to make a choice and I chose not to assimilate by wearing my ethnic dress. Living in an environment where I felt alienated caused me to have emotions such as feeling shame about my culture because it was not 'normal' and dressing in ethnic inspired dress solidified my status in society as alien and not 'normal' and that I can never possibly be 'normal' because of my ethnic dress. I believe this has emotionally caused me to become a stronger person and has allowed me to make a clear definition of what my identity is."

Some respondents experienced feelings of enjoyment in being distinct for more personal and hedonic reasons. They enjoyed being able to "show off" their distinctiveness and the attention it brought them. The following quotes illustrate these perceptions:

"I like feeling unique and having a sense of heritage, while knowing I can be fashionable because I accept what I wear."

"I have some cute items that I picked up when I was in China and Hong Kong a couple of summers ago, and I think it's kind of cool to have something obviously from another country. They're kind of like souvenirs that I can show off."

"I love wearing them. It's fun and different from everyday jeans and t-shirts."

Other respondents experienced feelings of pride in the distinctiveness they achieved through cultural dress:

"I'm proud of being dressed differently than others"
 "I feel that I am unique and it shows a side of me
 that I am very proud of."

There was also a small group of respondents who did not want to externalize their distinctiveness from the mainstream culture due to lack of attachment with cultural dress, discomfort and self-consciousness:

"I am not really attached to our ethnic costume. When I wear the costume, I feel differently, but it is not because I am really proud of my culture or something. I like it and think it is pretty, nothing more than that."

"Distinctive. Uncomfortable for having to wear something that I never wear."

"More self-conscious."

Thus, distinctiveness revealed itself as a complex theme, laden with emotion, and reflecting both the positive and negative voices of respondents. Since cultural dress serves as a visible marker of ethnicity, the maintenance of a distinctive cultural identity lies at the heart of understanding multicultural college students' motivations to wear cultural dress.

Conclusion

This study suggests that a majority of multicultural college students own and wear cultural dress, and also associate deep, positive meanings and emotions with this act of dress. The qualitative strategy of enquiry employed in this study revealed three important themes reflecting the social meanings and motivations attached to the use of cultural markers in dress among college students. The first theme labeled "cultural connection and belonging" addressed the use of cultural dress to form, express, or sustain meaningful bonds with the culture, ancestry, and the ethnic group. The motivations behind this expression through dress were for both, the "cultural self" of the individual, and for communicating the "cultural self" to others. This communication was perceived as a form of in-group support. The second theme labeled "cultural pride and celebration" addressed the use of cultural dress to demonstrate pride in the accomplishments of the culture, nationality, and respect for the struggle of ancestors. This theme also addressed pride in the beauty and uniqueness of the cultural artifact of dress, which was recognized for its ability to transform the wearer. The third theme labeled "identity, expression, and distinctiveness" was a critical theme in understanding the deeper motivations

underlying the use of cultural markers in dress. This theme addressed the use of cultural dress to express both personal and group identity. With respect to the latter, cultural dress was viewed as expression of the group's cultural history, and as a facilitator of cultural education. This theme also addressed the use of cultural dress as an externalization of ethnic difference. For some, this was a way to reject assimilation into the mainstream culture and maintain and strengthen linkages with the ethnic culture. For others, ethnic distinctiveness was either a source of enjoyment and pride, or a source of self-consciousness and discomfort.

In summary, social meanings and motivations attached with the use of cultural markers in dress are thematically similar and yet varied with respect to the undertones and perspectives that the respondent raised. Decoding these meanings and motivations is important in a multicultural society to better understand, communicate and uphold cultural pluralism.

References

- Forney, J. & Rabolt, N. (1985-86). Ethnic identity: Its relationship to ethnic and contemporary dress. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 4(2), 1-8.
- McGuire, W. J., & McGuire, C. V. (1981). The spontaneous-self-construct as affected by personal distinctiveness. In M. D. Lynch, A. A. Norem-Hebeisen, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Self-concept: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 147-171). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- McGuire, William (1984). Search for the self: Going beyond self-esteem and the reactive self. In R. A. Zucker, J. Aronoff, & A. T. Rabin (Eds.), *Personality and the Prediction of Behavior* (pp. 73-120). New York: Academic Press.
- Stryker, S., & Serpe, R. T. (1982). Commitment, identity salience, and role behavior: Theory and research example. In W. Ickes and E. Knowles (Eds.), *Personality, Roles and Social Behavior* (pp. 199-218). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Discussion Questions

1. Of the themes the author identifies, which one do you identify with, if you wear ethnic or ethnic-inspired clothing?
2. What does the author mean when she writes "social meanings and motivations attached with the use of cultural marker in dress are thematically similar yet varied"?