

## **Attitudes of Women and the Transmission of a Gendered Dress Code to the Offspring: A Case for Harare, Zimbabwe**

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### **Abstract**

The study examined the attitudes of middle-aged women towards a gendered dress code and how these influence its transmission to their offspring. Middle-aged women's attitudes are important since they are the main purveyors of culture and also constitute a large segment of dress consumers. The influences of middle-aged women in dress choice are pivotal to the clothing industry since its survival is based on sales of dress. A qualitative paradigm involving a case study was adopted. In-depth face-to-face interviews and evaluation of artefacts were the data collecting tools. Ten women aged between thirty and fifty and their offspring (30) were purposefully sampled. Collected data were presented in both descriptive and narrative forms. The findings indicated that most women held conservative attitudes towards a gendered dress code and were willing to transmit it to their offspring. In addition, the findings indicated that media and acculturation were pivotal in influencing choice of dress of the women's offspring. The results of the study is intended to benefit women in that they will have insight on how important their choice of dress and that of their offspring is to the clothing industry. The study recommends that the clothing industry should engage in periodic research activity that seeks to establish consumer attitudes which are ever changing.

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**Keywords:** offspring, gendered dress, dress code, attitudes, middle-aged women.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Attitudes in the area of dress are both psychologically and socially constructed and are learnt through gender role socialisation. As children grow, they learn gendered dress through initiation. According to Mcilveen and Gross (2004), children's attitudes are shaped by their observations of significant others, such as parents. Gendered dress is thus transmitted through learning and observation. In this case, the middle-aged women transmit a gendered dress as they play a role of the significant others. The study focused on middle-aged women's attitudes since they are the main purveyors of culture and also constitute a large segment of dress consumers.

The attitudes of the women were studied by Manwa, Ndamba and Manwa (2010) and this study is a follow up research on how these attitudes influence the choice of dress by the offspring. Attitudes of both women and their offspring towards gendered dress are pivotal in that they are major consumers of dress themselves and that of their offspring and they determine consumption levels of dress. Thus, they buy dress for their children and that for themselves. The levels at which the gendered dress code is transmitted to the middle-aged women's offspring is quite pivotal to the fashion designers since it affects consumption levels of dress. The survival of the

clothing industry depends largely on the sales of dress.

Doob (1999) in a case study of the attitudes of teenage girls discovered that in the United States of America, eighty three percent (83%) of daughters in his case study admitted that their attitudes were adopted from their mothers. Girls usually learn from their mothers and consider them as role models (Park, 2007). Echabe (1999) notes that a number of studies have indicated that young adult daughters have attitudes about marriage, career, dress and children similar to that of their mothers as compared to fathers. Mothers, in this case the middle-aged women, are more influential in the transmission of dress since they always have more time with children. The mother grossly affects the boy child during his early years in life.

Haralambos and Holborn (2008) and Beck (2005) notes that some values, attitudes and norms of families or individuals portrayed are based on religious or cultural beliefs. Culture determines values and norms which are passed on through gender role socialisation. In Zimbabwe, family and mothers in particular are socialised to be the chief purveyors of culture. Thus, the thrust of this research was to uncover the middle-aged women's attitudes

towards a gendered dress code and the effects on transmission to their off springs.

#### **Attitudes towards a Gendered Dress Code**

Culture determines attitudes towards any entity. Attitudes are an expression of values and this can be seen through choice of dress. Dress is used to mediate social values or culture. Hensline (1998) defines culture as the language, beliefs, norms, behaviour and even material objects passed from general to generation. Gendered dress is a code of dress, which defines the manhood and womanhood which is accepted by a specific cultural group. Anne Hollander (2009) states that dress, has formed the basis of constructions of ideals of male and female bodily and facial beauty in the Western World. The value placed on what is termed the ideal man or woman is reflected in the way it is transmitted from one generation to the other. Hensline (1998) further states that the value placed on a gendered dress code constructs the attitudes one has towards the importance placed on its transmission to the next generation. The symbolic interaction theory drawn from the field of Sociology emphasises on shared meanings. Shared meanings refer to the common understanding among people who share the same culture and which are reflected in gender role socialisation (Kaiser, 1985; Spencer, 2005). Through socialisation people learn shared meanings and culturally acceptable dress.

#### **Transmission of a Gendered Dress Code to the Offspring**

The nature of attitudes middle-aged women have towards a gendered dress code determines how the dress code is transmitted to their offspring. Haralambos and Holborn (2008) state that primary socialisation of children takes place at family level by the family members. Parents are responsible for socialising their children and Zimbabwean middle-aged women are no exception (Berns, 2007). Gender role socialisation at family level occurs in dress. When parents buy a pink dress for a girl and a blue suit for a boy they reinforce gender issues.

The concept of gendered dress is drawn from the theory of gender role socialisation. Kaiser (1995) asserts that dress can be used effectively in learning, assuming and modifying gender roles. Gender role socialisation has three basic assumptions that are related to dress. Perani and Wolf (1995) identify the three assumptions as follows: first, dress as an influencing factor in acquisition and learning of roles; second, dress as symbolic of behavioural patterns and roles; and third, individuals try to wear dress which is consistent with roles. Dress in this context is a non-verbal communicator of the society's expectations for men and women. Mcilveen and Gross (2004) assert that values, attitudes and life-styles of a family are reflected in dress. Hollander (2009) also suggests that

the manner of dress represents a person's social status or career. Families, especially mothers, have a task of preserving their culture including the dress code.

During the early years of their offspring, parents choose clothes for their children. Pilkington (1996) suggests that clothes are bodily attributes acting as symbolic mediators between parents and children. Parents with conservative attitudes transmit dress attached to cultural values while those with liberal values emphasize on fashion. Liberal mothers and admixture of attitudes of parents have less influence on the choice of dress of the offspring. However, they try to assist in the choice of dress which they term acceptable. Pilkington (1996) further says that mothers transmit gendered dress to their children as they pass on to the younger, clothes that older children have grown out of. Children are taught to share dress, thereby sharing a gendered dress. Thus children reflect the way they were socialised by their parents (Berns, 2007).

#### **Factors That Influence Choice of Dress**

There are several factors which influence the attitudes of the middle-aged women's offspring towards the choice of dress. As children grow, parents begin to involve with them on their choice of dress and parents give sanctions against dress alien to culture. However, children have other factors, which influence their choice of dress. Teenagers in particular are highly influenced by the media and acculturation. Hines and Bruce (2002) state that the e-revolution is bringing up a breed of young adults who have knowledge on what is happening across the globe in relation to dress and fashion. Fashion is taking over the minds of the young ones. Values and norms in regard to dress are in most cases second to fashion. The emphasis is on fashion rather than cultural values with regards to dress. Children who are still depending on their parents consume dress in relation to their parents' discretion.

Beliefs and culture can be reflected through dress. As children grow, they develop religious beliefs which are in most cases related to those of their parents. These beliefs influence their choice of dress since they also need to associate with other people. Dress patterns in most religious groups indicate the level of commitment people have towards one and another and their deity. Mcilveen and Gross (1998) suggest that religion fulfills one of the basic needs of people; that are company or affiliation. Hensline (1998) asserts that dress symbols in religion communicate identity and solidarity. They also learn how to dress well and how to dress in a fashionable manner.

The findings will add to content in the field of Social Psychology of Dress since attitudes in this area are given little attention in Zimbabwe. This research is

also in line with the new marketing concept and market research strategy, which is consumer-oriented, and not product-oriented such products sell easily since they meet the consumer at his or her point of need. Major decisions on product lines of dress can be made basing on the results of the study and future plans of the clothing industry can be made since information on trends on the transmission of dress to the offspring will be available. Therefore there is need to study the nature of attitudes women have and how these influence the transmission of the gendered dress code to their offspring.

The research questions are:

- What views are held by middle-aged women towards a gendered dress code?
- How do the attitudes of middle-aged women influence the choice of dress by their offspring?
- Which other factors influence the choice of dress of the offspring?

## METHODOLOGY

The research involved a qualitative approach in order to gain entry into the social world of the attitudes of middle-aged women and their offspring. Marshall and Rossman (2008) and Bogdan and Biklen (1995) suggest that data that is rich in descriptions of human behaviour, conversations and places, which cannot be easily handled statistically, is called soft data. A study of attitudes and the transmission of this aspect of culture from generation to generation require an interpretive inquiry, which seeks information from the participant's point of view. The specific design used was a case study since the main aim was to uncover the facts concerning the women's attitudes towards a gendered dress code and how these affect the transmission of a gendered dress code to their offspring.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2008) and O'Leary (2010) case studies are appropriate when describing an organization or a subculture. Attitudes and gendered dress are aspects of culture; hence the case study was best in this context. Neuman (2006) and Best and Kahn (1993) also assert that a case study deals with a particular group of individuals who share meanings or some cultural commonalities. Bogdan and Biklen (1995) and Marshall and Rossman (2008) define a case study as a detailed examination of one setting or a single subject. Since dress involves sharing of commonalities, the case study was thus an appropriate option.

The specific setting of this study is Southerton suburb in Harare, Zimbabwe. Southerton was formerly a suburb for coloured people before the 1980 independence. Coloured and black people now both reside in this suburb with blacks being the majority in this population. Marshall and Rossman (2008) and Lacour and Tissington (2011) state that attitudes are

significantly influenced by the setting in which behaviour occurs. The urban setting has an influence on attitudes since there is a cross-cultural element of blacks mixing with coloured people.

The target population comprised all the women in the three hundred households. A sample of ten middle-aged women with children from zero years to a pre-adulthood stage was chosen using a convenient or purposeful sampling or a non-probability sampling technique. Their children also became part of the sample. The sampling technique was best in that only those women who were forthcoming to participate were chosen (Gray, 2009; Upadhy & Singh, 2010).

Data collection was done using two techniques, namely; interview and evaluation of artefacts. According to Upadhy and Singh (2010), Bell (1998) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992), these two techniques enable the researcher to study the interconnected factors that affect human behaviour, since the researcher plays a key part during the research process. An in-depth interview was the major tool used to collect data. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Bogdan and Biklen (1993) an in-depth-interview is more of a conversation as compared to formal structured interviews, which give less room for detailed expressions. Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011 and Marshall and Rossman, 2008) define an in-depth interview as a conversation with a purpose. It involves the interaction between the participants and the interviewer who in this case is also a participant. The guiding questions were the three major research questions.

Evaluation of artefacts was the second method that was used to collect data. Sandhya (2004) and Bogdan and Biklen (1993) define artefacts as materials which provide descriptive data. Photographs were collected from five of the ten families who were forthcoming to participate in the study. The dress of the participants as reflected on photographs provided cues or symbols that gave information on gendered dress code, their attitudes towards the code and also the relationship between the dress of the mothers and that of children. The two techniques were used in order to enhance the validity of the data. Triangulation of data becomes possible when more than one data collection technique is used. Data collection started after obtaining permission from the local government. Data were presented and analysed in narrative forms. According to Sidhu (2003) and Bogdan and Biklen (1997) qualitative data is soft data and the data is best presented in descriptive and narrative forms. This will enable the voice of the participants to be heard.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion cover the three major research questions

**The influence of women's attitudes towards the dress code of the offspring**

The results indicated that five middle-aged women, out of the ten families studied, held conservative ideas towards a gendered dress code and were keen to transmit these ideas to their offspring. Female dress is still viewed along the traditional gendered lines of skirts and dresses for women in Zimbabwe. Three of the ten women had liberal views and the remaining two had an admixture of conservative and liberal views. In Zimbabwe, norms and values in regard to nudity, modesty and gendered dress are instilled from birth. This may be the explanation why most women in this study were conservative. Dray (2005) and Baron and Byrne (1997) note that norms and values with regard to a gendered dress code influence attitudes and behaviour of women towards dress. Thus, deviating from cultural norms is undesirable by most women, hence the need to transmit a gendered dress code to the next generation.

The group of women with the conservative views was the least educated and consisted of the oldest women. The data revealed that age and the level of education had an influence on the attitudes of women. The older women are in a generation which does not seek gender equality, hence, resisted change. The younger women were advocating for gender neutrality. As Hines and Bruce (2002) and Park (2007) assert, consumers of dress reflect generations they were born in. It is in this context that conservative women live to preserve their cultural values and norms in regards to dress. Transmission of gendered dress code to their offspring was not a problem on their part. This was echoed by one of the participants who stated that, *as mothers we are the chief purveyors of culture since we have more time with the children as compared to the time they have with their fathers.*

Inter-generational transmission of gendered dress was reflected more in women with young children and those with strong conservative attitudes. The parents are responsible for buying clothes for their young ones; hence transmission becomes easy as the parents' values are reflected in dress for their children. Higgins et al (1995) and Hollander (2009) point out those adult caretakers as the purveyors of culture prescribe a gendered dress code to the child. In this case, the parents communicate their cultural values and attitudes towards gendered dress through dress of their children. Park (2007), Polhemus in Roach-Higgins et al (1995) and Picton and Mark (1993) note that dress becomes important in developing gender identity or social roles. Dress is therefore used to structure behaviour such that children at a tender age learn the cultural values

regarding societal expectations for males and females.

Most women who showed no similarities in dress with their offspring had children who were male and female teenagers. This is an indication that transmission was not easy for women with adolescents and young adults. One participant who had both boys and girls teenagers said, *it is more difficult to convince teenage girls to adhere to a gendered dress code than teenage boys probably because they want to look attractive.* Thornham (2000) gives one reason for such a pattern to be the result of a desire by adolescents to fantasize their masculine or feminine desires through dress. Teenagers in their world of fantasy have a tendency of trying to contradict the norms of the society.

Women who had boys in this study indicated that the boys showed a deviation only when it was related to body modifications such as hair plaiting and ear piercing but not when it involved clothes. This is characterized by the differences in preferences and tastes between boys and girls, because females tend to have more attributes they need to enhance through dress (Dray, 2005). This is asserted by Wikipedia Encyclopedia (2005) which states that females have more attributes than males, as they have a number of areas to focus on, such as the bust, hips, face and hairstyle. All such attributes cause females to be more concerned about fashion and dress resulting in conflicts between mothers and daughters (Berk, 2005).

Findings indicated that transmission of a gendered dress code was of no importance to the three liberal women. They advocated for gender neutrality, so to them unisex clothes were the best to transmit to their offspring. The photographs confirmed that the dress of the offspring of the liberal women was alien to a gendered dress code. Mothers and their children were seen wearing trousers, culottes and unisex clothes. Jean trousers for the whole family were common among this group. There were no sanctions given to children who were wearing clothes that exposed much of the body by their liberal mothers.

There was also evidence that the Zimbabwean community in general was against nudity since the half naked teenagers were receiving negative comments from the older men and women and this was echoed by most participants. According to Haralambos and Holborn (2008), Rank (2012) and Hensline (1998), norms and taboos related to nudity or body exposure are in most cases based on religion. This maybe the explanation why the half naked teenagers received negative comments from the public since their dress was alien to the norm. It is very unusual to see half naked people in a church

service. Modesty is emphasized in most religious settings in Zimbabwe.

Two women who held an admixture of liberal and conservative views were quite willing to transmit what they called decent or acceptable dressing. Their children were seen wearing trousers and other forms of dress but not exposing the body parts or wearing very-tight fitting clothes. To this group of Zimbabwean women, children were given sanctions against what they called indecent dress or half nakedness. Their choice of dress was among the wide variety of clothes but only when they fit in well and is decent (Park, 2007).

They were also concerned about boys who were wearing body modifications for women. Plaiting of hair and wearing earrings was a taboo to these families. However, with adolescents there was a problem. Teenagers have a culture of resisting the old fashioned school of thought. They believe there is a generation gap between them and their parents. This view was expressed by one participant who said that: *as parents we should admit that change is inevitable therefore we cannot force our children to behave like us.*

#### **Factors That Influence Choice of Dress by the Offspring**

The results indicated that teenagers in this study were their choice of dress mostly influenced by media and acculturation followed by religion and education (Tope, 2012; Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). These had an influence on the choice of dress of the middle-aged women's offspring. Media and acculturation present new ideas of designs in dress which affect the cognitive structures and network of thoughts of individuals. Mckie (2010) and Koch (1993) assert that changes in technology such as televisions influence the family's values and attitudes towards life in general.

Lemmer et al in Kaiser (1985) note that adolescents follow the prevailing fashion trends wildly and extremely. They also have a tendency of being associated with crazy fashion, hence contradicting the traditional gendered dress. As Dray (2005) and Roach and Eicher (1993) point out, teenagers have a problem of adopting crazy fashions. Girls in this regard have a peculiar problem of resisting a gendered dress code as compared to boys. They tend to follow fashion trends and are concerned about how they dress. Roach-Higgins et al (1995) note that parents consider the cultural significance of clothes such as modesty which they hold on to them and transmit it to their offspring. Parents then insist on modesty and place sanctions to those who disregard adherence to a gendered dress code.

The study also revealed that beliefs influence the choice of dress for the offspring since a sense of affiliation is important to the children. In some families dress is used as a form of worship hence some of the children were seen wearing dress linked to their religion. Mothers of some teenagers indicated that the religion of their children was visible through their dress (Berns, 2007). The study also revealed that children at school learn different forms of dress hence their level of knowledge about dress influences their choice of dress. What children learn, whether through religion or education, influences their choice of dress.

#### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results indicated that intergenerational transmission of dress was easy between mothers and their younger children. As children reach the teenage years, intergenerational transmission of dress becomes tenuous. Their choice of dress is mostly influenced by the prevailing fashion. Young children, unlike teenagers, easily accept a gendered dress code since parents in this case communicate their values through the dress of their children. The study also revealed that media and acculturation were pivotal in influencing dress choice among the middle-aged women's offspring, followed by religion and education. These influences are alien to traditional forms of dress. Women who held liberal views were encouraging their children to watch television since media and acculturation present new ideas and designs in dress which is an advantage to the clothing industry as their scope is widened. Intergenerational transmission of a gendered dress code becomes problematic. However, religion had great influence on the choice of dress for the adolescents since a sense of affiliation is appreciated by most of them.

The findings and conclusions of this study have several implications. At micro or individual level, it shows that the buying patterns reflect one's attitudes. Conservative attitudes towards a gendered dress restrict the individual's choice of dress. A transmission of a gendered dress code also restricts the women's offspring on the choice of dress. Liberal attitudes open up for a wider choice of dress. This, at the macro level, influences group consumption levels of textiles and clothing. Attitudes of women who held an admixture of liberal and conservative attitudes have special attributes, which need to be studied in order to constantly check on the effects of other forces on them. Their buying patterns are not stable hence the need to study them periodically. Problems in transmission of dress, which were experienced by most women, indicated that dress needs are different for different age groups. Conflicts do arise as parents struggle to transmit an acceptable dress code.

In view of the conclusion and implications above, it is recommended that the Clothing Industry educates consumers on cross-cultural changes in dress. Conflicts between the women and their offspring concerning adherence to gendered dress may be resolved through consultancy and counseling. Consumers should be well informed, hence the need for educating them on pertinent issues with regards to dress. Conflicts in choices of dress between the women and their offspring may be resolved through education. Information on changes in dress code and designs will enable mutual understanding between the parents and their offspring since the gap in knowledge can be bridged through information or education. This can be achieved through websites, journals or magazines which focus on educating consumers on clothing and fashion issues. Currently in Zimbabwe there are no local fashion magazines. There is need for further research in this area using rural and bigger urban settings so as to obtain a general understanding of attitudes held by people in these places. Attitudes towards dress by the offspring and their buying patterns are complicated issues which require to be studied more often since they change, so that the Textile Clothing and Design industry be well informed of those changes.

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