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Exploring the Effectiveness of Social Psychological Theories of Dress in Costume Design Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the effectiveness of integrating social psychological theories of dress into a costume design curriculum. A semester-long prototype course was developed that focused on the role of dress in social interaction, self-expression, and identity formation. The prototype course covered concepts such as dramaturgical theory, social interactionism, gender, self-expression, and identity construction. The students were encouraged to use critical thinking skills to apply these theories in their costume design work. Using a mixed-method approach, data were collected through an online questionnaire consisting of open-ended and Likert scaled questions collected from five costume design students who completed the pilot theory course in the of spring 2022. Findings indicated that students valued learning social psychological theories related to dress practices and found the course helpful in informing their design decisions by widening their understanding of the social and cultural significance of dress and costume. Despite the limitations of the small sample size, this study highlights the importance of providing theoretical frameworks to students to inform design decisions and to demonstrate the practical use of theory in real-world scenarios. This study adds to the literature on costume and fashion design pedagogy and provides a preliminary framework to educators to include theoretical perspectives to design curricula.

Introduction

The social psychology of dress represents an intersection of diverse academic fields, mainly in sociological and cognitive social psychology fused with symbolic interactionism and the clothing and textile (CT) field to "study clothing and appearance as forms of communication" (Kaiser, 1983, p.1). Dress is defined as "an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body" (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 1) To create a more comprehensive understanding of social psychological aspects of dress, Kaiser (1983) synthesized the communicative aspect of symbolic interactionism with cognitive social psychologists' perspectives on social interactions. The purpose of that synthesis was to "enhance the present understanding of clothing as a symbolic representation of the self and as a medium for understanding others" (p. 1). Thus, many theories where dress (in any of its usages) is used to communicate and understand aspects of the self and others fall under the umbrella of social psychology of dress. Pedersen (2007) defines theory as "a set of statements that advances knowledge by describing, explaining, or predicting the relationship between two or more concepts. A theory provides order and guides research" (p. 123). Although social psychological theories of dress have become an integral part of CT and fashion scholarship and education and at one point was the most cited CT area in the *Clothing and Textile Research Journal* (CTRJ) and the *Home Economics Research Journal (HERJ)(Lakner et al., 1997)*, it has not featured prominently in costume design literature or costume design curricula.

However, as costumes are used as a symbolic communication device to advance understanding of a character (Brach, 2012), understanding social psychological theories of dress could be advantageous to both neophytes and experienced costume designers. For example, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory is explicitly linked to the theatre and relates to how individuals create and project their identities to others, similarly to the dynamic between actors and audiences. Stone (1975) included the appearance, and thus clothing, to this theory relating even further to CT and costume design. The control over how others view an individual's identity is referred to as "impression management" (Collett, 2005; Goffman, 1959). Although this aspect is usually managed by individuals themselves, in costume design the relevance of this particular theory is significant as the costume designer is responsible for this particular curation.

These theories are discussed in the pilot course examined in this study. The topics covered in the course are Defining Theory, Defining Dress, Social Psychology of Dress, Dramaturgy, Symbolic Interactionism/Impression Management, Cultural Capital, Identity and Dress, Self and Dress, and Gender and Dress. No costume pedagogy literature was identified that integrated social psychological theories of dress, or the discussion of theory and its importance to costume design. Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop a course to

integrate these theories into costume design curriculum and explore their effectiveness as a component of costume design pedagogy. This study employed a mixed-method research design by developing a pilot course and collecting data at the conclusion of the course through an online questionnaire that included both Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The significance of this study may not only enhance the education of costume design students but also provide costume design educators with a framework to integrate this course into their curricula. Additionally, this study adds to missing literature in costume design scholarship, as well as literature addressing the use of social psychological theories of dress in applied fields.

Method

Participants

The pilot course was conducted with five undergraduate students who had an emphasis in costume design at a southern university, with a Carnegie rating of research 1 (R1). Carnegie ratings are a classification system to compare US universities, where the R1 rating represents a doctoral-granting university with heavy emphasis on research (McCormick & Zhao, 2005). Students enrolled voluntarily in the course as an elective. The participants in the sample self-identified themselves as three males, one female, and one non-binary, with ages ranging between 18-24. All participants had previously completed at least two years of theatrical design but had no formal training in social psychology or research methods. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study was conducted after obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Learning Outcomes and Course Description

The learning outcomes (LO) for the course were for students to, (1) demonstrate an understanding of the social-psychological theories of dress, (2) recognize and define theory and related concepts from social psychology of dress, (3) discuss and apply theory and related concepts from social-psychological theories of dress and identity to character analysis of costume design. Students were assigned weekly reading assignments focusing on different concepts in the peer-reviewed literature on social psychology of dress, including literature on defining theory (see Table 1). In order to meet LO (1) and LO (2), students were asked to submit a conceptual review of each article they read. The conceptual review served to not only acquaint the students with the concepts and theories introduced by the article but also to think critically about the content of the article and how each concept related to character analysis for costume design. Additionally, it allowed the students to familiarize themselves with the format of traditional qualitative research. Students' conceptual reviews required the following eight components: (1) purpose statement of the article, (2) research questions or hypotheses, (3) important definitions, (4) any use of theory/theoretical framework, (5) methods, (6) major findings, (7) at least one question you have about the reading, (8) a statement on how the

reading could be used for or relates to character analysis for costume design. LO (3) was addressed through in-class discussions of each article, the student's conceptual reviews, and how each concept or theory related to costume design. Additionally, student participants were assigned a "final thoughts" assignment at the end of the semester, following four question prompts, (1) How do the theories learned throughout this semester relate to costume design and character analyses?, (2) How can you apply these to your costume design and your character analyses?, (3) What did you learn from this class?, (4) If you had to teach this class, what would you change/add/remove, and how would you teach it?

Data Collection

At the conclusion of the semester, an online questionnaire was distributed to the student participants. Following several demographic questions, six 7-question Likert scale-type questions were developed to measure the effectiveness of the course along with six open-ended questions (see Appendix A) which yielded both quantitative and qualitative data. Given the specific context of this pilot course, this study, and the lack of extant validated scales to measure attitudes toward teaching social psychological theories of dress to costume design students, this set of items was developed guided by the purpose of this research. The lack of prior validation should be considered when interpreting the findings, and further research is needed to establish the psychometric properties of these scales.

Data Analysis

To evaluate the efficacy of including a course on the social psychological theories of dress scholarship in undergraduate costume design education, data were analyzed using an exploratory mixed-method approach. Mixed-method research design uses both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a richer understanding of the participants' experience and a more comprehensive view of the subject (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Likert scale data were imported into IBM's SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for analysis; the descriptive statistic routine was run in order to report frequencies. Open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify themes and patterns in the student participants' responses.

Table 1

List of assigned readings

	Concept	Article Citation
1	Defining Theory	Pedersen, E. (2007). Theory is everywhere: A discourse on theory. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 25*(1), 106-128.
2	Defining Dress	Roach-Higgins, M.E., & Eicher, J.B. (1992). Dress and identity. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 10*(4), 1-8.
3	Social Psychology of Dress	Johnson, K. K., & Lennon, S. J. (2017). *The social psychology of dress.* Fairchild Bloomsbury.
		Kaiser, S. B. (1983). Toward a contextual social psychology of clothing: A synthesis of symbolic interactionist and cognitive theoretical perspectives. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, *2*(1), 1-9.
4	Dramaturgy	Goffman, E. (1975). The presentation of self. In D. Brissett & C. Edgley (Eds.). *Life as theater: A dramaturgical sourcebook* (pp. 68-77). Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing.
		Stone, G.P. (1975). Appearance and the self. In D. Brissett & C. Edgley (Eds.). *Life as theater: A dramaturgical sourcebook (*pp. 78-90). Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing.
5	Symbolic Interactionism/ Impression Management	Kaiser, S., Nagasawa, N., & Hutton, S. (1991). Fashion, postmodernity and personal appearance: A symbolic interactionist formulation. *Symbolic Interaction, 14*(2), 165-185.
		Min, S., Ceballos, L. M., & Yurchisin, J. (2018). Role power dynamics within the bridal gown selection process. *Fashion and Textiles*, *5*, 1-18.
		Collett, J. (2005). What kind of mother am I? Impression management and the social construction of motherhood. *Symbolic Interaction, 28*(3), 327-347.
		Ramirez, M. (2006). My dog's just like me: Dog ownership as a gender display. *Symbolic Interact, 29*(3), 373-391
6	Cultural Capital	It is not old-fashioned, it is vintage: Vintage fashion and the complexities of 21st century consumption practices. *Sociology Compass, 7*(5), 355-365.
7	Identity and Dress	Guy, A. & Banim, M. (2000). Personal collections: Women's clothing use and identity. *Journal of Gender Studies, 9*(3), 313-327.
8	Self and Dress	Miller, K. (1997). Dress: Private and secret self-expression. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 15*(4), 223-234.
		Titton, M. (2015). Fashionable personae: Self-identity and the enactments of fashion narratives in fashion blogs. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture, 19*(2), 201-220.
9	Gender and Dress	Nelson, A. (2000). The pink dragon is female: Halloween costumes and gender markers. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 24,* 137-144.
		Bordo, S. (2000). *The male body: A new look at men in public and private*. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Results and Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of integrating social psychological theories of dress into costume design curricula. Data were collected from structured questionnaires given to participating students which contained both quantitative (Likert scale) and qualitative (open-ended) questions.

Quantitative Data

The majority of student participants found that the course was highly effective in achieving the stated learning outcomes. Specifically, 60% of the respondents rated the course to be "extremely effective," while the remaining 40% considered the course to be "very effective." A significant number of participants expressed a high level of confidence in their grasp of the social-psychological theories and concepts pertaining to dress and identity introduced during the course. Notably, 80% "strongly agreed" that they were confident in their understanding of the theories and concepts, while 20% "somewhat agreed." This strong level of agreement underpins the course's effectiveness in communicating complex theories and ensuring student comprehension, but could also indicate students', in this field of study, willingness to engage in this level of academic exploration to better improve their skillset.

Additionally, the participants unanimously acknowledged that the course fostered an understanding of the impact of clothing on human behavior and social interaction. A universal 100% of the participants "strongly agreed" that the course provided them with the necessary formation to comprehend the intricacies present in the symbolism inherent in clothing choices and human behavior in social situations. Furthermore, every participant recognized the relevance of introducing social psychological theories of dress to the domain of costume design studies, affirming the central objective of this course. 100% of the respondents "strongly agreed" on the direct applicability of these introduced theories and concepts to their work in costume design. This high level of agreement across all survey questions supports the synthesis of theoretical knowledge with applied fields such as costume design practice and scholarship.

Qualitative Data

The open-ended question data were analyzed using thematic analysis (c). to explore the effectiveness of integrating social psychological theories of dress into costume design coursework. Thematic analysis is an approach used to encode qualitative information into themes that "use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations…"(Boyatzis, 1998, p. 5). During this approach themes, or found patterns, are used to describe and organized the data in order to translate qualitative information in meaningful ways (Boyatzis,

1998). Data analysis revealed several nuanced themes that highlight both the strengths and potential areas of enhancement for the course. The themes are: sequential and cohesive course design, depth of character analysis and broader understanding of dress, insight into societal norms and cultural sensitivity, and recommendations for enhanced theory-practice integration.

Sequential and Cohesive Course Design
The course design appeared to enhance the quality of student learning. Student participants commented on the systematic progression of the selected readings, highlighting that,

> Every reading had something to do with the different theories related to dress…Readings would build on top of one another in a way that was easy to understand and connect.

This structure not only helped to reinforce core concepts but also scaffolded them in a manner that encouraged deeper understanding. One student noted that the "Discussions in class were always fun and interesting," especially when they,

> involved looking at costumes and garments present in modern society and linking them to that week's readings.

This type of integration of theory with contemporary examples seems key to making theoretical knowledge relevant and actionable to current students.

Depth of Character Analysis and Broader Understanding of Dress
A notable shift in student participants' approach to character analysis and design based on that analysis became evident. One student reflected that,

> I apply the social-psychological theories when it comes to figuring out a particular character... Is this character I am designing for trying to fit in with their presentation of self or are they trying to make a statement with their clothing?

This developing introspection highlights the course's impact in nurturing a more layered, nuanced understanding of character motivations and identity presentations through the symbology of dress and costume. Moreover, the course expanded student's understanding of "dress." Going beyond simple clothing, students began to recognize dress's multifaceted nature,

> The most valuable theories were…the theory that discussed dress as not just the garment to wear, but hair, jewelry, tattoos or body modifications, etc.

Additionally, students noted how this influenced them as costume designers, for instance, one student remarked that,

> The course made me a better designer because I was able to look at the concept of dress and identity differently than just the clothes that a person wears. It made me think about how a person's identity can affect the clothes that a person is wearing… how appearance can be a first introduction of a character, so it makes me think differently than before.

The theories presented in the course, and the article defining "dress," helped to underscore for the students, the holistic nature of dress involved in self-presentation, what that could mean for character representation through costume, and the relevance of this course content to their field of costume design.

Overcoming Cognitive Challenges through Interactive Learning
While introducing theoretical frameworks and literature on theories was initially challenging, the interactive pedagogical approach served to enhance learning. One student participant articulated their journey, noting,

> I think at first when I would read the articles it would be hard to grasp some concepts but when we were able to ask questions in class and discuss the theories in class it made it easier to grasp the purpose of these theories.

This highlights the pivotal role of discussion-based classroom approaches in demystifying new or complex theories.

Insights into Societal Norms and Cultural Sensitivity
The course content also allowed students to reflect on societal norms and cultural understanding of symbolic meanings. For example, one student reflected,

> By remembering the theories we have discussed, we also remember how many of them apply on a large-scale societal level. They speak to things large groups of people experience or relate to, and as such can be used to help invoke specific reaction out of said people.

The same notion is reflected in a participant's response relating how these theories that explain phenomena that occur to individuals in real life relate to those that happen to fictional characters,

> When we think about it, the same interaction we have in everyday life, the characters that we are designing have those same theories playing an effect in a way. In the end, these theories relate to character analysis and costume design because they dive into the answers to the psychology of dress and why people wear what they wear.

These insights evidence the course's efficacy in instilling critical thinking and deeper cultural and societal sensitivity.

Recommendations for Enhanced Theory-Practice Integration
Student participants not only engaged with the course content but also proactively made recommendations. One suggestion was to,

> have students read a play and design a costume for a character at the beginning of the semester. Then, at the end of the semester, the student must redo the design using the principles and concepts that they have learned over the course of the semester.

This indicates a desire for the addition of a more hands-on, application-driven approach that emphasizes the integration of theory and practice.

Conclusion, Implications, Limitations, Future Studies

The central purpose of this research was to explore the effectiveness of integrating social psychological theories of dress into a costume design curriculum. Both qualitative and quantitative data were employed to capture a holistic view of student perceptions and the tangible impacts of this pedagogical approach.

Quantitatively, the high percentages of respondents that found the course extremely or very effective, including their expressed confidence in understanding the social psychological theories in dress and identity, underscore the curriculum's substantive impact. A further indication that the inclusion of a course that provides theoretical frameworks and support for costume design is illustrated in the unanimous agreement that the course provided a thorough understanding of the relationship between dress, human behavior, and social interactions. Furthermore, the student participants were explicitly unanimous in the relevance of social psychological theories of dress to costume design, further reaffirming the strategic fit of such an integration into their curriculum.

Qualitatively, a thematic analysis reflected student experiences that underscored the course's systematic design, the synergy of theory and practice, and the transformative impact on their

approach to costume design. Their recommendations also highlighted an appreciation of the course content and its continued integration into the curriculum, desiring additional hands-on, application-driven activities.

Key implications of this study include (1) structured and sequential learning. Therefore, it is recommended that additions of emerging and new theories be introduced mindfully so that the sequence of the readings retains a logical order for scaffolding that students value. Additionally, (2) active engagement enhanced assimilation, thus discussions and real-world applications made the learning memorable, but also helped to contextualize abstract theories. Moreover, (3) integrating these theories and helping students to apply them to design broadened their horizons, not only in expanding their understanding of dress and character analysis but in their overall analytical capabilities.

In conclusion, the findings of this pilot exploration advocate for the integration of social psychological theories of dress into costume design curricula. The benefits are evident in the enriched analytical skills observed in the course, as well as a comprehensive understanding of new theoretical perspectives, and heightened cultural and social sensitivity. Limitations of this study include a small sample size. While small student populations are typical in elective specialty courses such as this pilot course, there were only five student participants. A small sample size limits the generalizability of this study and precludes a traditional reliability analysis. However, this study provides important initial insights into the effectiveness of including social psychological theories of dress in costume design curricula that may inform and have important implications for future research. In addition, the scales used in this research were developed specifically for this pilot study and should be considered preliminary until further validation can be conducted. Future studies with larger sample sizes, including longitudinal designs, as well as comparative studies with diverse educational settings are recommended to validate this study. Additionally, incorporating established and validated scales would enhance the reliability and generalizability of these findings. These factors should be considered when interpreting the results of this study.

While acknowledging these apparent challenges and limitations identified in this study, the findings are compelling and highlight the transformative power of integrating social psychological theories of dress into costume design education. This initial exploration is a promising avenue for educators in applied areas such as design and costume design to reinforce the value of providing comprehensive theoretical foundations to shape the next generation of costume designers. Continued research and open dialogue in the field have immense potential to foster deeper theoretical, social, and cultural understanding, creativity in character analysis, along with critical thinking that results in richer narratives and more nuanced and elevated portrayals on stage and screen.

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About the Author

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Appendix A

Questionnaire questions

Social-Psychological Theories of Dress and Identity Course

1. How would you rate the effectiveness of the course in achieving its stated learning outcomes?

Not at all effective	Slightly effective	Moderately effective	Neither effective nor ineffective	effective	Very effective	Extremely effective
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. I feel confident in my understanding of the social-psychological theories of dress and identity covered in the course.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. I feel confident in my understanding of the social-psychological theories of dress and identity covered in the course.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. I feel that the course provided me with a thorough understanding of the impact of clothing on human behavior and social interaction.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. I am able to apply the social-psychological theories of dress and identity concepts in my costume design work.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. I believe that the social-psychological theories of dress and identity covered in the course are relevant to costume design.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

7. Please describe how relevant you find the course assignments and projects to your learning goals?

8. How did you apply the social-psychological theories of dress and identity concepts in your costume design work?

9. Were there any challenges or difficulties that you encountered in applying these concepts in your design work?

10. What were the most valuable concepts or theories that you learned in the social-psychological theories of dress and identity course?

11. How did the course impact your understanding of costume design and its potential impact on society?

12. Is there anything that you think could have been done differently to improve the course or your learning experience?