

Susan Kaiser

The
SOCIAL
PSYCHOLOGY
of CLOTHING
Symbolic Appearances
in Context

second edition



The Social Psychology of Clothing



Symbolic Appearances in Context

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***The Social Psychology
of Clothing***

*To the Memory of
My Parents*

Preface

On a daily basis, we are confronted with a variety of clothing styles—in our wardrobes, on other people, and in mass media. On an almost unconscious level, we continually assess what we should wear, what meanings clothing carries about people and situations, and what is currently happening in our culture. Clothes are tangible objects, and yet they provide a frame of reference for interpreting more abstract social processes, including how people relate to one another. Clothes are generally not seen by themselves (except in a closet or a store), but are inextricably linked to other, related cues that comprise our personal appearances. These cues include hairstyles, accessories, and facial and bodily characteristics.

The social psychology of clothing, then, encompasses the study of clothes within the larger context of appearance in general. This study includes: (a) how we use clothing and personal appearance cues as stimuli that help us to understand ourselves and the world around us, and (b) the influences of social relations on our daily decisions and thought processes involving clothing and personal appearance. Moreover, because some of the meanings we associate with clothing and appearance are provided by the particular culture and the times in which we live, it is important to place the study of clothing and appearance within their larger cultural and historical contexts.

As visible, material objects that are relevant to everyday life, clothes help us to organize, and make sense of, our social experiences. In the process, clothes are linked to different levels of everyday experience: (a) how we see ourselves as individuals, (b) how we interact with other people, and (c) how we are influenced by, and contribute to, the cultural milieu in which we live.

A theme that runs throughout this book is the importance of the social meaning of appearance, how it is established, how it is interpreted, and the importance of the social and cultural contexts in which these processes occur. Readers who are familiar with the first edition of *The Social Psychology of Clothing* (1985) will discover that this second edition has been extensively revised and rewritten. These changes reflect growth and development in the social psychology

of clothing, as well as in related areas of study. This edition incorporates a stronger emphasis on the broader issue of appearance as a whole; on linkages between social-psychological processes and culture; on the connection between clothing, gender, and the body; and on the importance of context in the study of clothes. The new subtitle, “Symbolic appearances in context,” reflects these emphases. Just as clothing and appearance are embedded in social and cultural contexts, the *study* of clothing and appearance is embedded within the intellectual movements that cut across disciplines in the social and human sciences. This study is similar to a web or a network of discovery—about everyday life, social meaning, and culture. As we explore the dynamic processes through which styles of clothes, as well as their meanings, emerge and change, we catch an illuminating glimpse of the essence of social-psychological processes.

The book is organized into five parts, beginning with a framework to view the social meaning of appearance, and then proceeding to discussions on individuals, their social interactions with others, and the importance of cultural context, change, and continuity. Part One introduces the social psychology of clothing as an area of study, by presenting its basic concepts and its development as influenced by related areas of study. Additionally, the theoretical perspectives that enable us to explain clothing as a component of social and cultural contexts are introduced and illustrated through an analysis of gender. Part One will set the stage for understanding the study of clothing and related cues in conjunction with the self (Part Two), interpersonal relations and communication (Part Three), appearance in cultural context (Part Four), and culture change and continuity (Part Five). Throughout, the emphasis is on viewing people as individuals who implicitly relate to clothing as a means for ordering, understanding, and shaping everyday life.

Readers of this book will find it helpful if they have had some preliminary background in the social or human sciences. However, many students have commented that it is helpful to study the social psychology of clothing and introductory sociology or psychology concurrently. Because clothing is so grounded in our everyday experience, it is sometimes easier to grasp abstract concepts (for example, the self, status) when we can relate them to clothing or other artifacts of culture. As readers of this or any other book, we bring to the *process* of reading a wealth of experiences, meanings, and ideas. It is this amalgamation of reader characteristics that shapes our understandings of the subject matter. One of the most exciting aspects of studying clothing pertains to the fact that we all have unique, individual perspectives on clothes that we rarely articulate but can bring to the surface in the course of reading and discussing. When we relate subject matter to everyday experience, our study becomes accessible and personal. That is, it becomes contextualized, or embedded in the contexts of our everyday lives.

With this theme of context in mind, several suggestions are offered for the reader who is new to this area of study and to the social and human sciences in general. These suggestions have been shared by students themselves, who note that it is helpful to: (1) read the abstract at the beginning of the chapter to obtain a “nutshell” view of its content, and (2) flip through the chapter to

peruse the headings and subheadings; while doing so, look at the pictures and drawings and read the captions; also read the “Social Foci,” designed to provide an elaboration on a theme or concept for purposes of illustration. At this point, do not be too concerned if all the ideas are not clear. As you begin your more careful reading of the chapter, you will have some “images” in mind that will help to contextualize your understanding. As you read, think of other examples of the concepts that relate to your own experiences. Imagine ways the pictures or drawings could be altered or imagine different ones altogether. In this way, you will be engaged in the process of understanding more abstract concepts by relating them to everyday life.

S.B.K

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Part One

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Symbolic Appearances in Context

WHAT exactly is the social psychology of clothing? How and why did this area of study emerge? How do we go about studying clothes and related cues as pertinent to social behavior? Part One explores the intellectual context of this area of study, to illustrate how and why it emerged. Part One also examines the basic topics and ideas that contribute to an understanding of clothing and human behavior. We will see that the social psychology of clothing draws from different disciplines or areas of study (for example, anthropology, consumer behavior, cultural studies, psychology, and sociology).

Chapter One addresses the basic concepts or terms used to define clothing and related cues and examines the social psychology of clothing as an area of knowledge. Some of the history of this young discipline is presented, along with an explanation of how different, older disciplines have contributed to our understanding of clothing and human behavior.

Chapter Two presents three perspectives from different disciplines and then introduces the contextual approach to the social psychology of clothing. The contextual approach integrates elements of three different perspectives and emphasizes the importance of situational factors in the interpretation of clothing, within larger cultural and historical contexts. Chapter Two also explores how theoretical perspectives structure and increase our knowledge of clothing and human behavior, to lay the foundation for understanding basic concepts and research findings presented throughout the remainder of the book.

Chapter Three explores how clothing and appearance are related to social thinking about gender. The contextual approach is illustrated

by focusing on how males and females use clothes to frame their social experiences. Gender is a pervasive aspect of how humans are socialized to use clothing in everyday life; understanding this topic enables us to examine other social-psychological concepts more critically.