

What to Wear Where: Mishaps in the Presentation of Identity across Cultures

A research report from
The Interchange Institute



Anne P. Copeland, PhD
Executive Director



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Forward

Not long ago, I was traveling in Asia for several weeks and, on one particular day, my clothes were, I admit, wrinkled. And that was only part of the problem. My shoes were flat and, while they weren't white sneakers, they were decidedly sensible. I was wearing the kind of slacks they tell travelers to wear and several layers of shirts and tops, for practical temperature control. I had tickets and maps and guide books and phrase books and an extra camera lens and an old *New Yorker* in my pockets, making me, well, a bit bulky. And my hair was... what you get when you're really jet lagged. In short, I didn't fit in at all in the fancy hotel my husband's colleagues had arranged for us. The hotel clerks and the concierge and the tea shop lady and that person who stood at the front door to greet every entering guest - they all wore very smart suits and high heeled shoes and scarves tied just so and had very very tidy hair.

I think I could have carried it off if I'd been in the U.S. In truth, hotel staff might dress that way here too. But in the U.S. how I looked that afternoon, wrinkles and all, would have said something accurate about me - dare I name it? Sensible, wordy, curious, practical. The kind of person who takes fashion tips from the *TravelSmith* catalogue and isn't in Asia to go shopping.

But there - with different fashion histories, different associations to what I was wearing, and different social histories that support a particular "look" - the message my appearance communicated was stripped of its cultural context. All that was left was some bald evidence, which communicated to them, I'm afraid, that I was a careless, messy, sloppy, frumpy person. I'd lost the ability to communicate my identity in a non-verbal way by my physical self-presentation - and I felt misunderstood every time I crossed the lobby floor.

Loss of identity. Prior research from The Interchange Institute has shown it to be one of the single most powerful predictors of expatriate difficulties. Of course, any time people move to a new town, there's a bit of loss of identity - no one knows them or their family or their history and they have to start from scratch.

But in an intercultural move, these losses are compounded; the subtle, unspoken ways in which they are accustomed to communicating who they are get lost in translation. The casually-dropped reference about which university they attended, the political joke they either do or do not laugh at, the photo on their desk that shows how they spent their holiday -- all these communicate something about who they are. But it works only within a culture, not between cultures. In the new culture, the locals may never have heard of that university or have any association to it; they don't get the political joke; they don't recognize the scene in the photo. Expatriates must learn the code of the new culture and find new, more explicit ways of saying who they are.

This study explores one important mode of non-verbal communication of identity: our physical appearance and the messages we mean to and do send when we get up in the morning, fix our hair, slip on our shoes, pick out our jacket and walk out the door.

Anne P. Copeland, PhD
Principal Investigator
Executive Director, The Interchange Institute

What to Wear Where: Mishaps in the Presentation of Identity Across Cultures

We transmit signals about who we are in countless ways — including fashion and physical appearance. Bright colors vs. black, neatly trimmed hair vs. scruffy-chic, modest vs. revealing clothing – all of these choices send a message about our identity.

"Coming from Hungary, where even poor people dressed nicely for going to each others house, I was amazed how little care these folks in the US take to even try color coordination, or put on jewelry etc. It is not the lack of money but a choice. Mostly I am overdressed and I feel uncomfortable, because of that. If I dress like them, I still feel uncomfortable because my usual "normal" way is so far from that."
(Hungarian woman)

When crossing cultures, however, these signals can get misinterpreted. The message received may differ from the message we intended to send. Finding ourselves in a situation where we've lost this non-verbal mode of communicating our identity can be unsettling, especially when it takes us by surprise.

Goals of the Research: This research study begins to quantify this issue and highlight its importance both for

those living an expatriate life and those seeking to support them.

Participants were 152 adults who had lived 3+ months outside their passport countries. They ranged in age from 20s to 70s. Half were US American, the others were from 31 other countries. They had lived an average of 11 years abroad.

Methods: Participants completed an online survey in which they rated their first impressions of women in six photographs, rating the appropriateness of their outfits, and the models' likely personality, skills, beliefs, and careers. Then, they wrote answers to these three questions:

- o Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt your clothing/appearance was out of place?*
- o Have you ever felt mis-understood because of how you were dressed or how you looked – that is, that others were making assumptions about you that were not true?*
- o Think of a time in the last six months when you felt good about how you looked. What are three words or phrases you hope people might have thought about you if they met you for the first time that day?*

"One of my first tasks upon arriving in the country was to check in at the American Consulate. I was told that I was dressed inappropriately and could not go out in public like that. Why? Because my wrists and ankles were exposed! Needless to say, I couldn't wait to get home and quickly made plans to buy some pre-fabricated shalwar kameezes. I felt vulnerable and exposed when I left the consulate, feeling that others were regarding me as a Jezebel!"
(US American woman)

Responses were coded and compared to the participants' citizenship countries' scores on the cultural dimensions described by two classic research studies.

Findings

- ♦ *The fundamental hypothesis that people make assumptions about others based on their physical appearance was clearly confirmed. The clothing "code" is strong.*
- ♦ *Participants most often described wanting to project an air of elegance, competence, and beauty.*
- ♦ *Participants judged appropriateness more leniently if they were from cultures that value individual freedom; that emphasize egalitarian and positive relationships with peers and superiors; and that are comfortable with ambiguity.*
- ♦ *When faced with an appearance we do not have internal rules about, we revert to cultural values in shaping our judgments about others.*
- ♦ *Participants felt out of place when their clothing was unlike others' in terms of formality, modesty, chic-ness and color.*
- ♦ *Those from individualistic cultures were less concerned with formality and more with a strong presentation of self-confidence, competence, neatness. But fundamentally, clothing was disjointed from core identity for this group, whereas it seemed an inherent aspect of identity, to be protected and defended, for those from collectivist, communitarian cultures.*



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For a copy of the full report of this study, visit www.interchangeinstitute.org
or contact Dr. Anne P. Copeland: copeland@interchangeinstitute.org.

Goals of Study:

Within our own culture we transmit signals about who we are in countless ways, including by our physical appearance. Bright colors vs. black, neatly trimmed hair vs. looser style, modest vs.

revealing clothing – all these send some message about the kind of person we are. When crossing cultures, however, these signals can get misinterpreted and the message received may differ from the message we intended to send. Losing this way of communicating identity can be all the more stressful when it takes people by surprise. This research study begins to quantify this issue and highlight its importance both for those living an expatriate life and those seeking to support them.

Participants:

- 131 women and 21 men (152 total) who had lived 3+ months outside their passport country
- Recruited from variety of online listservs focused on expatriates and interculturalists
- Age range 20s to 70s, 90% fairly evenly distributed across 26-57
- Half American; others from 31 countries; 33% dual citizens
- Median years abroad: 11 (range 6 months to 46 years)
- Median number expatriate experiences: 3 (range 1-10)
- 37% Third Culture Kids (TCKs) who had had their first expatriate experience as children

Methods Used:

Participants completed an on-line survey that took about 30 minutes to complete. Those who finished the survey were entered into a lottery to win a free Kindle reader, which was awarded to the winning participant in October 2012. The survey included the following sections:

- **Demographics** (see above)
- **Rating of six photos for first impressions:** six photographs of professional models were each rated on the first impressions they made on participants.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

Photo Image Ratings of First Impressions

Clothing and physical appearance often influence our first impressions of someone, even though those impressions can change with increased familiarity. Imagine you met the woman in this photograph in some setting where her outfit was appropriate. Rate your first impression of her on the following dimensions:

	Not at all	Somewhat	Medium	Fairly	Very
Socially outgoing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Positive self esteem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religious	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intelligent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Serious	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Daring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reliable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provocative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hard-working	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Likely to become my friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How likely is this person to:

	Not at all likely	Not very likely	Mixed/medium	Likely	Very likely
Be able to explain how computers work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Write poetry in her spare time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have very conservative political views	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Be happily married	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Be the president of a small biotech company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Play in a punk rock band	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteer at a nature conservancy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please rate each one on how appropriate this look would be in the country you know best, in the situations listed below.

	Offensive	Not appropriate but not offensive	Odd but acceptable	Appropriate and respectful
Executive in a corporate office	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Elementary school teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brunch guest at close friend's house	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Guest at a fancy restaurant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Guest at a formal wedding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Running errands on weekend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religious service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- **Open-ended questions:** Participants were also asked to write answers to the following questions:
 - o Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt your clothing/appearance was out of place?
 - o Have you ever felt mis-understood because of how you were dressed or how you looked – that is, that others were making assumptions about you that were not true?
 - o Think of a time in the last six months when you felt good about how you looked. What are three words or phrases you hope people might have thought about you if they met you for the first time that day?

Cultural Values

Finally, we added to each participant's data the scores from both Geert Hofstede's and Fons Trompenaars' classic studies* corresponding to the participant's country of citizenship. For example, all Americans got the USA scores on these dimensions, all Germans got Germany's scores, etc. We do not assert that individual participants would necessarily have their country's value score for themselves. For example, the USA scores very highly on Individualism, but we do not assert that all the American participants in our study were very individualistic. Rather, we include these scores as an indicator of the cultural values the participants were likely to have been surrounded by and raised in. Specifically, we included these values:

Hofstede (definitions from <http://geert-hofstede.com/dimensions.html>)

- **Individualism-Collectivism:** "The high side of this dimension, called Individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. Its opposite, Collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty."
- **Power Distance:** "This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally...People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalise the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power."
- **Masculinity-Femininity:** "The masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material reward for success...Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life."
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** "The uncertainty avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries exhibiting strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles."

* Hofstede, G. & Hofstede, G. J. (2005) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. McGraw-Hill.

* Trompenaars, F. & Hampden-Turner, C. (1998) *Riding the Waves of Culture*. McGraw Hill.

Trompenaars:

- **Universalism-particularism:** For universalists, rules and the obligation to an absolute standard are more highly valued than obligations to other people, while the reverse is true for particularists.
- **Individualism-Communitarianism:** Individualists value personal freedom and self-sufficiency while communitarians value group loyalty and obligation more highly.
- **Affective-Neutral:** Emotions - both positive and negative - are expressed as evidence of commitment and engagement in affective cultures. In neutral cultures, emotions are more often controlled and not displayed.
- **Specific-Diffuse:** In specific cultures, work and personal lives are kept separate; in diffuse cultures, the relationships one has at work and in one's personal lives are intertwined and interdependent.
- **Achievement-Ascription:** This dimension captures how cultures ascribe status to others: as a result of the things they have accomplished (achievement) or as a result of who they and their families are (ascription).
- **Relationship to Nature:** Cultures differ in how much they believe they can control nature and the course of their lives: a lot (internal) or not very much (external).

Summary of Findings

1) What kinds of messages about themselves do people hope to convey through their physical appearance?

We asked participants the following question:

Think of a time in the last six months when you felt good about how you looked. Please describe yourself on that occasion in detail - clothing, hair, shoes, jewelry, makeup (if any). Now, referring to that time you looked your best, what are three words or phrases you hope people might have thought about you if they met you for the first time that day.

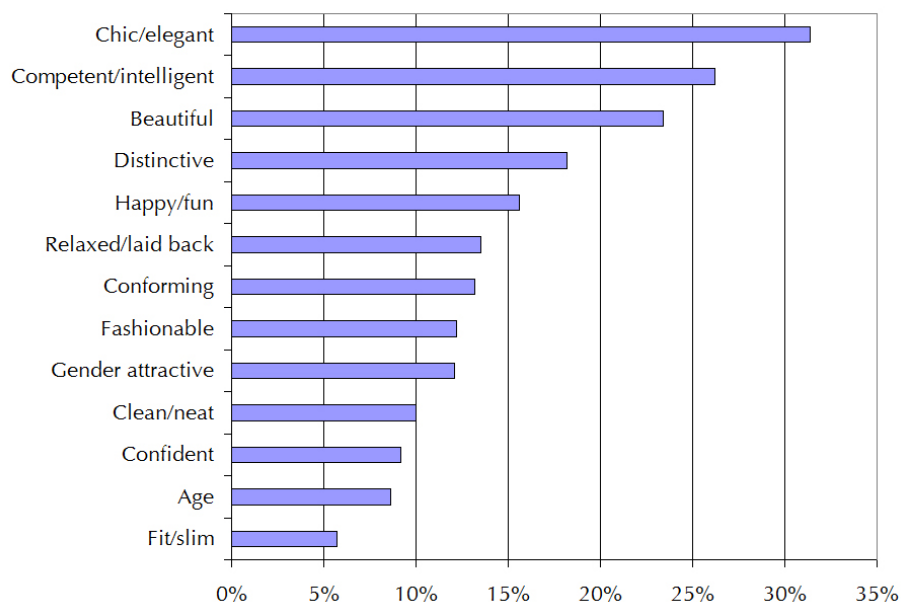
The initial part of this question, in which participants described what they looked like in detail, was not coded per se; rather, by asking participants to recall a specific time and outfit, and by describing it in detail, we hoped participants would then be able to give a more accurate report in the second part of the question - the three words or phrases they hoped to project about themselves, the actual focus of this question.

Participants most often described wanting to project an air of elegance, competence, and beauty. Other common goals were to appear happy, fun, relaxed, clean and neat, confident, young and slim.

Research coders classified each of the participants' words and phrases into one of the following categories (examples of each are given in parentheses):

- **Competent/intelligent** (*serious, informed, professional*)
- **Confident** (*sure of myself, confident, noble*)
- **Sexy** (*sexy*)
- **Age** (*youthful, mature, you don't look your age*)
- **Gender attractive** (*she looks good :), jolie femme, dressed to impress*)
- **Beautiful** (*stunning, pretty, beautiful but not too sexy*)
- **Fit/slim** (*thin again finally, she has a nice body, slender*)
- **Clean/neat** (*well-groomed, takes care of herself, polished*)
- **Fashionable** (*trendy, stylish, up to date*)
- **Chic/elegant** (*classic, classy, sophisticated*)
- **Distinctive** (*wow, quirky, looks interesting*)
- **Conforming** (*fits in anywhere, adapted, dressed for the occasion*)
- **Happy/fun** (*playful, a cheerful mom, fun-loving*)
- **Relaxed/laid back** (*friendly, comfortable, accessible, easy to talk to*)

Frequency of Categories Used by Participants



2) Do people make assumptions about others based on their physical appearance?

Clearly, participants hoped they were communicating something about themselves when they make choices concerning their physical appearance. So, do these messages get delivered effectively? To answer this question, we examined the participants' first impressions of the six photographed models (see rating scales on page 2).

There was strikingly consistent (and statistically significant) agreement about which model would likely have the characteristics, jobs or interests queried. In the absence of any information about these women other than that portrayed in the photographs, participants consistently agreed with each other in their ratings:

	Highest Scores*	Lowest Scores
Image 1:	high self-esteem provocative sexy	religious able to explain how computers work write poetry in her spare time volunteer at a nature conservancy
Image 2:	socially-outgoing (tie) play in a punk rock band daring	serious intelligent reliable hard-working likely to be my friend have very conservative political views be happily married be president of small biotech company
Image 3:	serious have very conservative political views	socially-outgoing creative play in a punk rock band
Image 4:	socially-outgoing (tie) creative likely to be my friend write poetry in her spare time	
Image 5:	religious	
Image 6:	intelligent reliable hard-working able to explain how computers work be happily married be president of small biotech company volunteer at a nature conservancy	daring high self-esteem provocative sexy

We also asked participants to rate how appropriate each of the outfits would be for a variety of settings.

* Statistical note: For ease of reading, statistics are not included in this report. Unless otherwise noted, all reported findings were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level or higher. Contact The Interchange Institute for statistical details.

Again, there was striking, statistically significant consistency in what participants thought was appropriate:

Most Appropriate

Least Appropriate

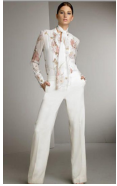


Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

executive in a corporate office
guest at a fancy restaurant
guest at a formal wedding

brunch at close friend's house

elementary school teacher
running errands on weekend
religious service

executive in a corporate office
guest at a fancy restaurant
guest at a formal wedding
religious service

brunch at close friend's house

elementary school teacher
running errands on weekend

In short, the fundamental hypothesis that people make assumptions about others based on their physical appearance was clearly confirmed. That there was such striking similarity across participants from so many cultures suggests that the clothing "code" is strong. But is the "code" universal and reliable? No, as we see in the next set of analyses.

The fundamental hypothesis that people make assumptions about others based on their physical appearance was clearly confirmed.... The clothing "code" is strong.

3) Are these assumptions the same around the world?

Despite the statistically significant consistency with which participants judged the models, there was also a range in their impressions. We labeled as “controversial” those images that were given the lowest rating (“not at all likely” or “offensive”) by at least 8 participants *and* the highest score (“very likely” or “appropriate and respectful”) by another 8, for each of the personality, skills and appropriateness ratings. The following images were rated as controversial. For example, Image 6 was rated as “*not at all likely* to have positive self-esteem” by 8 or more people and as “*very likely* to have positive self-esteem” by 8 or more others.

Images That Were Rated as Controversial (Very Low by some and Very High by others)

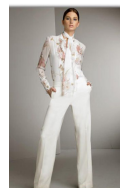


Image 1

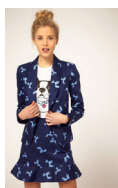


Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

Socially outgoing						
Positive self esteem						√
Religious		√				
Intelligent						
Serious						
Creative			√			
Daring	√				√	
Reliable	√				√	
Provocative	√	√	√		√	
Hard-working	√					
Sexy				√	√	
Likely to become friend		√	√			
Explain computers						√
Write poetry				√		
Conservative politically						√
Be happily married						
President of biotech	√					
Play in punk rock band		√				
Nature conservancy						
Corporate executive	√			√	√	
School teacher	√	√	√		√	
Brunch guest						
Guest at fancy restaurant		√				
Guest at formal wedding	√					√
Running errands						
Religious service	√		√	√		

This is precisely the problem we are trying to examine in this study – people thinking they are communicating one thing about their identity (by their choice of clothing, hairstyle and general look) in line with the cultural values they are accustomed to, but having their physical appearance misinterpreted by – or even seen as offensive to - others.

Cultural values seemed to play a role in these varying perceptions, especially in participants' ratings of the appropriateness of outfits. To get an overall sense of participants' ways of judging, we examined the relationship between participants' citizenship country's cultural value scores (i.e., the Hofstede and Trompenaars scores) and an average of their appropriateness ratings across the six photographed images (e.g., the average rating of appropriateness of the outfit for a corporate executive across the six models, and the average for the teacher ratings, and brunch ones, etc). In the chart below, significant statistical relationships are noted.

Significant Correlations Between Cultural Values and Appropriateness Ratings							
	Executive	Teacher	Brunch	Restaurant	Wedding	Errands	Religious
Hofstede							
Individualism-Collectivism							**(+)
Power Distance							*(-)
Uncertainty Avoidance		**(-)	*(-)				**(-)
Masculinity-Femininity	***(-)	**(-)			****(-)	*(-)	*(-)
Trompenaars							
Universalism-Particularism							***(+)
Individualism-Communitarianism			**(+)			*(+)	***(+)
Affective-Neutral	**(-)						
Specific-Diffuse							
Achievement-Ascription		*(+)	*(+)				**(+)
Relationship to Nature							***(+)

* p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

+ indicates a positive correlation, - indicates a negative one

High scores indicate:

Hofstede: individualism, high power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance and masculinity

Trompenaars: universalism, individualism, neutral, specific, achievement and internal control

The most striking conclusion from this chart is the strength of the relationship between many of the cultural values and participants' judgments about what is appropriate to wear, especially to a religious service. The outfits, collectively, were rated as more appropriate by participants from more individualistic, lower power distance, weaker uncertainty avoidance, feminine, universalist, achievement-based status and internally controlled cultures. That is, participants judged appropriateness more leniently if they were from cultures that value individual freedom; that emphasize egalitarian and positive relationships with peers and superiors; and that are comfortable with ambiguity. Or, conversely, they rated outfits' appropriateness more harshly if they were from cultures that value group loyalty and respect for seniors; that make judgments based on the context of such important relationships; and that appreciate having clear guidelines for social behavior.

Participants judged appropriateness more leniently if they were from cultures that value individual freedom; that emphasize egalitarian and positive relationships with peers and superiors; and that are comfortable with ambiguity.



Image 1

Looking more closely at individual models one at a time, we see the general pattern in the chart above, repeated. For example, Image 1 was rated as significantly less appropriate by those (using Hofstede's model) from more collectivist (compared to individualistic) and hierarchical (as opposed to egalitarian-focused) cultures, cultures where there is a preference for rules and structure (versus those that are more comfortable with uncertainty), and/or cultures where people put a value on ambition (rather than on lifestyle and relationships). And (using Trompenaars' model), it was rated as less appropriate by those that value loyalty to one's group, and who are more fatalistic about their degree of control over nature.

For another example, participants rated Image 2 as less appropriate in almost every situation (being a corporate executive, teaching school, or going to brunch at a friend's home, a fancy restaurant, a wedding, or a religious service) if they were from cultures that were more Masculine in Hofstede's system, compared to those from Feminine cultures. That is, for this [rather artsy, funky] outfit in particular, those from a culture that values ambition, achievement and material reward for success were particularly harsh in their rating of its appropriateness. Remember, we do not know if the participants have these values themselves, only that many people in their country of citizenship do. The findings underscore the importance of the cultural values we are raised in.

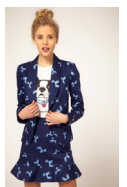


Image 2

Image 3, a model wearing a red sari, was particularly consistently and strongly linked to participants' cultural background. To assess for the influence of familiarity with saris, first we compared the ratings of participants who had lived in India with those who



Image 3

had not. Their ratings of first impressions or appropriateness did not differ from each other. The outfit was seen as particularly inappropriate by those from collectivist, high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance cultures (Hofstede dimensions) and from particularist, communitarian, diffuse cultures that ascribe status

based on being not achievement, and are more fatalistic (Trompenaars dimensions). This was especially true for ratings of appropriateness for a fancy

It seems that, when faced with an appearance we do not have internal rules about, or more generally in ambiguous situations, we revert to cultural values in shaping our judgments about others.

restaurant, wedding or religious service. It seems that, when faced with an appearance we do not have internal rules about, or more generally in ambiguous situations, we revert to cultural values in shaping our judgments about others.

4) What happens when people dress differently than their surrounding culture expects?

We asked participants if they had ever been in a situation when their appearance or clothing had been out of place and, if so, to describe the scene. We coded the descriptions into the following categories: Formality, Modesty, Chic-ness, and Color. One example of each category follows; other examples are found at the end of this report.

Formality: 58% of the participants described times when they felt they were dressed either too formally or too informally for the situation.

Examples: Too Formal

We live in a small town in the suburb of Boston/USA, where the typical rich, educated people from New England would want to live. But they don't dress well unless it is a Christmas party or Easter at the church. From the first time until now, I have a hard time to dress the way how they dress for the different occasions. Coming from Hungary, where even poor people dressed nicely for going to each others house, I was amazed how little care these folks take to even try color coordination, or put on jewelry etc. They wear shorts and jeans, LL Bean clothing or similar good quality, very little color, simple clothing. It is not the lack of money but a choice that it is not cool if something is near to elegant or sexy looking. Mostly I am overdressed and I feel uncomfortable, because of that. If I dress like them, I still feel uncomfortable because my usual "normal" way is so far from that. (Hungarian woman)

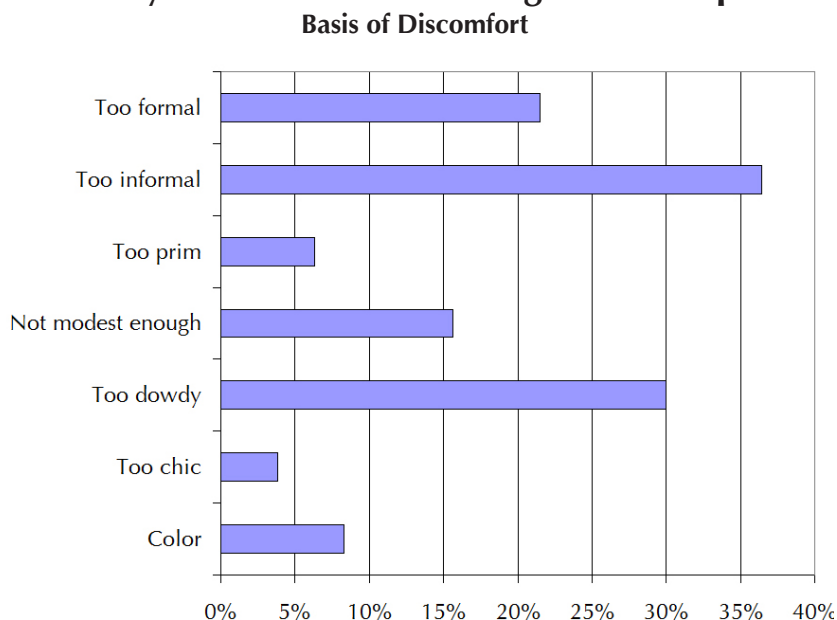
Examples: Too Informal

When I visited Italy, I entered a famous shoe shop but came out immediately because I saw many Japanese tourists in very casual clothes trying on shoes, without asking for assistance of the attendants (neatly dressed in suits). I found it embarrassing and since I was in casual wear, I left. (Japanese woman)

Modesty: 22% described times when they felt their clothing was either too prim or not sufficiently modest for the situation.

Examples: Too Modest, Prim

As a senior in High School, I left West Africa and attended Grade 10 in the USA. My parents bought me a very nice new dress to wear to school my first day in the US high school scene and I was so out of place, I wanted to crawl under a rock. Everyone else was in tattered jeans and revealing tops, and I had a very "proper" sweater knit dress, emerald green (looking back I probably looked 60 years old!) but I thought I looked beautiful until I got to school. (US American woman)

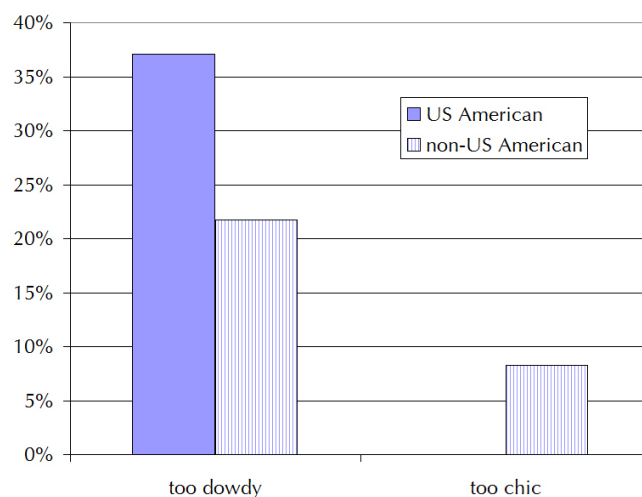


Examples: Not Modest Enough

Living in Algeria (a primarily Muslim country), I lived about 10 km from my work and I would frequently run home at the end of the day. It was quite warm in the summer so at some point I decided to wear running shorts rather than sweat pants. As I passed clusters of small homes along the road children and then adult males began yelling at me and at several points threw (small) stones at me, I didn't speak Arabic and had no idea what they were yelling about, or why they were so angry, but I soon learned upon finally reaching my destination and asking expat neighbors. It was considered a serious breach of decorum to show so much body flesh, for men as well as for women. While short-sleeved shirts were all right for men, bare legs were not. I soon realized that in the soccer playing I saw everywhere, the men's legs were always fully covered. (US American man)

Chic-ness: 34% said they had felt out of place because they were either more or less fashionable. Note that this category differs from the Formality one - one can be dressed very formally in a traditional, or even out-of-fashion business suit, or very informally in a very trendy outfit. There was a significant difference between US Americans and those from other parts of the world in use of this category: US Americans were more likely to describe situations in which they felt they were out of fashion, and they never described a situation in which they felt they were too chic, while 8% of non-US Americans did so.

Participants felt out of place when their clothing was unlike others' in terms of formality, modesty, chic-ness and color.



Examples: Too Dowdy, Out of Fashion

In Venezuela, I was not a HOT lady enough...had to change my clothing to high heels, lipsticks and accessories. I looked great at the end and was happy about the change! (French woman)

Examples: Too Chic, Trendy or Avant Garde

In Canada, when I would come into work wearing 'trendy workwear', which included fitted clothes with a little bit of a flare and some basic make up and heels. I was asked to dress down as the team was conservative. This caught me off-guard as I was never dressed inappropriately or showed too much skin. I just liked fitted trendy attire. (New Zealand woman)

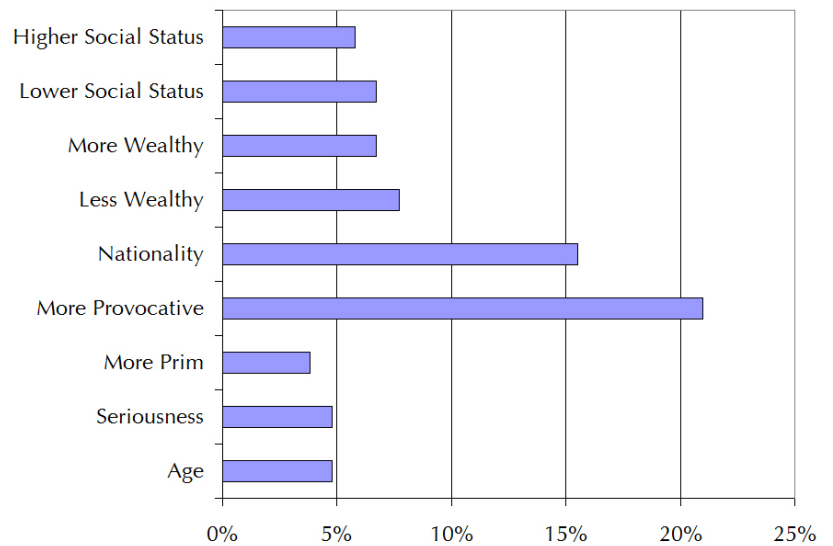
Color: 8% reported incidents in which the color of their clothing was out of place.

Examples:

I felt my costume was out of place when I first arrived in USA. I like to wear colorful clothing that makes me happy. I never wear sport jacket unless I am doing sport. But I found most clothing of my classmates in America is gray or a single color and they often wear sport clothing and shoes even for everyday. (Chinese woman)

5) What kinds of mis-attributions about identity do people make based on others' physical appearance?

So, what does it matter if people wear the “wrong” thing? Are they simply seen as “odd” or “unfashionable,” or are more fundamental mis-attributions made about them? We asked participants to describe a time when they felt their identity was mis-interpreted on the basis of their physical appearance. Most responses fell into the following categories of mis-attribution: social status, wealth, nationality, sexuality, seriousness and age. One example of each category follows; other examples are found at the end of this report.



Social Status:

Examples: Higher Social Status

In South Africa, I worked in an office environment for a development agency. I was chided by coworkers for overdressing whenever I wore a business suit of similar attire - even for wearing hosiery and “dress shoes.” It seemed to be interpreted as I saw myself as being above everyone else. I ultimately toned down my dress to what would have been considered casual to business casual in my previous work settings. (US American woman)

Examples: Lower Social Status

When I was in my twenties, I made a trip to Italy with my friends for a vacation. We were young, but already medical doctors so we could afford a very good hotel in Venice. However, we arrived on foot, wearing t-shirts and jeans, and this was a huge mistake. Being Asian, we looked much younger than our age, and I had the impression that the hotel receptionist thought we were stupid daughters of some Asian riches. (Japanese woman)

Wealth:

Examples: More Wealthy

In Mexico all my peers used a fancy branded pen in the shirt pocket. This is a kind of status sign that means you are an important executive. In USA people are proud of being frugal and my Montblanc looked like too fancy at my hierarchical level (which was higher than the one I used to hold in Mexico) so I retired the Montblanc. (Brazilian man)

Examples: Less Wealthy

In Istanbul, we live in an area where lots of well off people live - expats but also very rich Turks. The Turks seem to wear either very elegant clothes or sports dress, but there must be a dress code that seems concealed to me. If I go into a shop in our area being casually dressed, shop keepers sometimes ignore me but a casually dressed Turkish lady would command attention. If I walk my dogs in the compound (in sensible, hiking-style rather than smart clothes) I get asked by the maids who walk their owners' dogs if I am 'patron' or 'helper' - in this instance my unusual behaviour is not clarified by the way I dress, hence people don't know what to make of me. (German woman)

Nationality:**Examples: Wrong Nationality**

When I was in Italy, most locals assumed I was Italian until I started speaking. One Italian told me I was dressed too “white” to be American. He explained that he thought most Americans dressed in bright “hip-hop” styles. I was also rather pale - Italians were used to American students with fake tans, dyed hair, lots of makeup, flashy clothes. (US American woman)

Sexuality:**Examples: More Provocative**

When we moved to Pakistan I understood that I had to wear long sleeves and long dresses or pants as long as my hips were covered. So I bought a long shirt dress from J. Crew that I thought would meet these requirements. One of my first tasks upon arriving in the country was to check in at the American Consulate. I was immediately told that I was dressed inappropriately and could not go out in public like that. Why? Because my wrists and ankles were exposed! Needless to say, I couldn't wait to get home and quickly made plans to buy some pre-fabricated shalwar kameezes. I felt vulnerable and exposed when I left the consulate, feeling that others were regarding me as a Jezebel! (US American woman)

Examples: More Prim

When I first arrived in China my maid was always trying to get me to dress in tight, skin-tight, jean and bling-bling. She did not approve of my capri pants and hiking sandals. I am sure I was misunderstood by the Chinese because I dressed so casual. I have always been a size 2 and I found that clothes in China fit me much better than American sized clothes. I was soon wearing tight jeans and bling-bling...and the dresses and heels. (US Americans)

Seriousness:**Examples: Not Serious**

In Canada, I would come into work wearing ‘trendy workwear’, which included fitted clothes with a little bit of a flare and some basic make up + heels. I was asked to dress down as the team was conservative. This caught me off-guard as I was never dressed inappropriately or showed too much skin. I just liked fitted trendy attire. People assumed I was not hard-working and that I was a woman who would complain about ‘breaking a nail.’ I was offended to find that out as it is completely the opposite of who I am. I am ambitious and hard working and like to be judged by my work, not my physical appearance. I was stereotyped into a category; whereas for me, I was just dressed ‘presentable’. (New Zealand woman)

Age:**Examples: Wrong Age**

Malaysia-- Traveling for the first time in years without our children, my husband and I (despite looking our age -- nearly 40) were taken for backpackers and steered away from the expensive premier taxis... probably because we were casually dressed and he was wearing flip flops (very typical for Malaysians-- but not middle-aged Europeans...) (US American woman)

6) Do men and women differ from each other in their interpretations of others' physical appearance or in how others interpret them?

Men and women rated the six models somewhat differently, as shown in this chart. Men were especially consistent in rating most of the outfits as more inappropriate for running errands than women did.

						
	Image 1	Image 2	Image 3	Image 4	Image 5	Image 6
Socially outgoing				M>F		
Positive self esteem						
Religious				M<F		
Intelligent						
Serious				M<F		
Creative	M>F					
Daring		M<F				
Reliable						
Provocative						
Hard-working						
Sexy						
Likely to become friend						M<F
Explain computers						
Write poetry						
Conservative politically					M>F	
Be happily married						
President of biotech						
Play in punk rock band		M<F				
Nature conservancy						
Corporate executive		M>F				
School teacher						
Brunch guest				M>F	M<F	
Guest at fancy restaurant			M>F			
Guest at formal wedding	M>F					
Running errands	M<F		M<F	M<F	M<F	M<F
Religious service						

"M>F" means males gave higher ratings or rated the outfit as more appropriate than females

"M<F" means males gave lower ratings or rated the outfit as less appropriate than females

In the stories they wrote about clothing, men and women did not differ very much, with just a few exceptions. Men were less likely than women to say they had changed what they wore as a result of realizing they were wearing something out of place, and less likely to say they tried to present themselves as fashionable. No man described a situation in which he was mistakenly seen as prim or provocative, whereas this was the theme for almost 30% of the women.

Men were less likely than women to say they had changed what they wore as a result of realizing they were wearing something out of place.

There was a non-significant trend ($p < .10$) for men more often than women to:

- ♦ say they hoped to conform to local practice in their dress,
- ♦ describe having been mis-interpreted in terms of status and wealth,
- ♦ be concerned with appearing mature and professional.

7) Do people with more intercultural experience differ in the assumptions they make about others based on appearance, compared to those with less experience? What about Third Culture Kids?

Participants who had spent more years living outside their passport countries*:

- ♦ were more likely to describe a time when they had been uncomfortable because of what they were wearing,
- ♦ reported on others' reactions to their clothing more often,
- ♦ were more likely to change their clothing style in response to feeling out of place,
- ♦ were less concerned with appearing "distinctive,"
- ♦ mentioned "comfort" more often when describing a time they felt good about how they were dressed.

Perhaps more experience in living outside one's culture leads one to be a bystander, noticing others' reactions, valuing comfort and adapting to local norms.

Perhaps more experience in living outside one's culture leads one to be a bystander, noticing others' reactions, valuing comfort and adapting to local norms.

Third Culture Kids (defined here as those who had had their first expatriate experience before age 18) differed from those whose first expatriate experience occurred later in their lives in these ways:

- ♦ were more likely to describe a time when they had been uncomfortable because of what they were wearing,
- ♦ rated models somewhat more positively, especially seeing them as more likely to be hard-working.

Note: perhaps because of their early start, or because they went on to choose expatriate experiences, TCKs had lived outside their passport countries significantly longer than the non-TCK group.

* Because number of expatriate years could be a function of age -- older people would have had a chance to live more years outside their passport countries -- all these analyses statistically controlled for age.

8) Are peoples' stories about their physical appearance influenced by culture?

Next, we asked whether cultural values were related to the narratives participants told about their physical appearance. That is, did people from one kind of culture tell different stories, hope to project different images, or have different responses to others compared to people from another kind of culture? Comparing the coding of the stories with the Hofstede and Trompenaars cultural dimensions, we found:

Hofstede

Those from more individualistic cultures (compared to those from collectivist ones):

- ♦ were more likely to be able to think of a time when they were mis-interpreted because of their clothing,
- ♦ were less likely to refer to the issue of formality/ informality as a source of discomfort,
- ♦ more often changed their way of dressing after realizing they were mis-dressed,
- ♦ were more likely to be able to think of a time when they wanted to make a particular impression,
- ♦ less often noted reactions of others when describing a time they felt good about how they were dressed,
- ♦ were more likely to want to appear "confident" and "fashionable,"
- ♦ were less likely to want to appear "laid back" or "sexy."

Those from lower power distance cultures (compared to those from higher power distance ones):

- ♦ were more accepting of others' judgments in situations where they were mis-interpreted,
- ♦ were more likely to mention wanting to appear "clean or neat" when describing a time they felt good about their appearance.

Those from cultures weak in uncertainty avoidance (compared to those from stronger uncertainty avoidance cultures):

- ♦ were more likely to be able to think of a time when their clothing or appearance was out of place,
- ♦ were more likely to be able to think of a time when they were mis-interpreted because of their clothing,
- ♦ were more likely to want to appear "confident."

Trompenaars

Those from more universalist cultures (compared to those from particularist ones):

- ♦ when describing incidents when they felt they had been mis-interpreted based on their appearance, were less likely to emphasize that the assumption was wrong,
- ♦ were less likely to describe situations in which they were dressed too formally,
- ♦ more often changed their way of dressing after realizing they were mis-dressed,
- ♦ were more likely to want to appear "confident."

Those from more individualistic cultures (compared to those from communitarian ones):

- ♦ were more likely to be able to think of a time when they were mis-interpreted because of their clothing,
- ♦ were less likely to describe situations in which they were dressed too formally,
- ♦ were more likely to describe situations in which they were mistakenly perceived as being lower in status than they were,
- ♦ were more likely to describe situations in which they were mistakenly perceived as sexually provocative or available.

Those from more specific cultures (compared to those from diffuse ones):

- ♦ when describing incidents when they felt they had been mis-interpreted based on their appearance, were less likely to emphasize that the assumption was wrong,
- ♦ were less likely to describe situations in which they were dressed too formally,
- ♦ were more likely to want to conform, or fit in, when dressed to look their best,
- ♦ were less concerned with appearing “distinctive,”
- ♦ were more likely to want to appear “competent and intelligent.”

Those from cultures in which status is given based on achievement (compared to those where it is given based on family):

- ♦ were more likely to be able to think of a time when they were mis-interpreted because of their clothing,
- ♦ were more likely to want to appear “clean and neat.”

Those from cultures with a belief in the internal ability to control nature (compared to those from cultures with a more external view of nature):

- ♦ were more likely to be able to think of a time when they were mis-interpreted because of their clothing,
- ♦ were less likely to describe situations in which they were dressed too formally.

From this list of findings emerges the pattern that, for some people - those from countries that, like the USA, score in the individualistic, low power distance, weak uncertainty avoidance, universalist, specific, achievement status and internal control directions - there is an acute awareness of how one is being perceived and a tendency to treat their appearance as a malleable instrument, rather than a core and un-changeable part of their identity. These people are more willing to accept others' judgments and change their appearance to suit the circumstance.

For some people...there is an acute awareness of how one is being perceived and a tendency to treat their appearance as a malleable instrument, rather than a core and un-changeable part of their identity.

We do see the tendency for those from individualistic cultures to be less concerned with formality ... and more with a strong presentation of self-confidence, competence, neatness. But fundamentally, clothing is disjointed from core identity for this group, whereas it is an inherent aspect of identity, to be protected and defended, for those from collectivist, communitarian cultures.

We might have expected the opposite - that people from cultures that value individualism would not pay much attention to what others think but rather dress as they like, not noticing or caring about others' feedback. But that is not what the results show. Now, in fact, we do see the tendency for those from individualistic cultures to be less concerned with formality (an inherently hierarchical concern) and more with a strong presentation of self - confidence, competence, neatness. But fundamentally, clothing is disjointed from core identity for this group, whereas it is an inherent aspect of identity, to be protected and defended, for those from collectivist, communitarian cultures.

Conclusions

Within a culture, people tend to judge others' personality, skills, interests and values based on their physical appearance. Those who want to look "creative" or "intelligent" or "business-like," for example, can learn how to convey that within their own cultural norms. When people enter a new culture, however, these messages do not always translate well. What conveys sensitivity or professionalism in one culture can be seen as offensive in another. Understanding the role that physical presentation makes in one's expatriate adjustment can smooth and speed the process of transition. Specific findings include:

- ♦ Participants most often described wanting to project an air of elegance, competence, and beauty. Other common goals were to appear happy, fun, relaxed, clean and neat, confident, young and slim.
- ♦ The fundamental hypothesis that people make assumptions about others based on their physical appearance was clearly confirmed. The clothing "code" is strong.
- ♦ Participants judged appropriateness more leniently if they were from cultures that value individual freedom; that emphasize egalitarian and positive relationships with peers and superiors; and that are comfortable with ambiguity.
- ♦ It seems that, when faced with an appearance we do not have internal rules about, or more generally in ambiguous situations, we revert to cultural values in shaping our judgments about others.
- ♦ Participants felt out of place when their clothing was unlike others' in terms of formality, modesty, chic-ness and color.
- ♦ For some people, like those from individualistic countries like the US, there is an acute awareness of how one is being perceived and a tendency to treat their appearance as a malleable instrument, rather than a core and un-changeable part of their identity.
- ♦ We see the tendency for those from individualistic cultures to be less concerned with formality and more with a strong presentation of self-confidence, competence, neatness. But fundamentally, clothing is disjointed from core identity for this group, whereas it is an inherent aspect of identity, to be protected and defended, for those from collectivist, communitarian cultures.

More Examples of Participants' Descriptions

Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt your clothing/appearance was out of place?

Formality:

Examples: Too Formal

It took me a while to fully grasp the "casual friday" concept in my organization. At first I would wear simply the same as any other day (business casual). Someone mentioned that on Friday everything was very casual, and I thought that a very nice habit. However, when the next Friday I showed up in shorts and a t-shirt (it was very hot, and no airco in my office), it was made clear that that was not exactly what was meant by "casual Friday." Unwritten rule was that everyone would show up in blue jeans (clean, not too much worn or faded), a polo shirt (white, green, red or blue. No pink, orange or flower print) and sneakers. I ended up going to the supermarket to buy my own casual Friday uniform. (Belgian man)

Examples: Too Informal

In Madrid, women dressed formally and always in the latest fashion. They may only have had one good outfit, but they wore it with aplomb, and accessorized with fashionably-tied scarves to make the difference! They would not go into the street without full make-up, and a well-coordinated outfit. I tend to be the dressed up sort anyway, but in Spain, I was shocked to hear my "assistenta"..cleaning lady.. say to me (in Spanish) as I was about to run out to the bodega to pick up a few things, "Senora, you are not going out like THAT!" (US American woman)

Modesty:

Examples: Too Modest, Prim

Brazilians dress well - women wear high heels most of the time and a lot of skimpy tops (tight, low cut, exposed back, etc) and tight pants (in my opinion). I started wearing skimpier tops and more fitted jeans when I lived in Brazil. I felt better about myself and more ingrained with the culture when I dressed like everyone else. It was also fun to try on a different persona when wearing what I would consider "too risque" back home. It was harder to wear the same clothes back in the United States because I think they come across more provocatively than they would in Brazil, and that made me uncomfortable. Now that I am older, I have basically abandoned all the tops I wore back then because they are too revealing and not age appropriate anymore (but I still have the jeans!). On a side note I have held onto a couple of the tops just so I can go back in time and say to myself 'I can't believe I wore that'! (US American woman)

Examples: Not Modest Enough

In China, a non-religious country, I had thought it would be ok to dress more in the line of "Southern Europe" when on vacation. In other words - tops on the skimpy side when anything else is simply too hot. My mom said I should be more covered up, but then she always does, so I didn't listen. Out on the streets, the intense scrutiny from by-passers quickly showed me my mistake. The funny thing is people always stared at us anyway, because there aren't that many westerners about. But it immediately felt different. I noticed that while the locals weren't necessarily all that covered up them selves, they were covered differently

from me. They wore very short shorts for instance, while my tops were more low-necked and showed more of my shoulders too. Although no one commented, the way they looked - and looked away - was easy to read. It felt quite uncomfortable, and I quickly adjusted to local style. (Danish woman)

Chic-ness:

Examples: Too Dowdy, Out of Fashion

I remember one time when I was shopping in one of the main grocery stores in Athens and was wearing a summery cotton skirt with a pair of flat, comfortable sandals. A woman in front of me at the check-out line who wore the usual skin-tight pants with impossibly high heels and several layers of jewelry over a chic top sized me up from head to toe with utter disdain. Her eyes landed on my feet and stayed there, then looked right in my eyes and laughed and muttered something under her breath in Greek to herself. (US American woman)

I was living in China and the majority of women were wearing dresses and heels. I felt out of place wearing my typical Pacific Northwest (Seattle, WA, USA) outfits of cropped pants and Keen sandals (hiking sandals). It wasn't a "problem" what I was wearing, but it became a problem to my self esteem. As a result I had many dresses hand tailored and bought and wore high heels. My maid encouraged me to dress in tighter fitting jeans and bling-bling tops. By the time I left China I was dressing like a local and not like a "soccer mom" from Seattle. (US American woman)

Examples: Too Chic, Trendy or Avant Garde

When I arrived on a U.S. mid-western college campus as a 25 y.o. graduate student, my suitcase was full of high-heeled shoes and the types of clothes that I would wear back home: two-piece suits and dressy styles (which could be perceived as party clothes in the US). I had none of the sneakers, casual t-shirts and sweatshirts that almost everyone else on campus was wearing and for months I just couldn't bring myself to wearing them, they'd make me too uncomfortable. I was told by someone that I looked like one of the professors rather than students and I wasn't sure if it was a compliment or a hint to change my style. While on an internship, I was for the first time faced with the concept of a "casual Friday." Initially it meant nothing to me and I didn't dress down, until one of the Asian-American undergraduate interns sarcastically commented, "Wow, YOU look very casual today!" When I was back on campus, the clip-clop of my stilettos finally started to annoy me and I searched for a pair of comfortable shoes. I settled on a pair of whites that didn't look as brutal as sneakers to my untrained eye but were soft enough and had a sporty look to them. One of my friends then said they looked like nurse's shoes that his mother wore to work. It was the same guy who, having been to my country before, declared that women there looked "like Christmas trees, overly decorated." (Azerbaijan woman)

Color:

Examples:

Coming from Australia where bright colors were a given, as they matched the weather and more casual clothing was acceptable, to the Geneva community where business meant either dark blue, grey or black and suits, not casual chic, was appropriate for my sector. (French woman)

Church wedding in South Africa. I wore an unstructured plum colored dress with matching jacket. I was surprised to see that most of the guests wore black or similarly dark colors, and

very plain outfits. In my culture, wedding attire is festive and bright and even ornate. Dark colors are reserved for funerals and business functions. The only “rule” is that one does not wear shades of white so as not to upstage the bride. My outfit wasn’t problematic, however, I was very aware of the lack of color among other guests. (US American woman)

When you wear solid black in Thailand it can be assumed that you are in a sad state due to someone’s death. I often wear black tops and bottoms with just a bright colored scarf or jewelry. I wore my “normal work clothes - black” to the office on my first day at a new job. Everyone thought someone in my family had died. (US American woman)

Have you ever felt mis-understood because of how you were dressed or how you looked – that is, that others were making assumptions about you that were not true?

Social Status:

Examples: Higher Social Status

In the 1980s when I was in the reserve forces (Army) in the UK we had to attend training courses periodically at regular Army bases rather than our own centre. We were not issued ID cards, as they were held in our files for issue only if we were going abroad or some other “special” need (in case we lost them!). So when turning up at the gate to gain access to a military base I had to be able to convince them to let me in, with no ID. I learned very quickly to turn up in a jacket and tie. As far as the guards were concerned, this meant Officer, so I could gain access much quicker than if I turned up in casual clothes (at the time, due to the IRA threat from Northern Ireland, we were not supposed to wear uniform when travelling). I think the stereotype terrorist in their mind wouldn’t wear a jacket and tie and walk up to the main gate. (British man)

Examples: Lower Social Status

When I arrived in the US, I started working as a waitress, wearing a uniform. The uniform/ position implies, at least it is how I felt it, for some people that you must either be a student or not a smart person. I have a law degree in my country and was not used to dress in such a way. Well, I handled this situation by always being very polite and classy, whatever the outfit. (Belgian woman)

Wealth:

Examples: More Wealthy

In Kenya, people assume you are very rich when you wear western clothing, and there is no brand recognition. In LA, unless you are wearing brand name clothing, you are assumed to be poor, and there is a definite status system in place attached to wearing the ‘right’ clothing. I remember going to a Kenyan wedding in the wilds of Mount Kenya, and being mortified because I felt overdressed wearing fancy shoes. That was until we were given places of honor next to the bride and groom (my partner was the regional manager, so apparently was the honored guest) - and I realized that the wedding party felt honored and respected by our family’s more formal wedding attire. Having well dressed expat guests elevated their status in their hometown, and delighted their families. (Welsh woman)

Yes, as a white man and taken for granted to be an American, it was assumed that I was rich and often bothered for money by even the better off in Congo. Native Congo people who walk past a rich Congolese to come to me to ask for money or things. If you were at the scene of an accident, it was assumed that you were either at fault or expected take care of

the injury (money). (US American man)

Examples: Less Wealthy

On vacation in Valencia, wearing typical tourist garb of shorts and training shoes, trying to get served in the bar of the 5-star hotel we were staying in. It was Sunday lunchtime and this was a very popular place for Valencians to meet. They were dressed very smartly - dressed to impress - and we were not treated in the same way by the staff because we looked untidy. We were with a friend who lives in Valencia and she pointed this out. (British man)

This happened while I was living in Saudi Arabia. I was on home leave, visiting my sister in Phoenix, AZ. The water in Arabia was very harsh so after clothes had been washed a number of times, they became stiff, the colors faded or turned grey so we were all a pretty ratty sight when we first got home. We had stopped in Istanbul on our way to Phoenix and I bought a lapis and gold bracelet. The catch on the bracelet broke so one of my first tasks was to find a place to get the bracelet fixed. We were in the local mall when I spotted a Filipino sitting in the window of a jewelry store doing repairs. Great!! Just like home!! Since "home" to me was Arabia and Filipinos were the technicians of the Middle East. We walked in and approached a very tall, blonde, elegantly-dressed and coiffed woman behind a counter. I pulled out my bracelet and explained what I needed. She looked down her nose at me, obviously judging me by my grayish-white blouse, blue jeans and tennis shoes--standard Aramco housewife attire. Without even glancing at the bracelet, the elegant woman sniffed "We only work on 14 carat gold jewelry here". I replied, "Ok. I'll go elsewhere since this bracelet is 18 carat." And we did. I heard the Filipino chuckle as we went out the door. (US American woman)

Nationality:

Examples:

I am half American-half Bangladeshi and so my looks often confuse people. Once I went into a store in Bangladesh with my friend of Indian origin (who grew up in Dubai). She wore jeans and a t-shirt and I wore a shalwar-kameez. Later the store-owner told my aunt that an American girl came in wearing a shalwar kameez and spoke fluent Bangla and a Bangladeshi girl came in wearing jeans and couldn't speak a word of Bangla. I always try to be as gracious as possible and never get offended. (American-Bangladeshi woman)

I often feel that people mistake me for American (I was born Canadian) because of my accent and the way I dress. Europeans seem to keep their distance slightly if they think that you are American but if I can let them know I am Canadian they warm right up! (Canadian woman)

Living in NYC, if I went around in my traditional clothes (shalwar-kameez from Pakistan), people automatically assumed I was Indian. In the same city, when I went around wearing jeans and T-shirt, EVERYONE would speak to me in Spanish! When I told them I didn't speak Spanish, they thought I had lived in the US so long that I had forgotten my mother-tongue! (Pakistani woman)

Sexuality:

Examples: More Provocative

When I first arrived in Dubai, in 1996, I knew only one business contact. I asked him about local cultural restrictions, especially regarding clothing. He told me to "feel free" and that

there was nothing to worry about. One day, I took a long drive to a smaller emirate. I wore shorts, though they were not too short, a T-shirt and a ball cap. I went to see some locally famous crabs on a beach. When I got there, many families were picnicking on the grassy area, above the beach. I wandered below, looking for and following the speedy crustaceans. I noticed that I had gone farther than expected and started back. It was then that I noticed two young boys coming toward me. I thought nothing of it. One was in local dress and the other in Western gear, both about 13 or so. As I neared them, I noticed the larger one looking about and then he came to me, putting his arms around me from the back...He started to bump against me and say "Don't afraid, only a little." I shouted "NO!" and threw my elbow back at him. He and the other boy backed off while I scrambled up the hill. I went back to my car and drove down the way about a half mile. I calmed down and then saw a British woman looking for shells. I had driven a long time to get there and was not going to leave yet. I got out of the car and walked the deserted beach. After only a few minutes, I heard a lot of feet running toward me. I looked up and saw a group of young men, ranging from perhaps ten to fifteen in age, running at me. I turned and ran to my car and had just gotten in, locked the doors and they arranged themselves in front of the car. Each one reached into his khandoura ... (US American woman)

Examples: More Prim

I'm sure that some Brazilians assumed I was conservative due to my old-fashioned jeans and full coverage tops. (US American woman)

Seriousness:

Examples:

Already in the US, I had to visit my company's office to meet up with our recruiter. We were supposed to go out to the city to handle paperwork for the whole day. Since our office is in Miami and the weather was really hot and humid, I decided against professional clothes. This was a big mistake, because I ended up being at the office all day long, freezing in the air-conditioned office. My boss told me, that I looked like a hippie, but understood the reason I was dressed like that. Fortunately I could make him forget this incident by appearing the next day by appearing in a fully professional look. (Hungarian woman)

In Nanjing, China, working at a University. I would wear casual clothing for teaching my classes, including casual shorts and polo tops. For most of the classes this was no issue, but for any business-related class (Business English, for example), it was a sign that I was not to be taken seriously. If I did not wear the appropriate clothing for what was the local perception that business personnel wore in the West, then obviously I had no idea. This created an instant barrier that provided more work to break down (until I realised that the clothing was the issue). Other teachers would wear business casual, often they would wear ties. There was no rule, but this was an unwritten rule. (Australian man)

They thought I was a joke to attend their gathering to wear my traditional cloth. Where I feel honor to wear such traditional clothing to the occasion. (Indonesian woman)

Age:

Examples:

In both Kenya & Rwanda I was often perceived as being younger than I was because of my more casual clothing, especially when I wore sandals for comfort instead of the heels the Africans wore in more formal settings. (US American woman)

Wearing t-shirts and jean pants and a facecap (baseball cap) to the bank in a small town in USA, I was asked if i was a student at the university. An assumption for dressing the part ??? and speaking English like the Brits?? On my part I believe she could see my bios when I signed into the account but only my dressing makes an impression!. I must tell you the same thing happens every time I wear a baseball cap and no jewelry. I took it as a compliment and just what she is used to seeing? I have learnt assumptions are very natural if you have never left your world. I just gently answered No. and thanked her for helping me. She exhibited empathy in her job. (Nigerian woman)