

Marital Impact on Appearance Management Behaviors and Clothing Selections among Married Couples

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Jeong-Ju Yoo

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Family and Consumer Sciences, Baylor University, Waco, USA

Abstract *The purpose of this study is to investigate the behavioral complexities frequently arising in married couples with respect to clothing choices. Symbolic interaction theory was used to understand how spousal influence affects clothing selection after marriage. A convenient sample of nine married couples was interviewed for the data collection. A content analysis revealed how marriage affected their clothing choices, types of communication conveyed with their spouses about clothes and shopping patterns. The primary result indicated that individuals take their spouses' clothing preferences into consideration. Couples exhibited varying frequencies of communication about clothing choices and developed a variety of shopping patterns. As a result of the findings from this study, future research directions are suggested.*

Key words *Appearance management behaviors, Symbolic Interaction Theory, Spousal Influence*

Introduction

The spousal relationship is usually found to be the most significant of all relationships within the family (Edwards and Klockars, 1981). Entering marriage is a significant life course event that may influence the clothing choices of each partner. Spouses' discussions concerning clothing worn by their partners and clothing shopping patterns might come into play when making decisions regarding clothing choices.

Clothing is an important factor related to appearance, involving one's own and others' image perceptions of an individual (Schlenker, 1986). Indeed, positive perceptions of a partner's physical attractiveness is an element in maintaining marital relationships (Albada, et al., 2002), and physical attractiveness is an important component of a relationship (Fletcher, et al., 1999). An individual's decision as to what clothing to wear could be the result of adjustments on the part of a partner's expectations. Due to the highly interactive nature of marriage, individuals can influence their partners' clothing choices; likewise, they may also alter their own choices in reaction to their spouses' clothing preferences.

Family relationship researchers have not yet examined how married couples influence clothing choices, although marital status is an important variable with a substantial impact on consumer behavior (Solomon and Rabolt, 2004). A study exploring the possible dynamics and complexities arising in married couples' appearance management behaviors might yield insights into this interaction. Therefore, the

purpose of this study is to explore some of the behavioral complexities frequently arising in married couples with respect to clothing selection.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interaction (SI) theory was used to form the foundation in understanding clothing choices of married couples. The basic premise of SI is that “people attach symbolic meaning to objects, behaviors, themselves, and other people, and they develop and transmit these meanings through interaction” (Howard, 2000: 371). In the marriage relationship, there are various patterns in negotiating other areas, such as food, automobile and house purchases. Therefore, there must be a number of unique patterns relating to the negotiation of clothing preferences. Effective spousal influence results in individuals making sense of the self and wearing clothes that satisfy spousal preferences through interactions about dress and apparel product purchases. In this case, SI theory is especially relevant, given that it is concerned with the symbols that people use when interacting with one another, and how these meanings are constructed and negotiated (Sandstrom, et al., 2003).

Clothing choices and identity negotiation

Through the process of choosing clothes to wear, individuals define and express their own identities. Sproles (1979) has noted that some people’s self-identity is virtually driven by changing styles and clothing preferences. Kaiser (1997) argues that identity is the self-in-context, and the self is embedded in social relationships and situations, as individuals tend to dress and behave differently depending on the individuals with whom they interact. Changing clothing choices allows them to anticipate what identities they would like to maintain in various social situations so that they can present themselves accordingly to others. Since appearance management practices are impacted by marriage, and appearance is used to communicate identity, it is possible that either individual’s identities can be renegotiated. Even a new married identity may be constructed.

Goffman (1959) argues that fashion causes people to alter their virtual identities, thereby relinquishing one image of the self in favor of another. The definition of one’s identity in marriage is complex because relationships within marriage are of two identities (Erikson, 1963). It is assumed that each individual wants to create an appearance that satisfies his or her spouse’s preferences without detracting from his or her own preferred image. Husbands and wives may also differ in the degree to which they make changes in their appearance to conform to their spouses’ preferences. For example, wives might select certain clothes to look nice for their husbands, or vice-versa. Selecting clothes in this case involves a variety of expectations related to their spouses.

Communication about clothing worn by the spouse and by the self

Symbolic interaction typically interprets meaning as constructed in the process of interaction. Communication is crucial if spouses are to understand each other's preferences (Finkenauer, et al., 2004). Spousal communication is significant for marital satisfaction (Rosen-Grandon, et al., 2004), as well as for expressive and constructive communication (Fincham and Beach, 2002; Miller, et al., 2003). Interaction about clothing and satisfaction of spousal appearance are related because in-depth discussions concerning clothing provide a better understanding of each other's clothing preferences.

SI theory provides a useful tool for understanding the possible relationship between appearance satisfaction and the clothing concerns of married couples. Husbands and wives define a visual and verbal understanding of clothes and construct meanings that they perceive through communication. In other words, when an individual wants his or her spouse to look a certain way, it must involve a variety of communication strategies.

Clothing purchases

Research concerned with gender differences in clothing perceptions provides relevance to the differences between husbands and wives in clothes shopping. Buying clothes is regarded as a role specific to women (Corrigan, 1994; Horne and Winakor, 1995). However, men in public high-status positions tend to be self-conscious and show great interest in self-presentation and the strategic utility of clothing (Edwards and Klockars, 1981). In addition, as Lubner-Ruper and Winakor (1985) suggest, husbands or wives may purchase clothing that is more expensive than their spouses feel is appropriate, which may then result in disagreement. Husbands and wives may develop unique shopping patterns in order to provide clothing for their spouses and themselves. Because clothing shopping behavior is directly related to clothing available in people's wardrobes, clothing shopping has a definite influence on developing an identity of what to wear in individuals' daily lives.

Therefore, specific research questions were established in order to 1) investigate how spouses influence clothing choices after marriage; 2) identify communication patterns that couples make regarding clothes worn by their spouses; and 3) understand how married couples shop for clothing.

Method

Sample Selection

The Internal Review Board reviewed all instruments and procedures and approved the research prior to data collection. A convenient sample of nine married couples was recruited to participate in the research. They were all Caucasians, and their ages ranged from 21 to 40. All of the participants were living with their spouses. Six of the couples had been married for less than three years, and three couples had been married for a period from four to six years.

Procedure for Gathering Data

Face-to-face interviews

Husbands and wives were interviewed separately and at different times to keep the responses independent of each other's influence. The reflexive interview technique was used, which provides room for conducting in-depth discussion and produces data for interpretation. This technique allowed participants to talk in their own words about marriage and clothing, and whether their spouses exerted any influence. Types of questions concerned with the effect of marriage on clothing choices included the following: "How does marriage affect the way you put clothes together?" and "Do you conform to your spouse's clothing preferences?" Questions concerned with communication about clothing included the following: "Is clothing in general a topic for discussion with your spouse?" and "What type of comments do you make about your spouse's clothing with your spouse?" Questions concerned with clothing shopping included the following: "How do you shop for clothing for you and your spouse?" All of the interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed by the primary investigator. An independent reviewer then reviewed the transcriptions to assess their accuracy.

Data analysis

A content analysis was performed in order to analyze the interview responses (Holsti, 1969; Paoletti, 1982). Content analysis produces quantitative data from verbal communication. After the interviews were transcribed, the responses were arranged by questions across the different couples. The text was read several times in order to identify emerging themes and to record the frequency of these themes.

Results

Clothing choices after being married

The first objective is to investigate how spouses influence clothing choices. Twelve individuals (seven wives and five husbands) stated that marriage had an effect on their clothing choices, whereas six individuals (two wives and four husbands) mentioned that their clothing choices remained constant before and after marriage. A multitude of opinions were expressed to account for the ways in which marriage affected the ways that the couples dressed. Four reasons emerged in explaining changes in their clothing choices: 1) taking the spouse's clothing preferences into consideration; 2) dressing up for a special occasion; 3) relying on the wife for clothing; and 4) budgetary constraints.

Taking the spouse's clothing preferences into consideration

Most frequently, citing the reason that marriage affected their clothing choices and appearance management behaviors, eight individuals (six wives and two husbands) mentioned that they took their spouses' opinions into consideration. Both the husband and wife of Couple 7 took each other's opinions into

consideration. H7 commented, "I take her opinion into consideration. I mean I know that there are certain clothes that she likes when I put them on. She persistently says that is something that she likes." His wife (W7) said, "Well, I wouldn't wear something that he doesn't like. I wouldn't bother to. I mean, I like to look good for him. So it definitely affects me." Comments from those wives who mentioned taking their spouses' opinions into consideration included comments such as the following: "I am just around him all the time, and I know what he likes; eventually, his taste starts to influence me" (W4); "I guess I try to keep in mind what he likes" (W5); "I do think about what my husband thinks about how I look when I get dressed" (W6); "I care about the way my husband thinks I look. Since we are married, I would say, in my mind, I think a lot whether he will like this outfit" (W8), and W9 stated the following:

Part of being married is respecting your spouse, so I want to make sure I respect my spouse by the way I dress. So I try not to dress too sexy, and I don't want to reveal my stomach. If he tells me things that he doesn't like, if he tells me that a shirt is too tight, I am not going to wear that.

For the husband, H1 also revealed that he felt a responsibility to dress nicer than he normally would after marriage.

Dressing up for a special occasion

Of those individuals who mentioned that marriage affected their manner of clothing choices after marriage, two husbands mentioned that they generally dressed the same before and after being married, but that they dressed up for special occasions. H2 said, "For the most part, in my everyday attire, I still wear my T-shirts and Levi's, which hasn't changed, but for dressing up, I dress up more now." Likewise, H6 said, "There are some days when she says, 'Hey, you need to wear this, and you need to wear that.'" Having to dress up for an occasion made them feel that marriage definitely affected their clothing choices, although it did not affect them on an everyday basis.

Relying on the wife for buying clothing

One husband (H9) expressed that he now relies on his wife for clothing: "I guess when I was quite a bit younger, my mom kind of put things together, and so I expect my wife has to." He commented that marriage had an impact on clothing choices made for him.

Budgetary constraints

Marriage also affected clothing choices due to budgetary constraints. W2 stated the following: It is all financial. Because before we got married, I spent a lot of money on clothes. And after we got married, I never go shopping. Most of this is because I've taken on more of my husband's financial ideas since we have been married.

Clothing styles remaining constant

Six individuals (four husbands and two wives) said that marriage did not affect their clothing choices. A multitude of opinions were also expressed to account for the ways in which marriage did not affect their clothing choices. Comments for not being affected included the following: "I dress the same as I did before I was married. I wouldn't change the way I dress after I got married" (W1); "I don't think since I got married that I have changed the way I dress. I dress pretty much the way I have always dressed" (H3); "I am not any one way or the other" (H4); "I haven't seen any changes in the way that I choose clothes. Everything has been pretty consistent before or after we were married" (H5); "I dress pretty much the same as I did before I got married. I would say that my style has remained fairly constant" (H8).

One other emergent reason from W3 as to why marriage did not influence her clothing was due to her work clothing requirement. She said, "Five days a week, I mean, it makes no sense to wear nice clothes. I try to be comfortable more than anything." She stated that she needs to dress a certain way for her job, and that affects her most of the time regarding her clothes choices.

Communication about clothing worn by their spouses

The second objective is to identify the communication that takes place among couples regarding clothes and appearance. Couples varied in the frequency with which they discussed clothing and their preferences in clothing styles for each other. Three patterns emerged with respect to spousal communication about clothing: 1) couples who talk about each other's clothing; 2) couples who do not talk about each other's clothing; and 3) clothing as a potential source of tension.

Clothing as a topic of discussion

Four couples clearly spent time discussing clothing preferences and negotiating their appearances once they had gotten married. Couple 4 revealed that each other's clothing was frequently discussed, and that each of them knew what clothing looked best on them. The husband said, "I like preppy clothing. I am very coordinated. I wear black shirts, and I wear black shoes. If I wear black shoes, I wear black socks." The wife noted, "My husband likes to look clean and neat...My husband dresses well and generally knows what looks good on him." In disagreement, however, the husband mentioned that he would tell his wife directly that he did not like an outfit that his wife was wearing.

Both partners of Couple 7 indicated that clothing was a general topic of discussion between them, and they shared their preferences for each other's appearance. When they discussed clothing, they mentioned that they talked about particular things. They informed their spouse of their dislike of particular clothing each one wore. W7 said, "I let him know." The wife mentioned that she asked her husband about her size, such as when wearing different clothing items.

Couple 8 also indicated that they had a good understanding of each partner's style preferences as a result of the discussions they have had. W8 stated, "It is generally, 'Oh you look good,' or, 'I like

this,' or, 'I need to go to a store because I need a jeans,' or whatever." In the case of disagreement W8 admitted, "I usually don't say anything unless it was really awful, and then I would find a discreet way to mention it without making him feel bad." H8 noted, "I have made only a few negative comments, but have learned to keep them to myself, but they are rare." Some couples reported that they made subtle suggestions rather than direct comment about their partners' clothing choices.

Couple 9 was satisfied with the clothing choices each made, and they routinely offered suggestions about each other's clothing. W9 said, "My husband usually dresses well, although occasionally he will pair a top and bottom that are a little off or underdressed for an occasion...Quite frequently, he will comment on how he likes the way I dressed that day. That is a favorite shirt of his, or something like that." When they talked about their clothes, H9 said, "I guess what we are going to wear that day is sometimes a topic. She often asked me for advice on what to wear for work." W9 also mentioned that almost every morning, her husband made comments about her clothing.

Clothing was not discussed

There were two couples that rarely talked about clothing. In some instances, they did not talk about clothing because they were satisfied with what they wore. For example, the husband and wife of Couple 3 both commented that clothing was not a topic for discussion. H3 said, "I am used to her, and I like what she wears...I wouldn't care as long as she is comfortable. I am ok with it." W3 said, "For the most part, I think he has good taste."

Couple 4 revealed that they rarely engaged in discussions about clothing, but they expressed that they were satisfied with their spouse's clothing choices. This couple maintained control over individual clothing choices, but each partner provided feedback to the other about specific outfits only for special events, as they wanted to present themselves as a couple in public.

Clothing as a potential source of tension.

In the case of three couples, discussions about clothing seem to be a potential source of tension in the marital relationship. For example, W1 stated that she rarely talked about clothing. She was not able to identify her husband's clothing preferences, as evidenced by her husband. H1 revealed, "They [clothes purchased for him by his wife] are not clothes I would choose for myself." In addition, when he did not like the clothes worn by his wife, he said he generally keeps his opinions to himself.

Couple 2 also noted that that they rarely talked about clothes. With respect to any disagreement about clothing, W2 stated, "When we are going out, or depending on the occasion, I think he dresses too casually." W2 also said that she did not understand her husband's clothing preferences because she usually had to take back purchased items she bought for her husband. It is evident that Couple 2 wants to avoid purchasing clothes that may instigate disagreement.

H5 indicated that he and his wife never talked about clothes, and that his wife did not manage her outfits to match his wishes. "We disagree about clothes. I like dresses, but she does not." He noted,

“...If I had my way, she should wear dresses all the time, but she never does.” He mentioned that she generally does not wear dresses. He also stated that she did not alter the selection of her clothes in favor of him, and that she ignored his preferences concerning her clothing. He said that he sought advice from his spouse, but that it was meaningless to him: “I always seek her advice. She doesn’t usually know, but I ask her anyway.” In any disagreement with his wife about clothing, he states, “I would hint like crazy.” He continues, “I certainly would never say to change, but I would say, ‘Are you sure you want to wear that?’ when she wears something that I don’t like.” He also makes subtle suggestions instead of arguing.

Tasks of Clothing Purchases

Once the husbands and wives began to make more in-depth comments, a great deal of both agreements and also disagreements on clothing matters became apparent. Shopping habits with spouses were categorized into four groups: 1) couples who tend to shop for clothing together; 2) partners who tend to shop for clothing without their spouses; 3) wives who tend to shop alone for their own clothing, but often shop with their husbands for their clothing; and 4) husbands who do not shop for clothing at all.

Couples who tend to shop for clothing together

Four couples provided a variety of reasons as to why they shopped together. One of the most frequently given reasons for shopping together was that they wanted to have a second opinion and get approval from their spouses before making a buying decision. For example, W2 commented, “Because sometimes I buy things he doesn’t like, I end up usually taking it back. I would never go ahead and buy it without his consent.” H2 commented, “In my case, if I am buying clothes for myself, she can’t decide.” When H2 buys his clothes, his wife does not take part in the decision. W3 says, “I don’t mind shopping by myself for my clothes, but I like having him there because I like to have his opinion. If he doesn’t like something, then I won’t get it.” In response to the same question, H3 says,

When we go out together, it is mostly so that she can show me stuff she wants to buy. She wants to make sure that I like it. I pretty much like anything she buys, unless it is something that is especially bad. Mostly it has to do with either she has two things, which one do I like better...I like her to come with me. I don’t know why. I guess it is more fun. For the same thing, you know if I have two clothes items, and I don’t know which one she likes better, [I can ask her].

Couple 9 also shops together to share their opinions. H9 commented, “I have a different angle on what she would look good in; she likes it a lot when I pick out things.” Most of the time, W9 also likes to go shopping with her husband so that she can ask him questions to understand what her husband thinks of style and fit, as well.

Although the most frequently cited reason for shopping together was to discuss clothes preferences and to come to mutual decisions, Couple 4 had a different reason. H4 believes that they are forced to shop together because of financial reasons. H4 said, “I don’t think I am allowed to have money by my-

self to buy my clothes.” However, his wife makes decisions about what she likes to wear for herself, as long as she is certain about the product. W4 said:

I think it is when he has weekends off. That is just when we happened to go. It is just a time matter. Generally we give each other opinions. Whether or not I am shopping with my spouse, it is my decision.

In this case, W4 tends to be in control of the process of selecting clothes for herself, even though they shop for clothing together.

Partners who tend to shop for clothing without their spouses

Two couples showed considerable independent clothing shopping behaviors. Couple 5 stated that they preferred to purchase their own clothes and meet each other afterward. H5 said, “When we go to the store, we usually don’t walk side by side.” W5’s comments correspond with those of her husband’s: “We have to go alone to find the clothing” H5 mentioned that he would argue with her until he gets the clothing he would like to purchase, even if his wife does not agree with him. W5 reacts similarly in this kind of situation, saying, “I will let him have his way.” A case resembling that of Couple 5 was found in Couple 8. H8 stated, “I think we both prefer to shop independently; we don’t really consult with each other too much.” In response to the same question, W8 said, “If we are going to specially buy clothes, I would say we usually shop alone.” For these couples who tend to shop separately, there is more freedom in what each spouse chooses to wear.

Wives who tend to shop alone for their own clothing, but often shop with their husbands for their clothing

There were two couples in which the wife shopped alone for her own clothing, but shopped together for her spouse’s clothing. H6 said, “I don’t like it when she goes shopping for me by herself, because of the clothes that she picks out; they are not generally things I would pick out if I went by myself.” W6 stated that she would not buy clothing that her husband told her not to buy for him. Couple 7 commented that they shop for the husband’s clothing together because the wife felt that her husband was relatively more particular about choosing his own outfits.

Husbands who do not shop for clothing at all

There was one husband (H1) who did not shop for clothing at all. H1 stated, “I never shop for myself, my whole life, I never shopped for my own clothes, even when I was single. I never buy clothes.” However, H1 continued, “Most of what happens is that my wife brings clothes. If I like them, we keep them. If I don’t like them, we would take them back. Isn’t that terrible?” He does not wear clothing his wife buys for him unless they pass certain criteria that he has not divulged to his wife. His wife finds it inconvenient when clothes have to be returned to the store.

Discussion

Marriage affected the way married individuals dress, as eight (either both partners or one of them) out of nine couples agreed that spousal influence affects their clothing selection. An investigation of clothing behavior between husbands and wives revealed that the marital relationship has the potential to mold each person's identity through the process of accommodating the partner's clothing preferences. The most frequently cited reason of those claiming that they changed their clothing style after marriage was that these individuals took their spouses' preferences into consideration. Therefore, the appearance of husbands and wives is dependably negotiated throughout the marriage relationship.

Although it has been assumed that verbal communication conveyed between individuals exerts a great deal of influence on developing the self-image, this investigation of couples' interactions regarding appearance in real-life situations revealed that the amount of interaction concerning clothing selection between husbands and wives seemed to vary quite a bit from couple to couple. It is possible that the manipulation of appearance created through spousal interaction could contribute to levels of stability or instability if the other person feels that he or she is being unfairly manipulated within a marriage. Although clothing choices are also often negotiated through the use of subtle suggestions, a potential source of tension can occur in disagreement regarding spousal clothing preferences.

Given the prevalent assumption that most clothing purchases are made by wives, an investigation of their interactions revealed different dynamics of clothing purchase behaviors among couples. The emerging idea from this investigation of couples' shopping is that couples tend to seek feedback from their spouses, and to different degrees, they will defer to their spouses' preferences when shopping with them. Shopping both unites and separates husbands and wives as they select and purchase clothing. Couples may indeed have developed a preferred collective decision-making process.

Appearance management in marriage is more complex than it initially appears. In decision-making for clothing purchases, a mutual level of understanding is often negotiated before the purchase occurs. In other words, married individuals predict the consequences of clothing decisions made in the marriage context. In such a case, even wives that make most of the clothing purchases are not found to control all aspects of the decision-making related to clothing. Individuals engage in a variety ways of shopping for their own and for their spouses' clothes within the context of marriage.

Conclusions

In an effort to explore the nature of two individuals' harmonizing their clothing decisions in marriage, the findings of complementary responses from couples were outlined. Human beings use clothes as adaptive mechanisms to adjust to their own environments. Consequently, as the role of husband or wife develops, marriage might have an effect on overt actions related to clothing and appearance management behaviors. On the basis of their salience to the self and the degree to which one is committed in a marriage, these identities are premised to have particular consequences. The interviews demonstrated that

marriage is an arena within which considerable amounts of change occur with respect to clothing for married couples.

In seeking to probe the primary tenet of how appearance is established, maintained, and altered through communication, Symbolic Interaction (SI) theory was used in order to understand how spousal influence leads to clothing choices. SI theory provides an effective way of framing the study, as it explains how spousal influences come into play when making interpretations of clothing worn by the self and by one's spouse. In this study, it was clear that the negotiation of clothing style and its meaning that each partner held was necessary between spouses. In a key proposition of SI theory, these meanings that define people, situations, and social settings are emergent from negotiation; as a result, some appearance of consensus is necessary in relationships.

Recommendations and Limitations

The conclusions reached in this study have important implications for the retail industry, particularly in areas targeting both men's and women's apparel. Retailers need to understand the distinctions and differences of marketing to couples, as opposed to individuals. It is evident that those couples who shop together provide a significant influence on shopping decisions for clothing. Focus groups of married individuals exploring the specific style or fit features considered appropriate by their spouses would help companies who wish to target this group. Accommodating the shopping procedures for men's clothing, allowing women to shop for their husbands, but making it easy for them to return rejected items would help retailers address the needs of wives shopping for their husbands.

For scholars and educators, it is recommended that further studies be conducted, including a detailed categorization of variables: socio-economic status, duration of the marriage, whether the family includes children, ages of the participants, and levels of education. These categorizations provide a keener perspective for the researcher from which to adopt a detailed assessment of how marriage influences individuals' appearance management behaviors, and how important appearance is in maintaining marital stability. It is also important to understand whether marital conflicts or satisfaction exist by exploring spouses' sense of fashion, which scholars have largely overlooked. It might also be important to examine whether any individuals have manipulated their appearance through riskier or extreme measures (e.g., plastic surgery, taking diet pills) after being married and identify the factors attributed to these unhealthy appearance management behaviors within the marriage context.

All of the participants were Caucasian-American, with a small sample group size; different findings could perhaps emerge if the sample selection were either multi-racial or if the study focused on another single racial group. The findings could have been larger, with more representative samples. However, the limitations of the study do not affect the new research area—spousal influence on appearance management behaviors—that this study has introduced.

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