

WHAT·U·WEAR

by Jerome Ryckborst

I love to watch first year students in September. I probably have a sadistic streak but I think it's hilarious to watch just how hard this year's freshies work at fitting in. For most of us, it's "been here, done that, I know this scene!" But first year students have it rougher, because they haven't been here before. What's interesting is how they — often without forethought — turn to clothing to help them adjust to their new surroundings.

Especially in the first month of school we'll see how first year's dress to fit their faculties. New students feel insecure about the university environment and their place in it, so they dress according to their conception of what is acceptable to their group, subconsciously wearing what will help them overcome the insecurity of being "new" or "alone".

The exaggeration is hilarious, especially around this time of year. People are all over-dressing and over-doing it to try and fit a role . . . just so we can know who's what.

Artsies wear wild stuff, angular hair cuts and crazy colours. Business students are another easily identifiable group, especially the women. Variations of polo-prep is the name of the game here. Jocks wear sweats, engineers wear Hewlett Packards, aggies wear cowboy boots. It's all the same type of generalization. Reflecting group identity is only one of the reasons behind our clothing choices.

Clothes are an extension of the body. In our culture we wear clothes almost all of our waking hours, and many people incorporate what they wear in their self-concept. We don't see ourselves as a naked person, but as a clothed body. People acquire the properties of the garments they wear.

When women wear high heels, they don't see themselves as women wearing heels. They become *taller women*. Individuals may wear strong, bold colours because this gives them self-confidence, or makes them feel more forceful. Look, for example, at sports uniforms. They're always bright, strong colours.

Because clothing becomes an extension of the body and of the self-concept, our dress habits affect how we perceive ourselves. Could you see yourself wearing the clothing — complete with hair, jewelry, make-up — of a pop musician? Or the conservative suit and tie of an Alberta business man? Clothing really is a part of self-image, and unless you see yourself as a musician or businessman, you wouldn't want to wear *their* clothing.

And that's not all. Some of us also wear clothing to reflect status. We know who's rich and who's trendy. Related to this is trophyism: wearing articles or clothes to show off courage or strength. Things like chains, brass knuckles, or police uniforms are examples. One Alberta fire department rejected one of the best heat resistant fabrics for their uniforms because it was too *limp*, and they wouldn't look like real men.

These are some of the theories which explain clothing choice. I could go on, but there's really only one more interesting reason why people wear clothes: sex.

Sexual attraction — we're not just talking fishnet stockings or latex muscle shirts here, people. Everything we wear adds to our sexual attractiveness. As one theory would have it, any body part we cover up for a long time (like a century or two) "stores up" in erotic value. Uncovering these parts gradually is considered taboo, titillating *and* sexy. This happened in the sixties with the midi-skirt which shrank to become the mini, gradually exposing more leg.

Another surprise: we don't wear clothes out of modesty. Modesty results from wearing clothes. We started out naked and began using body covering for environmental protection. Now we wear them for aesthetic reasons too.

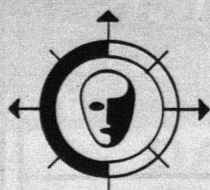
The desire to be beautiful is supposed to be the most common group motivating attitude. Body adornment draws attention to or from various body parts as we strive for aesthetic perfection. Nose piercing and shrink-to-fit pants are recent examples of this.

But whether it is modesty, weather, group identity, sex, status or self-concept, clothing plays an important role in our everyday life, on campus as much as off.

Ironically, we rarely consider the why of *what-u-wear*.



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- all program activities
- member of SORSE Advisory Board

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