Do you see what I see?: A cross-cultural study on interpretation of clothing as a non-verbal signal.

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DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY ON INTERPRETATION OF CLOTHING AS A NON-VERBAL SIGNAL

Abstract

To understand human social behavior, it is crucial to pay attention to non-verbal communication signals. Clothes are one of the non-verbal signals which inevitably transmit social signals and clothes are closely related to self-representation; therefore they can be used to make a desired impression. Clothes are also part of culture and each culture develops its own fashion of appearance and symbols of agreed meaning. Due to globalization, people all over the world now have wider and more similar choices of clothes than before.

There is much research investigating the role that clothing plays in nonverbal communication, however, previous studies have employed positivist, quantitative methodologies and have neglected the role that culture might play. The aim of this study is to understand how people from two different cultural backgrounds (China and Sweden) interpret messages communicated through clothing.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with two groups representative of high-context and low-context cultures. The interviews used photographs as visual stimuli to achieve photo elicitation. Grounded theory was employed in the analysis of data from the interviews.

The results gathered from the interview data suggest that both high-context and low-context cultures have the ability for interpreting clothes as non-verbal signals and attach meanings to them in similar ways. Implicit communication in terms of clothing is not a monopoly of high-context cultures. Difference decoding patterns existed which subsequently call for further research.

Keywords: clothing, culture, decoding, high-context, intercultural communication, low-context, non-verbal communication, photo elicitation

"It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearance.
The true mastery of the world is the visible, not the invisible."
Oscar Wilde (as cited in Argyle, 1988, p.233)

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Introduction

1.1 Clothes as a Nonverbal Signal

To understand human social behavior, we need to pay attention to non-verbal communication signals, as Argyle (1988) famously argued. Clothes, along with facial expression, gaze, gestures, posture, bodily contact, spatial behavior, non-verbal vocalizations and smell, is one of these non-verbal signals (Argyle, 1988, p.1).

Each morning we choose clothes and wear them to go to work, go to school, go jogging and engage in other different activities. We pay even more attention to what to wear for special occasions such as a job interview, a wedding or funeral, or a date. Morris (1977) called this "the act of dressing" which is a single daily event performed each morning. According to Morris (1977) "it is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals. Every costume tells a story, often a very subtle one, about its wearer" (p.213). Clothes might *give off* more information about the person before people open their mouths to verbally communicate with others. Davis (1992) stated "that the clothes we wear make a statement is itself a statement that in this age of heightened self-consciousness has virtually become a cliché." (p.3).

1.2 Impression Management

Compared to other non-verbal signals mentioned, such as facial expression, posture or vocalization, clothes seem to be easier to control and are even used as a more effective tool for impression management. Erving Goffman (1959) explained that individuals consciously alter their ways of interaction in ways that benefit them. Leathers (1992) defined this concept as "an individual's conscious attempt to exercise conscious control over selected communicative behaviors and cues – particularly nonverbal cues – for purpose of making a desired impression." (p.204). In Goffman's dramaturgical analogy, dress is considered one of the important aspects of *personal front* - one part of the individual's performance whose function is to define the situation for the audience.

Clothes are also closely related to self-representation. One of the conclusions Argyle (1988) reaches is that respectably dressed and physically attractive people elicit more positive reactions from others such as various helpfulness, better jobs, and more dates. He further argues that appearance can influence a lot when a person wants to present him- or herself as competent and socially acceptable.

1.3 Clothes as a Part of Culture

Clothes are one of the distinct and visible parts of a culture. Each culture has its unique traditional clothing, e.g., Japanese Kimono, Indian Sari, German Lederhosen/Dirndls. It is also culture that decides what, when, and how to wear certain clothes, and guides its members

to interpret the messages communicated through clothes. Lustig and Koester (2010) contend that there are three different cultural variations in nonverbal communication: (1) specific repertoire of behaviors, (2) display rules that decide when and under what circumstances different nonverbal expressions are required, preferred, permitted, or prohibited and (3) the interpretations, or meanings imposed on particular nonverbal behaviors, and that one learns these not verbally but through direct observation and personal experience in a culture (Lustig & Koester, p.201-203, 2010). The definition of culture and its application to the present research will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Similarly, Davis (1992) claimed that meanings of clothing are cultural in the same way that common understandings about the music we listen, the food we eat, furniture, health beliefs, in short, "the totality of our symbolic universe" are cultural (p.13).

Argyle (1988) also agreed that although there are cultural variations in bodily decoration, the same principles apply to all. There are different fashions of appearance and symbols of agreed meaning developed by each culture. However, he argued that the changing nature of fashion and different meanings the same elements of appearance can carry depending on various contexts make the study of appearance different from other fields of nonverbal communication.

The idea of change is often associated with the term fashion. Davis (1992) strongly argued that "*fashion* […] must be made to refer to some alteration in the code of visual conventions by which we read meanings of whatever sort and variety into the clothes we and our contemporaries wear" (p.14-15). Despite the challenges in systematically defining fashion, or the items of appearance, very similar methodological approaches have been applied across all studies that have investigated the decoding of nonverbal signals in clothing, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

1.4   Globalization, Multinational Clothing Companies, Mass-produced Taste

One cannot talk about culture without discussing the concept of globalization. It is often claimed that globalization blurs the border between cultures. However, the question of where the core of globalization is and who receives its influence is open for discussion and still in the process of debate. Kothari and Laurie (2005) highlighted that the discussion on globalization continues to lead to "Eurocentric geographical imaginaries whereby the core is synonymous with the West, while the periphery is Third World" and within such a dichotomous view the phenomenon of globalization often positions the West as the place of the production of global values and the Third World as merely the receiver of influence from the West (p.223). The authors go on to argue that the relationship between 'the core' and 'the periphery' is highly complex and dynamic and the flow is not one directional and agreed with Held and colleagues' (1999) notion of globalization –"globalization […] is neither a singular condition nor a linear process" (p.23).

In spite of the differing thoughts and approaches the reality is that globalization does have an impact on our life, especially the way we dress when preparing for intercultural encounters in business and places of learning. The range of choices one can make to facilitate these intercultural encounters has become wider. Held and colleagues (1999) suggested "the textiles and clothing industries are among the most widespread across the globe" (p.266) and the emergence of such multinational clothing companies have slowly changed the pictures of streets in most countries. Successful multinational clothing companies such as H&M, Zara, Gap, United Colors of Benetton, and many others have extended their reach almost to the entire globe, making mass-produced and standardized fashion available for anyone worldwide. For instance, there are 3,100 H&M stores in 53 countries, which means one can find the same outfit both in a store in Stockholm, Sweden and in a store in Seoul, South Korea.

The process of globalization, coupled with the absence of culture as topic within the literature concerned with nonverbal communication and clothing, provides for interesting research questions to be posed as well as an opportunity for the present investigation to contribute to this body of knowledge.

1.5   Summary and Research Question

The following is a summary of what has been discussed so far: (1) clothes are one of the non-verbal signals which inevitably transmit social signals, (2) clothes are closely related to self-representation and can be used to make a desired impression, (3) clothes are part of culture and each culture develops its own fashion of appearance and symbols of agreed meaning, and (4) globalization made mass-produced and standardized fashion accessible almost all over the world.

Then, what is the problem? Due to globalization, people all over the world now have wider and more similar choices of clothes than before. It does not seem that the streets in New York and Tokyo are drastically different in terms of how people dress. As Davis (1992) claimed, meanings of clothes are cultural. Then, would people from different cultures interpret the messages transmitted from clothing in the same way? To study this, Hall's (1976) taxonomy of culture, i.e., high- and low-context, is used although it is not without controversy. In high-context (HC) cultures, most of the information is internalized in the person or in the physical context while in low-context (LC) cultures, most of the information is in the explicit and transmitted parts of the message. More detailed discussion will be in the next chapter.

The aim of this thesis is to answer the following research question:

How do people from a high-context culture (China) and a low-context culture (Sweden) interpret/decode messages communicated through clothing?

Main Concepts and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Culture

Hofstede (1980) famously defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind" that distinguishes the members of one group from others (p. 25). Similarly, Trompenaars (2012) claimed that culture is "a shared system of meanings" which "dictates what we pay attention to, how we act, and what we value (p.17). Both Hofstede and Trompenaars developed taxonomies that employed bi-polar dimensions, e.g., collectivism vs. individualism, universalism vs. particularism, to conceptualize national culture.

However, McSweeney (2002) argued that "extreme, singular, theories, such as Hofstede's model of national cultures are profoundly problematic" (p.113). In his work, *Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: A triumph of faith – a failure of analysis,* the plausibility of national cultures was critically questioned. He claimed that Hofstede's analysis of data "relies on a number of profoundly flawed assumptions to measure the 'software of the mind'" and "Hofstede has not demonstrated that national culture is how we think" (McSweeney, 2002, p.25). His conclusion was that instead of excessively focusing on national conformity, it is more important to "engage with and use theories of action which can cope with change, power, variety, multiple influences – including the non-national – and the complexity and situational variability of the individual subject" (McSweeney, 2002, p.113). Although McSweeney (2002) makes many important points relevant to the concept of national culture, it is still the case that this is the most accessible and used unit of measure of culture in the field. Subsequently, McSweeney's (2002) observations accepted, the present study will nonetheless follow the convention in this area of research and employ the concept of national culture.

Allwood (1985) defined culture as "all the characteristics common to a particular group of people that are learned and not given by nature" (p.1) and introduced four primary dimensions for analysis – patterns of thought, patterns of behavior, patterns of artefacts, and imprints in nature.

Edward, T. Hall (1976) claimed that culture is "the total communication framework: words, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, the way he handles time, space and materials, and the way he works, plays, makes love, and defends himself". He went on to explain that all those named above and more are "complete communication systems with meanings that can be read correctly only if one is familiar with the behavior in its historical, social, and cultural context" (p.42).

Hall (1976) suggested that everything we are and do is modified by learning and thus are subject to change (p.42). However, those learned behaviors, responses, and ways of communication "sink below the surface of the mind" and "control from the depth", which can be a reasonable explanation of the relation between "the mental programming" and "learned

and not given by nature".

In this study, the definition by Hall will be applied which, it can be argued, widely covers many of the definitions presented above despite of some differences in detail. Additionally, Hall's concept of culture is significant and relevant to the present investigation because it is connected with nonverbal communication, culture and clothing and because his work placed an emphasis on the nonverbal, unstated parts of a culture and on "the way things are actually put together than at theories" (Hall, 1976, p.16).

2.1.1   High- and Low-context Cultures

Hall developed the concept of high-context (HC) and low-context (LC) cultures in his work in the 1970s. For example, "a high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted parts of the message" (Hall, 1976, p.91).

Figure 1 High- and Low-context
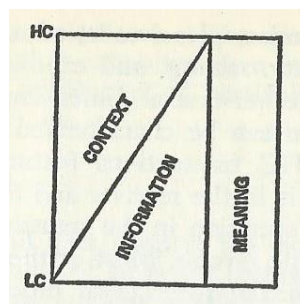
(Hall, 1976, p.102)

A low context (LC) communication, on the other hand, is quite the opposite; most of the information can be found in the explicit code itself (see Figure 1 above). Hall (1976) gave twins and two lawyers as one of the examples of high- and low-context communication –the communication between twins who have grown up together is more economical (HC) than the communication between two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC). While Hall (1976) applied high- and low-context communication to culture, Lustig and Koester (2010) exemplified with nonverbal communication explaining that high-context cultures put a large emphasis on nonverbal codes (p.109).

It is difficult to draw a strict line between high- and low-context cultures. Hall (1976) argued that "although no culture exists exclusively at the end of the scale, some are high while others are low" (p.91). The Scandinavians, along with the Germans and the Swiss Germans, are on the low-context end of the scale while China is on the high-context end, possessing a complex culture (Hall, 1976, p.91). Hall gave, as an interesting sidelight, the Chinese orthography which he claimed is an art form and further argued that low-context communication system has never been an art form (p.92).

The purpose of the present study is to compare two cultures and Hall's model provides a good framework that can be practically applied to an empirical setting (relevant to the present study) with selected cultures employed at either end of the high- and low-context continuum, i.e., China as a high-context culture and Sweden, a part of Scandinavia, as a low-context culture. As an interesting comparison, Hofstede's model also shows that almost on every dimensions China and Sweden are opposites (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2 China and Sweden according to Hofstede's Model
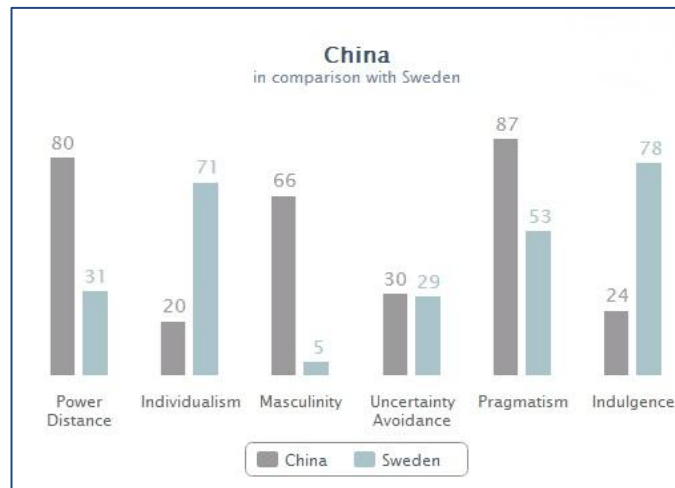
(Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010)

However, Hall's (1976) high- and low-context theory is perhaps out of date and that although its simplicity is its attractive feature and strength it can also be a major weakness. In addition, the use of national cultural groups (i.e., China and Sweden) can be questioned. There might be regional differences within each country, e.g., South Chinese vs. North Chinese, Norrlänningar vs. Stockholmare. McSweeney (2002) also criticized Hofstede for generalizing national level culture "from an analysis of sub-national populations" (p.107).

It should also be mentioned that the countries chosen might be questioned. Sweden and China were selected national cultures due to the availability of both communities to the study. However, according to some authors, Sweden is claimed to be quite unique in many ways in terms of being both individualistic and collectivistic and having much in common with Japan in respect to their collectivistic decision-making (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Lewis, 2000). Perhaps future studies might look at other high- and low- context cultures that are more clearly oriented towards either end of Hall's continuum.

2.2   Non-verbal Communication

What is non-verbal communication? According to Argyle (1988), "non-verbal communication, or bodily communication, takes place whenever one person influences another by means of facial expression, tone of voice, or any of other channels [...]", i.e., gaze, gestures and any other bodily movements, posture, bodily contact, spatial behavior, clothes

and other aspects of appearance and smell (p.2).

There is a theory called the 'linguistic model' in Argyle's book positing that "bodily communication is really a kind of language" (Argyle, 1988, p.290). It is claimed that there are some important similarities between bodily communication and language. First, both of them are modes of communication and signals are often sent with the intention of influencing another person (p.290). Second, it is difficult to separate the two because verbal communication is closely connected to nonverbal communication such as vocal qualities, gaze, gestures, etc.

Argyle (1988) also distinguished non-verbal communication (NVC) from non-verbal behavior (NVB) based on the degree of intentionality. There is a higher degree of intentionality in non-verbal communication than non-verbal behavior (Argyle, 1988, p.2.).

Kendon (1981) on the other hand, extensively reviewed the term 'nonverbal communication' by discussing its emergence and drawbacks. He questioned the relevance of distinguishing between behaviors and intentionality in relation to communication. He claimed that "the question of intentionality is irrelevant because [...] to witness a behavioral event is to receive information and the process of communication has, accordingly, taken place, regardless of what was intended by the production of the behavior. The question of intentionality is not determinable because whatever message an actor may have intended to convey there are always messages at other levels that are conveyed simultaneously" (p.9).

Mehrabian (1972, 2009) consented to the idea that nonverbal behavior refer to "actions as distinct from speech" including "facial expressions, hand and arm gestures, postures, positions, and various movements of the body or the legs and feet" (p.1). However, he claimed that the term 'nonverbal behavior' is "a misnomer, for a variety of subtle aspects of speech frequently (i.e., paralinguistic or vocal phenomena) have been included in discussions of nonverbal phenomena" (p.1, parentheses added). In addition, "complex communication phenomena, such as sarcasm", where combinations of both nonverbal and verbal behaviors play an important role to subtly express feelings, are included when people discuss nonverbal behavior (p.1). The subtlety of the phenomena mentioned above can be attributed to the lack of explicit rules for encoding or decoding. In spite of the absence, he argued that it is "legitimate to consider such behaviors *communicative*" (p.2). Therefore, in his book, he used the term *implicit communication* in preference to *nonverbal communication*.

There are some variations in terms of the behaviors/modalities/movements included. Ekman and Friesen (1969) defined a person's nonverbal behavior as "any movement or position of the face and/or the body" (p.57). Duncan (1969) included body motion or kinesic behavior, paralanguage, proxemics, olfaction, skin sensitivity to touch and temperature and use of artifacts as nonverbal communication modalities (p.118). In a similar way, yet with different words using a different term, Allwood (2002) included facial gestures, head movements, direction of eye gaze and mutual gaze, pupil size, lip movements, movements of arms and

hands, movements of legs and feet, posture, distance, spatial orientation, clothes and adornments, touch, smell, taste and nonlinguistic sounds as *bodily movements*.

The present study uses the term *non-verbal communication* consistent with Argyle (1988) since it includes clothes as one of the non-verbal channels that can be used as a means to influence others. At the same time, unlike many other researchers that merely mention clothes, Argyle's work contains an exhaustive review of the research investigating clothing as a nonverbal channel which helped lay the inspirational foundation to the present study. In addition, clothing and costume are physically separate from the body and could be considered almost entirely removed from spoken language and truly non-verbal, which makes the use of the term *non-verbal communication* suitable and appropriate for the present research.

2.2.1   Culture and Non-verbal Communication

Culture and non-verbal communication have been an inseparable pair and often researched hand in hand (Collett, 1971; Sauter et al., 2010; Schleidt et al., 1981; Tracy & Robins, 2008), with its focus mainly on cultural difference in non-verbal communication. Argyle (1988) argued that the topic carries both a great theoretical and practical importance – since it shows us which aspects of non-verbal communication are universal or innate and shows the range of cultural variations and differences that can lead to misunderstanding, annoyance and friction among cultural and national groups (p.49).

Various studies with cultural themes have been done within the field of non-verbal communication and Argyle (1988) claimed that there are similar patterns between cultures in terms of the use of non-verbal communication, though there exist striking differences in channels such as gestures, the amount of touch, proximity and gaze (p.300). Whilst culture and nonverbal communication are commonly researched together there is an absence of cross-cultural research investigating clothing as a channel in spite of clothing being one of those things that could be referred to as being on an anthropologist's list of cultural universals alongside language, food, family, etc., which is a way the present study hopes it can contribute to this body of literature.

2.3   Decoding Clothes

A model of the process of non-verbal communication was introduced by Argyle (1988), which provides an insight into which methods to use to study non-verbal communication, i.e. encoding studies or decoding studies.

Figure 3 Non-verbal Communication Paradigm
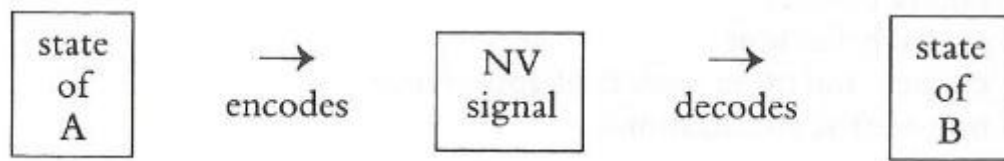
(Argyle, 1988, p.2)

The research methods used to study clothes, and appearance – and their associated nonverbal signals – also use encoding or decoding designs, consistent with nonverbal research in general (Argyle, 1988, p.235). The focus of this study is mainly on decoding with the aim to see and understand how subjects perceive, react to, or interpret certain signals in clothing. Argyle (1988) claimed that most studies investigating appearance have used decoding methodologies, e.g., showing subjects photographs with different clothes combinations and asking to rate them (p.235). In addition, most studies use a questionnaire approach statistically analyzing their data thereafter. There is only one study reported by Argyle that employs a qualitative methodology, i.e., in-depth interviews and the study itself was an unpublished thesis (Tse'elon at Oxford, see Argyle, 1988, p.236). This provides the present study with an opportunity to employ a neglected methodology in order to provide greater insight to previous findings and new knowledge to this area of research.

2.4 Classification of Clothes

Argyle (1988) pointed out that there has never been any systematic measurement or classification of clothes (p.235). Possible reasons behind the difficulty of establishing a comprehensive, universal taxonomy of clothing can be that there are cultural variations and preferences in how people decorate their body and the changing nature of fashion makes the same elements of appearance have very different meanings or significance at different eras (p.235).

Knapp and Hall (2010) also contended that it would be impossible to make a list of things "invariably communicated by clothes" because the list would be different depending on the demands of particular situation, ethnic group, time of a day, different era, region, etc and what makes things more difficult is that any item of clothing can communicate multiple meanings based on how it is worn (p.204).

This challenge was also confronted by the author when trying to find a general classification of clothing from previous studies. Relevant literature that categorized clothes in some ways was searched and listed (see Appendix 1). The classifications varied depending on different purposes and contexts of the study and were not always objective, e.g., well-dressed/poorly-dressed, dramatic/natural/romantic/classic, acceptable/non-acceptable. It was also interesting that the articles were published in different journal fields, ranging from journal of social psychology, home economics, clothing and textile, communication to business and marketing.

This difference in perspectives looking at clothes and appearance makes the object of study and field of research more complex.

Certain patterns could be found among the list. The most frequently used classification was 'formality classification' which, yet with different words in each study, categorized clothes by varying degrees of formality, e.g., formal – informal (or casual). The second most common pattern was 'status classification' which categorized with clothes according to social status, e.g., upper-middle class – working class/high – low status. The rest of the studies categorized clothes based on appropriateness, gender (i.e., looking at male/female costume behavior), uniform and other styles. This was used by the present investigation when developing visual stimuli of clothes, which will be discussed in the methodology chapter.

Other methodological approaches with a quantitative orientation have alternatively let the decoders define the characteristics or grade the degree of certain attributes of clothes, e.g., snobbish, shy, immoral, etc. (Hamid, 1968; Gibbins, 1969). The idea of classifying clothes based on the decoders' opinions is in line with the intention of our study. However, providing study participants with clear concepts, i.e., a set of adjectives, before they make their own judgments carries a risk of leading them to certain directions and limiting the possibility to use their own vocabulary, which deviates from the aim of our study which is to give decoders tabula rasa so that they can fill 'the blank slate' with their own words and descriptions.

2.5   Features of Clothing Code

Davis (1992) held that "clothing styles and the fashions that influence them over time constitute something approximating a code" (p.5). He listed several distinguishing features of clothing-fashion codes and most of them are highly relevant to this research.

First, the clothing-fashion code is more *context dependent* than the utterances in face-to-face interaction and the meaning of some combination of clothes or styles varies enormously depending on "the identity of the wearer, occasion, the place, the company, even something as vague and transient as the wearer's and the viewer's moods" (p.8). For example, the same black suit made with the same material will have different meanings when it is worn in a funeral or in a night club.

Second of all, there is high social variability in the signifier-signified relationship. Using semiotic terminology, Davis suggested that the signifier – signified relationship of clothing's sign is not stable, which means, in simple words, that it is almost impossible to make people to interpret the same symbols in clothing in the same way (p.9). The signifiers form a style, appearance or fashion trend can be considered "in a material sense" as the same for everyone (the width of a lapel) while what is signified, understood, expressed is remarkably different "at least initially" for different social groups (p.8).

Alongside the two distinguishing features outlined above others include "fabric, color, texture,

cut, weight, weave, stitching, transparency and whatever else makes a difference in how the garment or its surrounding ensemble of apparel is responded to in a community of clothes-wearers" (Davis, 1992, p.13). Therefore, depending upon social identity, taste, and an individual's accessibility to the symbolic wares of a society, there is a substantial difference in the universal meanings attached to clothes, jewelry, cosmetics and hairstyles (p.9).

2.6   Meanings and Functions of Clothing

Many researchers have investigated what messages or meanings clothes communicate. Argyle (1988) suggested four dimensions of social meaning that clothes communicate: (1) "formal-informal, appropriateness for different social situations", (2) "group membership, including uniforms, social class" (3) "attractiveness and fashionability" and (4) "colourfulness, and other ways of expressing personality or mood" (p.235-236).

Similarly, Barnard (2001) claimed that clothes can fulfill various functions: "decoration, physical and psychological protection, sexual attraction, self-assertion, self-denial, concealment, group identification, persuasion, attitude, ideology, mood reflection or creation, authority, and status or role display" (as cited in Knapp & Hall, 2010, p.203-204).

Knapp and Hall (2010) listed some personal attributes communicated by clothes: "sex, age, nationality, relation to a companion, socioeconomic status, identification with a specific group (e.g., matching sweaters), occupational or official status, mood, personality, attitudes, interests, and values (p.205).

In addition, Allwood (2002) named 'clothes and adornments' as one of types of body movements, which functions as a way to "indicate or display social status or role in particular social activity" (p.7).

Based on what the previous studies show, what clothes can communicate can be divided into several dimensions: social, e.g., occupational or social status, group membership (Bickman, 1971, 1974; Lawrence & Watson, 1991; Lefkowitz et al., 1955), personal, e.g., attractiveness, mood, personality (Rosenfeld & Plax, 1997), and functional dimensions, e.g., physical protection (Barnard, 1996).

2.7   Photo Elicitation - Interview with Photographs

While most decoding studies have used pictures in research that use questionnaires and experiments (Hamid, 1968; Harris et al., 1983; McCracken & Roth, 1989; Morris et al.,1996; Stuart & Fuller, 1991), there were no studies found by the present investigation that used photographs within an in-depth interview research-setting investigating how clothes are decoded, which may be due to the difficulty of taxonomizing clothes.

Using photographs in an interview is not something new. Harper (2002) explained the

concept of *photo elicitation* and a history of its development, which has been widely used in the field of anthropology and sociology. Photo elicitation started from the simple idea to put a photograph in a research interview and appeared first in the paper, *Photography in anthropology: a report on two experiments* (1957), published by photographer and researcher John Collier (Harper, 2002).

According to Harper (2002), "images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness" than words which has to do with how our brain has developed and functions (p.1). He further explains that processing both images and words utilizes more of the brain's capacity than words alone as the parts of the brain processing visual information are "evolutionarily older" than the parts processing verbal information (Harper, 2002, p.1).

The types of photographs vary depending on the different purposes, from pictures of objects, people and artifacts, pictures of institutional experiences to pictures depicting intimate dimensions of social group or one's own body (Harper, 2002, p.1). For this study, photographs of people with artifacts, i.e., people wearing clothes, will be used.

Photo elicitation is closely related to the achievement of *Verstehen* (understanding the issues from the insider's perspective) in the sense that it brings the subject and its subjective experiences into focus. As Harper (2002) suggested, photo elicitation can be considered as a "dialogue based on the authority of the subject rather than the researcher" (p.15). The concept *Verstehen* will be discussed in more detail in the method section.

A cross cultural study that employed photo elicitation is Harper and Faccioli (2000)'s *Small, silly insults: Mutual seduction and misogyny the interpretation of Italian advertising signs*. They examined how people in two different cultures interpret messages in advertisement by interviewing women in the United States and Italy using photographs of advertisements.

Their research design was intended to address three levels: (1) the specific reading of the ad, (2) the social meaning of the ad, and (3) the relationship between the ad and individual identity (Harper & Faccioli, 2000, p.28). The study found that women from the U.S were persuaded more strongly by the advertisements than women from Italy who tended to analyze the ads with more sophistication based on socioeconomic perspectives.

Method

3.1 Research Method

The present study is investigating *How people from a high-context culture (China) and a low-context culture (Sweden) interpret/decode messages communicated through clothing* and so, essentially, is asking a *how* question.

It is important to understand the concept of understanding and *Verstehen* from the aspects of the interpretative paradigm which forms the foundation of qualitative research. *Verstehen* is the concept that was widely applied by the German sociologist Max Weber and has become central to qualitative research (Hennink et al, 2011, p.17). Hennink and colleagues (2011) claimed that there are two different perspectives to understanding. *Understanding* refers to when researcher uses his or her own frame of reference or interpretive framework to understanding the issues, "from the 'outsider's perspective'", while *Verstehen* refers to understanding the issues "from the insider's perspective" which means that a researcher puts an emphasis on knowing "the subjective meaning that people attach to their views and experiences" (p.18).

The effort to achieve *Verstehen* carries a significant implication as it regards a person as a subject, not an object. The effort to put oneself into another person's shoes or see the world through others' glasses might broaden the perspectives on others and provide new insights on how to communicate with other human beings – which is the aim of the present investigation.

3.2 Interview Design

There are many different qualitative methodologies available to researchers – for the purpose of the present study in-depth, semi-structured interviews were deemed most appropriate and relevant to the research question being asked. Different authors have slightly different approaches to what an in-depth interview is. An in-depth interview is described, according to Hennink and colleagues (2011), as "a conversation with a purpose" in order to "gain insight into certain issues using a semi-structured interview guide" (p.109). According to Barnard (2006), "semistructured, or in-depth interviewing is a scheduled activity" and "open ended, but follows a general script and covers a list of topics" (p.210). He went on to explain that semi-structured interviewing has much of the "freewheeling quality" but "is based on the use of an interview guide" (Barnard, 2006, p.212). The present study will anchor the use of the term with Barnard's (2006) approach and definition of an in-depth, semi-structured interview alongside Hennink and colleagues' (2011).

3.2.1 Visual Materials - Photographs

As discussed in the previous chapter (see 2.8. Photo elicitation - Interview with photographs), a set of photographs had to be developed for use during interviews. The first attempt to create

pictures of clothes was to take pictures of people in some of the popular areas in Gothenburg, Sweden - the reason behind this was to avoid researcher bias in the selection of clothes. However, there were several problems: (1) poor quality of pictures – since the people on the street were constantly moving or walking, it was hard to take a still picture with clear quality, (2) limited variations of clothes – due to cold weather, people mostly wore dark, thick winter coats and jumpers, and (3) no control over height, body shape and posture –the people in the pictures taken after a couple of attempts were different in height, shape and posture, which might act as confounding variables.

Another alternative considered was sourcing commercial pictures from fashion magazines. This was not put into action for two reasons: (1) no control over height, body shape and posture in the same way with the street pictures and (2) the clothes in the magazines are combined differently, mainly for commercial purposes, compared to clothes that we can easily see every day.

The final approach to developing images for photo elicitation, which was employed by the present investigation, was to take studio photographs. This was selected because; (1) indoor/studio pictures can be taken with the same conditions of setting and light and (2) height, body shape and posture can be controlled by having one model for different clothes. Two models (one male, one female) with average physiques were arranged. Clothes used were mostly from the models' own closet in order to maintain the naturalness of the photo-images. It was assumed that having clothes that are in different sizes and poorly fitting would create a distraction and a confound variable to the data. Some other items used such as hats, sneakers, a sweater, jackets, were also sourced from second-hand stores or from the authors' associates with a similar physique to the studio models employed.

Since there is not a systematic classification or taxonomy of clothes, the clothes were chosen by the varying degree of formality, status, or smartness, based on the patterns found through the literature studies in the theoretical framework discussed above (see 2.4 Classification of Clothes). Other accessories such as bags, jewelries, glasses, watches were not included in order to limit the realm of our study. It was made sure that both male and female pictures have corresponding equivalents, e.g., shoes or shirts with similar smartness, similar color combination.

Fourteen photographs (7 male/7 female) were taken indoors with the same conditions of setting and lighting, and only twelve photographs (6 male/6 female) were used for the actual interviews due to the time constraint. The same models were used for different combinations of clothes in order to control the body shape and posture. After the pictures were taken, the head part (above the neck) of each picture was removed using iPhoto to eliminate any other stimuli that are not purely 'clothing', such as facial expressions, make-up and hair style which might affect the interviewees' interpretation and responses.

3.2.2   Interview Guide and Pilot Interviews

The initial interview guide was designed based on themes that were drawn from the concepts
in the related literature, i.e., Argyle's (1988) dimensions of social meaning: (1) formal-
informal, appropriateness for different social situations, (2) group membership or social class,
(3) attractiveness and fashionability, and (4) colorfulness, personality or mood (p.235-236).
This represented the deductive element of preparation for the in-depth interview (i.e.,
appropriateness for different social situations, group membership – social class, attractiveness,
and personality), following Hennink and colleagues' approach that argues in-depth
interviewing is both a deductive and inductive process (Hennink et al., 2011). The following
five themes with relevant questions were made into an interview guide and pilot-tested with
the photographs.

1. General impression
2. Appropriateness for different social situations
3. Group membership – social class
4. Attractiveness
5. Personality

Two pilot interviews were conducted with individuals that matched the profile described
below (see 3.3 Interviewees) to test the validity and workability of the first interview guide.
During the interviews, twelve photographs were shown in batches, i.e., three at a time on a
single page, grouped according to gender and dissimilarity (i.e., different smartness, with the
intention that such dissimilarity can trigger more discussions) (see Appendix 2). A coin-
tossing procedure was conducted before each interview without the presence of the
interviewee to randomize in which order the male/female photographs should be shown –
'heads' started interviews with male photographs and 'tails' started interviews with female
photographs. This procedure was followed through all interviews.

The pilot interviews revealed that the guide worked in some ways, but with some problems
identified. Many concepts were identified in the piloting exercise, such as age, color, style,
price, textile type (leather), fashionableness, design, etc. However, the themes 2, 3, 4 and 5
turned out to be rather repetitive, for instance, interviewees mentioning or discussing them in
the first theme already before being asked. Even when they have not discussed them in the
general impression theme, the rest of the themes tended to be leading or forcing. The
interviewees showed difficulty answering the questions or sometimes just rated the pictures,
e.g., "this one is more attractive" when asked "do you find this person attractive?" This could
have been because the pilot-interviewees did not necessarily draw conclusions about
personality, status or attractive based on clothing.

Based on the lessons learned from the pilot interviews, the interview guide was revised to be
more consistent with the aim of the study. To understand the messages communicated
through clothing and how they are transmitted, it is better to give the interviewees a tabula

rasa without prescribed themes or concepts so that they themselves come up with what *they* see in clothing. Then, more questions can be asked regarding the way the messages are transmitted, based on the interviewees' own answers and expressions.

Subsequently, the interview guide was refined to the following two themes that were deemed more open and general, which was more relevant to the research question (see Appendix 3 for the overall interview structure).

1. Messages communicated through clothing – social meaning
   - General impression
   - Context
2. The way the messages transmitted and its effects – code elements
   - Based on the interviewees' answers and expression

3.3   Interviewees

Two national cultural groups were chosen in order to conduct a cross-cultural study: China and Sweden. Participants were selected according to the following criteria: (1) people who are originally from China or Sweden, (2) people who are at the age of 25-35, and (3) people who have academic background (minimum Bachelor's degree). The number of male/female participants in each cultural group was evenly distributed. Participant recruitment was achieved through 'snowball recruitment' (also called 'chain sampling') where a researcher asks "a study participant or a key informant whether they know anyone else in the community who meets the study criteria, and asking them to refer this person to the researcher" and this process continues (Hennink et al., 2011, p.100). Recruitment information was also published via student Facebook groups targeting students at the University of Gothenburg and Chalmers Institute of Technology; however, this yielded no responses.

Following the employment of sample controls and recruitment, described above, the present study interviewed 12 individuals, six male and six female, evenly distributed between the two groups of interest. Average ages for both the Chinese (HC) interview group and the Swedish (LC) interview group were 28 years. A table is presented below (Table 1) detailing an anonymized profile for each interviewee alongside their reference code relevant to the results section.

Table 1 Interviewee Profile

	Chinese group				Swedish group		
	Gender	Age	Education		Gender	Age	Education
C1	Female	30	MA(Completed)	S1	Female	26	BA (Completed)
C2	Female	27	MA	S2	Female	30	MA (Completed)
C3	Female	35	MA	S3	Female	28	MA
C4	Male	26	MA (Completed)	S4	Male	28	MA
C5	Male	25	MA	S5	Male	28	MA (Completed)
C6	Male	27	MA	S6	Male	28	MA (Completed)

3.4   Data Collection

Guest and colleagues (2006) conducted research on data saturation with in-depth interviews. They found that saturation or "the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data" occurred within the first twelve interviews. However, "the basic elements for metathemes were present as early as six interviews" (p.59).

Based on Guest and colleagues' (2006) findings the present study planned to conduct six interviews per culture comparison group and in the analysis no new metathemes were identified – consistent with Guest and colleagues – to suggest six per group was sufficient. Twelve interviews were conducted from the 17th of March to the 4th of May. The recorded interviews are 415 minutes in total, so the average duration of one single interview was approximately 44 minutes. The interviews took place at various university campuses of the Chalmers Institute of Technology, Gothenburg. Settings varied between private study rooms to more public cafeteria, and were conducted in English. Neither the interviewing setting nor the interviews being conducted in the interviewees' non-native language were found to adversely affect the interviews.

3.5   Recording and Transcription

All interviews were recorded (with the consent from the interviewees) and transcribed. iPhone with the recording function was used as a device for recording. Windows Media Player and Microsoft Word were used for transcribing the interviews. Transcription involved everything that was said during the interviews by the interviewer herself and the interviewees, including speech fillers, verbal gestures and colloquial expressions. The names of the interviewees and the transcript files were made anonymous, e.g., C1, C2, S3, S4 (C to anonymize and denote Chinese interviewees and S for Swedish interviewees).

3.6   Code Development

Grounded theory approach was used for code development. As Hennink and colleagues (2011) explain, grounded theory is not a theory; "it is a *process* for developing empirical theory from

qualitative research that consists of a set of tasks and underlying principles" (p.208, italics added). Those principles include: (1) a circular data analysis process, (2) the use of verbatim transcripts in analysis, (3) interlinked data collection and analysis, (4) inductive construction of analytic concepts, (5) constant comparison, (6) the use of reflexive and analytic memo and (7) analysis going beyond description. They suggest that deductive strategies are also used by researchers in qualitative data analysis and acknowledge the use of deductive strategies. They argue that "deductive theory does play a part in theory building in qualitative research" and "qualitative data analysis involves the interplay between induction and deduction" (Hennink et al., 2011, p.210).

Based on Hennink and colleagues' perspective on qualitative data analysis, the present study employed both deductive (codes derived from the conceptual framework) and inductive strategy (codes developed directly from the data). For the deductive code development, some of the concepts from Argyle's (1988) dimensions were used: (1) formal – informal, appropriateness for different social situations, different kinds of sports, (2) group membership, social class, (3) attractiveness and fashionability, (4) colorfulness, etc. Inductive codes were developed by reading the data themselves such as age, tight – loose, second-hand, etc.

The software Nvivo (30-days trial version) was used for coding. Code development was performed for each group (Chinese and Swedish) respectively. As Hennink and colleagues (2011) suggest, one third of the data, i.e., two transcripts for each group, were sampled for the initial code development and some more codes were added later from further analyses (p.217).

Figure 4 Examples of Initial Code Development Using Nvivo

(Chinese) (Swedish)

Thirteen codes (9 deductive, 4 inductive) were initially developed from the Chinese data while 16 codes (9 deductive, 7 inductive) were developed from the Swedish data (inductive codes are marked with red dots on the image above).

Based on the codes that were initially developed, the rest of the data was read through until the code development reached saturation. During the process, one more (inductive) and 4 more (3 inductive and one In vivo) codes were developed and added to Chinese and Swedish

data.

Codebooks were created using Nvivo for each data group in order to have the overall picture
of the codes and keep track of changes throughout the process, and were used as a central
reference. Among the codes developed, only the ones that answer the research question were
chosen for analysis. Sometimes the interviewees claimed something and did not give any
further explanations or reasons. Such answers, therefore, were not considered valid or
sufficient for later analysis.

3.7   Ethical Considerations

Sufficient information about the research was given to interviewees and informed consent
was established at the start of the interview. The researcher made sure that the identity of the
interviewees was kept anonymous at all times through the process. Assurances were given to
interviewees that data would only be used for research purposes.

Results

The results indicate that both Chinese and Swedish groups interpret clothes in a very similar way, but there are differences in *how* they do it. Similar themes were developed for each group, i.e., *age, appropriateness, colorfulness, personality & mood, group membership, status & golf*, with some variations in the sub-themes. There were themes that were not common, i.e., *looseness, tightness and proportion* (in Chinese group) and *hipster-factor and second-hand stores,* and *hats* (in Swedish group).

Table 2 Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Obtained from Code Analysis

High Context (Chinese Group)	Low Context (Swedish Group)
Age	**Age**
Appropriateness	**Appropriateness**
Colorfulness • Expression of Emotions or Mood • Eye catching and Attractiveness	**Colorfulness** • Fashionableness • Swedishness & Weather • Social Occasions and Economic Status
Personality & Mood • Sociability • Seriousness • Originality and Independence	**Personality & Mood** • Flamboyance and Originality • Confidence, Shyness, Seriousness, Ambitious • Artsy and Interested in Culture
Group Membership • Norms and Stereotypes • Nationality	**Group Membership** • Political Orientation • Nationality
Status & Golf • Economic Status • Golf	**Status & Golf** • Socioeconomic Status • Golf
Other • Looseness, Tightness and Proportion	**Other** • Hipster-factor and Second-hand Stores • Hats

The most frequently recurring themes that all interviewees (both Chinese and Swedish) talked about were *age* and *appropriateness*, followed by *colorfulness*. More Swedish interviewees talked about *personality* and *status & golf* than Chinese while the same number of interviewees in each group talked about *group membership*. The findings will be structured and presented in the order of the approximate weightings of the identified themes and in the order from common to more unique themes (see Table 3).

Table 3 Number of Sources for the Identified Themes

Chinese Group		Swedish Group	
Themes	Number of Sources	Themes	Number of Sources
Age	6	Age	6
Appropriateness	6	Appropriateness	6
Colorfulness	5	Colorfulness	5
Personality & Mood	3	Personality & Mood	5
Group Membership	4	Group Membership	4
Status & Golf	3	Status & Golf	5
Looseness, Tightness and Proportion	4	Hipster-factor & Second-hand Stores	2
		Hats	5

NB: A source stands for the number of interviewees that referred to the themes.

4.1   Age

Age, according to Knapp and colleagues (2013), is one of the personal attributes communicated by dress (p.190). One of the common meanings both Swedish and Chinese interviewees attached to clothing was age.

Chinese

One way to identify if the person is old or young was through color. Findings indicated that there is a norm for preferable or acceptable colors for different age groups. Younger groups would wear clothes with more colors while older groups, e.g., middle-aged, would prefer to wear darker clothes because bright colors give an impression that they're not serious. On the other hand, bright colors were associated with retired people since when people have to work, it is better to wear clothes with darker colors which would not easily show when they get dirty.

> *If I see people, girls usually, either very, very like, manly or very girly, flowers, many colors. (CI)*

> *For example, my dad, if I buy my dad such kind of sweater, he would never wear that. He will say, "that's so bright to me". Too bright. Too young, too positive, you know. Too naïve. (laughs) I don't know. Just.. just make old people think they're not very serious. Of course this color is pretty okay to me. But I don't think my father will accept that. (C4)*

The interviewees also assumed the age of the person by the looseness or tightness of the clothes.

> *This isn't wrong to wear this, but they are so loose, in the way. So, you could like more casual. So, their waist line are like fit so well. So, it feels like these are middle-*

aged man's choice. (C2)

Certain items such as chinos, certain types of shoes, hat, jeans and high-heels were mentioned as something an older person would or would not wear.

I think young people, they don't like to wear this kind of hat. Hat or bonnet, this kind of... it's very, it's very strange if I wear the same hat. I think they are a little bit older. Because I see so many old people wear this kind of hats. So, I think maybe it's belongs to the old men. (C6)

They are not that open-minded. That's why they choose this sort of clothes. [...] Normally people with..like old people, they don't.. they don't.. they don't wear high heels. (C5)

Swedish

Just like Chinese interviewees, Swedish interviewees gave color as a reason when they talked about age.

Not in Sweden, but I can absolutely see it somewhere else. But in Sweden, I think, this is more for an older generations because younger people have other models or colors or... (S2)

This woman, maybe she's a bit older. Personally, I don't believe this outfit for younger women, you know. It's maybe... (inaudible) I don't know. I would say that she's a bit... at least in her 40s or 50s or something. I don't know, also the color, yeah, the color, this kind of shade-up, or this kind of fabric kind of looks a bit un..look very modern, or looks something that you know elder women would wear.(S6)

A specific pattern (leopard) was considered to be suitable for a certain age group. Sometimes they associated the images with their personal experiences that they had in the past, which led to certain interpretations.

Because sometimes you see like, middle-aged people wear like leo-print and stuff. (S1)

Even though leopard couldn't.. can easily be seen as something that older people wear. I love leopard, but I mean, in my head, when I was a child, the only people that wore leopard was old people. (S2)

Formality of the clothes was one of the indicators of age. In relation to this, one interviewee argued that showing much skin is not preferable among older people.

> *He's a bit older, like maybe at least 40, or 35 to 40 something. And because it's quite, you know, quite formal. (S1)*

> *I don't know it just seems like older people likes to, you know..keep. But..but I'm…I'm not sure actually. Just… just have this..maybe that old people.. older people don't want to show so much skin. (SI)*

There seems to be a tacit norm for what is appropriate for different age groups. Naming certain items, such as Khaki pants, a denim shirt and t-shirt with certain prints, an interviewee claimed that there is an age-limit for certain clothes and also mentioned the consequential impression when the limit is not kept.

> *This kind of jeans and shirt, it's typical, yeah, if you are studying or, yeah. And also you know, there's an age-limit. Maybe you can't be you know, too old. Maybe this outfit is more for younger people. You know, I don't suppose that you can be, you know, 40 maybe and wear it. I guess, that would look odd. (S6)*

> *I would assume that that person is going though like a 40's crisis or something. You know, they want to look, you know, younger than his actual age. So, I think you have to be careful about that, you know. (S6)*

4.2   Appropriateness

One of the most frequently discussed themes that emerged from the data was if the clothes are appropriate for different occasions or contexts, which was then developed into a deductive code based on Argyle's (1988) dimensions of social meaning communicated through clothes. In the very similar way, both Chinese and Swedish groups have specific ideas for appropriate clothes.

Chinese

Some of the Chinese interviewees mentioned shoes as something that can define whether the clothing is casual or professional, or appropriate for working or spare time.

> *This kind of shoes make me feels very much like, she's easily ready for going to mountain or ready for bad weather in Gothenburg. (C2)*

> *Professional and this is casual, very casual. This is.. half-casual, half-professional, because we recognize it by shoes. This is definitely not for professional working place.(C3)*

In addition, it was claimed that 'too fashionable' or stylish clothes are not appropriate for

work places, but for more private contexts. Certain items such as napkins, sweater, and hat are not suitable for business context.

> *And also the napkin, yeah. And the sweater. So it's not a business. It's not for business. It's not for work. So probably that's for parties with friends. Or just go to the pub. […] I guess, for business company or financial companies, they will wear real shirt inside with collar. (C4)*

> *And it's not really suitable for the… for the..for working as well, for working in office. Of course, you can wear whatever you want in a company but still this one is too..how to say.. uhh.. (laughs) a little bit over-fashioned? I don't know how to describe. Too fashionable. Yeah. I think so. It's like, you can even wear this kind of clothes to the cocktail. Because of the.. I think it's because of… The clothes are too loose and a little bit more 'designly' but more fashionable, I think. (C5)*

One interviewee also discussed that clothes that show too much skin (i.e., low neckline) is not appropriate for work.

> *Neckline is very low. It's not that suitable for work. (C6)*

Swedish

Like the responses from the Chinese interviewees discussed above, many Swedish interviewees also mentioned the types of shoes that are appropriate for different social occasions, sometimes the combination with the types of trousers.

> *Yeah, maybe. You know, when you need to go out, but you don't wanna dress up. And sneakers also implicates that this is a very casual outfit, you know. (S5)*

> *Well, they're kind of sneakers, running shoes. They're usually comfortable to wear, and usually not something you would see at a dinner party if it's like, if it's fleshy or you know, formal, then you wouldn't see sneakers, at least not of that kind. Maybe, possibly, Converse or something, but not that kind of sneakers. (S6)*

One of the reasons why we have to dress in certain ways or have our clothing in certain ways, e.g., ironed and clean, buttoned-up, in both professional and private contexts was, according to a few Swedish interviewees, to give an impression that the person is reliable, responsible and serious.

> *It could be like a guy dressed for an interview, like a job interview. I think just be clean and you know, everything is ironed and stuff like that. That.. you know, that you look smart and, you know, like a responsible person. (S1)*

> *Like, this is pretty casual, I suppose. [...] And also the leather jacket, you know, shows off that she wants to… well could, maybe not you know, look professional, or you know, look reliable at work.(S5)*

It was found that there are unwritten dress-codes and rules, and different situations demand a specific way to look, with some variations in its strictness depending on different countries, in general. Interviewees thought that they unconsciously think about this for different social occasions before they situate themselves in them. One of the Swedish interviewees also stressed the importance of following the invisible dress-code that exists everywhere, especially if the person is ambitious and willing to move ahead by making a positive impression.

> *It's one thing on a beach. It's like… I think it's about where you are and how you dress or… Things that you don't maybe think about, but unconsciously, you know, it's always there. Like on a beach, you dress in one way, but in an office in town, or home, or walking around in a street somewhere, or when you're out backpacking, it's always different kind of situations that, not demand a specific way to look, but I think we have it..we think it's important to.. how we are perceived maybe, without realizing it. I mean, it's..it's first now when I'm thinking about it because I think that.. "No, I don't care much", but maybe I do. (S2)*

> *So, in a way, maybe we have a kind of invisible dress code, you know, still, like everywhere. Unwritten rules, you know, like everywhere.[...]And also, if you want to, you know, make career or something, you wanna look good, it's also to dress well, you know, it's part of it, you know. So, even though you don't have to, you still wanna, impression is that well, you wanna show that you wanna move up the ladder or whatever. Yeah, ambitious. Like everyone is ambitious. (S5)*

4.3   Colorfulness

Except for the association with age as discussed above, colors were also interpreted in various ways. The Chinese group associated certain colors with different emotional states or mood and attractiveness. On the other hand, Swedish interviewees connected certain colors in the image with fashionableness, Swedishness, different social occasions and the person's economical status.

Chinese

4.3.1   Expression of Emotions or Mood

Strong and bright colors, e.g., red, blue, were interpreted as an expression of emotions or mood. They can also affect the mood of the people looking at the person wearing such colors.

> *Maybe chose strong color to be happy or something. I meant like, the red, exactly red. It's not darker or pinkish red. It's exactly red. Or blue. You can pinpoint that's blue, it's not darker blue or pastel blue. This feels more like… You can express your emotions more and as I believe that color well express very much your emotions and mood. (C2)*

> *The red color makes people very happy. (C6)*

4.3.2   Eye catching and Attractiveness

It is suggested that bright colors, including gold, are eye catching and therefore give a more positive impression to make the person wearing them attractive.

> *Yeah, it's good, because gold is perfect color, or so to say, it combine with black. So, it's quite bright and shiny. Yeah, it's not very bling bling. It's not shining everywhere, but just a part of it, yeah just one point. So it feels very balanced and eye-catching. (C4)*

> *I'll say, the bright colors are more, no matter in China or in Sweden, are more eye-catchy. Also, that, how do you say, give others more obvious impressions. And the people wear bright clothes are more attractive to..to… how do you say. to.. if I ask me to talk to someone, like randomly, I would choose people wearing bright dress. (C5)*

Swedish

4.3.3   Fashionableness

A certain color e.g., the light blue, was associated with a specific era and consequently with fashionableness for a Swedish interviewee.

> *This light color is nothing that we wear nowadays, or not often anyway because the color is kind of maybe..ten years ago, for me. That light blue. I think about the 80s and..the pants, you know, like jeans that always had that color. I think like, when I was a kid, I saw that color everywhere. Everybody had like, jeans, shirts in that color, like matching. So, because of that, (laughs) I've seen it too much, I couldn't wear it myself. Because I just… I think about the 80s. (S2)*

Moreover, another interviewee regarded a certain combination of bright color, e.g., red and white, undesirable.

> *I don't think that white and red, white and bright red is a very good combination in general. It's hard to see if they would suit anyone, you know. (S5)*

4.3.4   Swedishness & Weather

The color black was associated with what Swedish people would prefer to wear.

> *Yeah. And I feel like, it's quite..it's something that you could see here in Sweden because it's a lot of black. And people like the [color] black here. (S3)*

At the same time, colors were associated with different weathers or seasons, i.e., chromatic colors with sunny or summer and achromatic colors with winter.

> *Colors come out when it's nice weather. I can see it now, just walking down the street when it's sunny. And, then people start wearing bright colors again. And all winter, it's been like white and black. (S1)*

4.3.5   Social Occasions and Economic Status

Light blue or baby blue color was claimed to be more appropriate for events like a wedding, social gathering or a dinner than for work. At the same time, it gives an impression that the one who wears it might be rich.

> *I don't know, it's purple or something. It doesn't… for some reason, I don't get the feeling that he's going to work. Ah, look like he's going to an event, like a wedding, or a really fancy dinner. And I think he's got a lot of money, this man. It looks like it. I have no idea. It looks like a party. If he will be going to work, I don't think he would have a purple or baby blue tie and that blue thing there. Yeah, that's what makes me think it's like an event or social gatherings. The colors of them. […] Just those colors makes me feel like, he's going to like a party or something. (S3)*

4.4   Personality & Mood

Personality and mood of a person can be communicated through clothing as Argyle (1988) illustrated in his review of the studies. Both groups interpreted the clothing in relation to personality and mood. One aspect that they had in common was seriousness, both Chinese and Swedish interviewees contended that if a person wears a set of clothes that match or fit well, it gives a positive impression that the person 'cares' and consequently he or she can be taken seriously.

Chinese

4.4.1   Sociability

Sociability of a person was expressed in clothing. The combination of t-shirt, denim-shirt, jeans and sport shoes shows the possibility that the person can be social. In addition, the way

a shirt is worn, e.g., open shirt, rolled-up sleeves, can imply that the person is social and active.

> *He's wearing t-shirt and jeans and jean-like shirt, and sport shoes. So, he can be a bit… he can be social. So if you find him in a bus stop, if you ask him something, he will probably answer you and talk to you. (laughs) His shirt is open. Sleeves are up (rolling up the sleeves). So… He likes probably sport or walking or… because if you wear these kind of shoes (pointing at the other pair) you can't walk so long. So, if you have these kind of shoes, you can run, jump, walk, whatever. (C1)*

4.4.2 Seriousness

According to some of the Chinese interviewees, whether the person is serious or not seems to be closely related to how sensitive he or she is to his clothing, e.g., when the items of clothing do not match or fit.

> *It seems quite just not very serious. (laughs)I mean, serious means he… it shows..it tells me that this guy is not very sensitive to his wearing or to the clothes. So the shoes, the trousers, the jac, eh, the jeans, they're not combined at all. So..they doesn't fit. They don't fit. (C4)*

> *That means the person care a lot of details. And of course, I mean this is not really necessary for working or for..for parties even. So, if you wear that, that means you care lot of details of your clothes and you have to match the..this to your tie and to the colors of your suit as well.(C5)*

4.4.3 Originality and Independence

As discussed above, clothes that are well put-together seem to give a positive impression and in this case, slightly loose and not-too-tight trousers and the shirt with rolled-up sleeves, when they are especially on women, shows that the person is original and independent.

> *It shows the woman has her own concept or ideas. It feels really cool, I mean. She's special. She wants to be special, not the same with others. […] The sleeves, yeah. She rolled the sleeves and also the shirt is not very tight. It fits on the upper side, but the down side is quite loose. But still quite fit. And the trousers, it's, it's those kind of.. I don't know how to call that, this kind of cut. Just wanna be independent or… yeah. It feels quite independent. The woman's quite independent. And also the belt is…is really good. (C4)*

Swedish

4.4.4   Flamboyance and Originality

The clothing with unusual color combination, material and items, such as a hat or a colorful
napkin can make someone look flamboyant, original or outgoing.

> *The person, this person is a bit flamboyant. He likes to, you know, some odd choices
> of clothing, like maybe to show off that he's a bit original? Yeah, doesn't wanna look
> like everybody else. This color and this material is not so classic, or you know, it's
> not so ordinary. But he's also wearing a hat and a colorful napkin. (S1)*

> *I don't know, nothing. I mean, just someone that likes to, I don't know, spice things
> up a bit, like a bit of variations maybe. So probably fairly outgoing, I would say. (S6)*

4.4.5   Confidence, Shyness, Seriousness, Ambitiousness

When clothes 'fit' a person well, it gives a positive and confident impression and he or she
can be taken seriously.

> *A nice, confident guy. Yeah. Somehow, how the clothes.... and I mean, like the… At
> these pictures, this fits him. The fit is so much better. Therefore, you get the
> impression that he's more confident or looks better, uhh.. feels better. So even if he
> feels best in this one, it looks better here because it's nicer. (S2)*

> *You take the person more serious maybe, because she's well put-together. (S2)*

During the interviews, a certain kind of sweater that was closed all the way up with a bit of
dark color was pointed out as something that can make a person look shy or not confident,
not wanting to show much of oneself.

> *Maybe a bit shy actually because of the clothes, they're not kind of [inaudible]
> confidence. I don't see confidence in this outfit. I think it's really… I think it's the
> sweater. It's just like..he's mamma's boy. Because it looks so… nice and gentle, and
> just shy. I don't know, it feels like it's "I need my mamma" (S2)*

> *I don't know if it's true, but I get a feeling that he's kind of shy. […] Like, you kind of
> get the feeling that this person is a bit like closed-in, doesn't really reach out to
> people that much.[..] Yeah, well, part of it is that the sweater is like grown all the
> way in the top, kind of makes me feel like, "okay, I don't wanna show anything about
> myself", just as a bit of a touch of a color with the shirt, but doesn't show that much
> of it. (S6)*

Another interviewee argued that an ambitious person would put an effort to his or her clothing to give a professional and reliable impression, which is also the reason why we dress up.

> *She's ambitious and she really tried to make an effort to dress up for this. Like the man with the suit, you know, like try to look professional, ambitious, reliable, and all those things, you know, that you can do with your clothing. One of the reasons why we dress up, you know, for work. (S6)*

4.4.6   Artsy and Interested in Culture

Some of the Swedish interviewees associated a specific item, a polo neck with someone who is into culture and art and fairly conversational. Also, quite many interviewees mentioned Steve Jobs when they discussed polo neck with jeans since he used to wear the items quite often in public.

> *I don't know. I get like an artsy feeling because he has like the polo, it's kind of like Apple, Steve Jobs' style, and some kind of napkin or something in the… but like, more like a flower or something above his pocket in the shirt, well, in the jacket, I guess. Fairly loose, though. Yeah, I would definitely see him as someone conversational, like someone who would, I could see like at a vernissage or like some kind of art showing… I could see this guy with like a glass of wine in his hand and just, you know, yeah, sociable. (S6)*

> *But also his… polo neck, that's also a bit you know, something that people associate it with people that work with culture, you know. (S5)*

4.5   Group Membership

Group membership also belongs to Argyle's (1988) dimensions of social meaning of clothes. Different aspects of group membership were dealt with in two different groups during the interviews. The Chinese group showed strong norms in terms of how a person in a specific gender group is supposed to dress or what items are preferable or popular for a certain group while the political orientation of a person was discussed based on clothing by one of the Swedish interviewees. What both groups had in common is that they interpreted certain types of clothing in relation to certain regions or countries.

Chinese

4.5.1   Norms and Stereotypes

Some of the Chinese interviewees, mostly the male interviewees seemed to have strong norms or stereotypes for what is the 'proper' way to dress for a certain group, e.g., girls in

China, people in Asia, and also which colors, patterns, items are preferable or not.

> *The leopard pattern.[…] We have some stereotype on this. So, we think "good girls won't wear those kind of pattern". Or, "modest girls won't wear those". That's so wild. And that's what this kind of pattern want to express, actually.(C4)*

> *In China, people wear normal jeans a lot. And if they have.. the.. sort of… trousers they will choose more tight one, not that loose one. I can be definitely sure even the old person in China, they will never wear clothes like that. (C5)*

4.5.2   Nationality

Clothes can communicate which country a person is from. Certain countries or their 'styles' were associated with a certain material and colors, sometimes in combination with specific items.

> *I felt he's Spanish or Italian. Corduroy, this a bit like the.. yeah this material. And the color, the red-brown color. And this, I think quite mainly this handkerchief. […] And I don't know how much of the hat, but maybe the hat, as well, to make me feels, like a Italian or Spanish. Doesn't feel so much like Swedish style. (C2)*

> *It's like a Swedish style, but I don't know why. Maybe because the color of the trousers is brown. And with the..umm.. yup. And with the sweaters and they have a shirt, sleeves there. Umm.. I'd say it's more Swedish style.(C5)*

Swedish

4.5.3   Political Orientation

A person's political orientation was assumed by looking at the items of clothing that he was wearing and the style of clothing. Golf shoes and chino pants and what one interviewee referred to as 'a classy way' made the person look like someone who would vote for the conservative party. The relation between the conservative political orientation and golf will be addressed in more detail in the later section.

> *Uh… it's golf shoes. [..] And also, also his pants in a way, they.. I mean they look.. look a bit formal. But still casual. I guess, it's what you would call, chinos, in a way. But the same time, I mean, he's dressed in a classy way, like he's… yeah, he's going to play golf, but with an important colleague, or… [..]I mean, he wants to make a statement with this kind of clothes, "well, I belong here". [..] He votes for the conservative party. (S4)*

4.5.4 Nationality

In a similar way as the Chinese group associated certain material, colors or items with
specific countries or 'national styles', the Swedish interviewees discussed a specific city,
country and region such as Florida, Paris, Britain and Scandinavia, in relation to colors,
certain patterns, e.g., strips, fabrics, hat, etc.

> *The strips and the red color. It's like, "I'm on vacation and I want to look French.
> And I'm in Paris". What is the actor called, from 'Amelie från Montmarte'? I'm
> thinking about her and like her movies. [..] I'm not sure why it's France. But it's like,
> strips and… In all pictures, if you see a French man, like they make a stereotype,
> they often, they have a white-and-black strips. It's like.. and a little hat and a
> baguette. (S2)*

> *White and black. A lot of white and black and… the fabrics and how you put together
> the clothes. Cotton. [...] In Scandinavia, you more see maybe, not always, but more
> cotton, or… (S2)*

4.6   Status & Golf

Clothes communicate membership of a social class, e.g., upper, middle, etc. (Argyle, 1988,
p.235). Knapp and colleagues (2013) also contended that socioeconomic status is one of the
personal attributes that can be communicated by dress (p.190). Both groups assumed the
social class of a person based on clothing in a slightly different, but fairly similar way.
Interestingly, golf was a sport that was commonly mentioned and discussed in relation to
status in both cases.

Chinese

4.6.1 Economic Status

The Chinese interviewees suggested that a person's economic status can be judged by the
way the clothes are worn, i.e., a style of clothing, color combinations and if the items worn
are brand-named or not. When a person have not seemingly cared enough about the color and
the style, it might give a socioeconomically lower impression, while a certain combination of
colors can make the person look 'rich'.

> *Homeless people. Yeah. So, he doesn't have any, doesn't have many clothes or
> something. Just, "whatever I have, I have to put on". He doesn't care about the color,
> the style and anything. (C1)*

> *This one is rich. Red, white is rich color. And, white shoes. Like those people who
> play golf…It's… clean. Yeah. Just… white or red just make him rich. (C1)*

Another way to assume the economic status of a person is by looking at the size and how modern, or the stylishness of the clothes worn. In addition, the interviewee below named some popular shoes brands such as New Balance, Nike as 'a better choice' that might possibly raise the person's so-called 'poor' impression.

> *The third one seems a poor guy. I mean… because the.. these jeans, it's really old, seems really old. It's quite loose, quite big. It's much bigger than his size. And the shoes, they are not in style. I mean for the sneakers… Um, that's the most common sneaker, and just for running. That's not kind of casual style sneaker. So… I mean this kind of sneaker, they don't have any design on them. And they are not classical types. They are not New Balance. They are not Nike. Just common. Just common, daily wearing stuff. But now, it feels really poor. For my shoes like these, this one is from the Forest Gump. Some other shoes, Nike shoes like Air Max, they are classical sneaker. So I think that's better choice than these kind of stuff. (C4)*

4.6.2   Golf

When the interviewees talked about economical status, the concept of golf was often associated with it. The following comment explains this well.

> *This one is rich. Red, white is rich color. Like those people who play golf…usually have this kind of clothes. (C1)*

In addition to one's economic possibility that golf can indicate, people who wear such types of clothes for golf can also be interpreted as someone who want to show 'authority', according to another Chinese interviewee.

> *I mean the clothes itself is not that expensive maybe. But the people willing to wear like that, that means, I guess, it means, he want to show sort of a… I don't know, how do you say, authority. (C5)*

Bright colors can also be found in the clothes that people playing golf might wear in the field. This association can be best explained by the influence of media. The portrait of people playing golf in the media, e.g., movies or TV shoes, seems to be quite stereotypical.

> *And the color bright and that means you are going to, I mean, going to play some sort of games with your friend. [..] The bright colors and… yeah.. the white trousers maybe. Because in too many movies and stuff I saw in golf course they… people wear like those clothes. (C5)*

> *It seems this kind of combinations kind of old. Or for golf. Golf like? It's… the hat? Ah…the sweater, and the shoe, and the trousers. (laughs) All of them. All of them, actually. Because the people… I don't know, probably from TV shows or… Because*

people in.. on the golf court, all of them looks quite like that, like wearing white trousers or this kind of rice grey or rice yellow, yeah. (C4)

Swedish

4.6.3   Socioeconomic Status

Compared to the Chinese interviewees, the Swedish group used the word 'upper-class' quite often. They also looked mostly at colors and styles to identify people with higher socioeconomic status. It was claimed that the clothes that upper-class people would wear do not necessarily have to be fashionable, but they are 'matchy', strict and not revealing.

Some quite upper class, I would say. It looks quite fancy. So someone like, yeah, that person seems like someone who has money. It's the style, you know. It's like… It's something about the coloring and the style. And it's not… I don't see that as very like fashionable. I see that as like some kind of upper class. I don't know why that comes to me. [..] I also think I would still see that person who's someone quite classy. Quite strict in a way. [..] It's so matchy and strict and… Everything is just like, the shoes matches the jacket and it's white and… very like, doesn't reveal anything.
(S3)

Besides, another factor that makes a person look upper-class was the specific outfit that a sailing person would wear. It gives the image that the person wearing such sailing wear is well-off enough to own a sailing boat and a summer house.

This looks like someone quite upper-class, upper-class person in the summer, quite old from 55 to up, going on a boat in the..on his summer house or something like. [..] I think about a boat. I felt like he's going sailing or something. Or like he's wearing, I don't know if it's the shoes, they look quite sailory. So I feel like he's going on a boat somewhere and then I feel like, then he must be someone who has a boat, sailing boat. Maybe I don't know, I think, a lot of people have a sailing boat, but I still feel like, then he must be quite well-off. (S3)

This is like a summer vacation outfit or like the..you would wear on your vacation, you know. And in general you know, they're only the upper-class would dress up in this kind of way, you know, if they would go to, go on vacation or still.. I can't see anyone else that would do it like that. (S5)

4.6.4   Golf

Even with the Swedish group, golf seemed to be closely related to status. As it is explained quite well below, those who play golf are claimed to be 'classy', politically conservative, and rich.

*I mean, he's dressed in a classy way, like he's… yeah, he's going to play golf, but
with an important colleague, or… His boss or yeah, maybe a client.[…] When it
comes to golf, I think it's, it's not just a sport, it's a life style, in a way. So, if you play
golf, as he shows that he does, then with it, it also comes that you should drive a
certain kind of car, and you should vote for the conservative party, [..] or Blue party
as we call it in Sweden. (S4)*

*It looks, you know, maybe someone who's playing golf. [..] You know, he looks like
someone who has a lot of money and who's going to his summer house and then to
try to wear something relaxing. But, maybe it's a person from movies I watched or
something. (S5)*

4.7   Other Themes of Interest

4.7.1   Hipster-factor and Second-hand Stores

The word 'a hipster' or 'hipster-ish' was frequently mentioned by most Swedish interviewees,
which included meanings such as a sense of originality and trendiness. One of the Swedish
interviewees coined a term, 'the hipster factor', which describes this concept very well.

*The hipster factor. Just trying to be original and.. I'm not sure. It's like, "I'm gonna
wear something that I bought in a secondhand store. And I'm gonna be so special
and now I'm on my way to bake bread". And… you know, surdeg [sour dough]. Uhh..
I just get that picture. "My friends are also very, very special" Yeah, kind of going
overboard. "I'm not taking the tram. I'm bicycling and I take bicycles that's like fifty
years old and got a big wheel and small wheel". No, but, you know, like, "I want to
be special". (S2)*

Buying clothes in a second-hand store seems to be considered quite trendy in Sweden and
one of the prerequisites for a hipster since he or she can find something original and give the
impression of being environmentally conscious.

*I don't know, but I think, it's kind of trendy to buy your clothes at secondhand
because then it's more original. Because if you buy it H&M, you know, it's gonna be
a hundred of them. But secondhand is just one, or maybe… Yeah, a bit more original.
But, I mean it could, of course be from a H&M. But the combination just makes it
seems like the person likes to shop at more original places, maybe. (S1)*

*I think it's great. I mean, it's a good way of… the environment and everything. So, I
mean, everybody's been doing it for years and I think it's good to do it. So..yeah, it's
nice because then you can take back fashion and things that were modern before but
might not be modern now. So, I think it's good. (S2)*

4.7.2 Looseness, Tightness and Proportion

Compared to the Swedish group, the Chinese interviewees paid more attention to looseness or tightness of clothes. Different interpretations were made on loose clothes depending on how loose they are: elegant, unenergetic/lazy and relaxing, i.e., making the beholder feel relaxed.

> *They're loose, but they are not super loose as they don't fit at all. So, they are loose in a nice way and the shirt as well. It's nice and they are simple and they're… feels more elegant than they are… (C2)*

> *The sweater, both of them, they are quite loose. Yeah. So it's kind of really, you know, it's not tight. [..] He's not very energetic as I can see. It makes people feel quite lazy, I guess. (C4)*

Likewise, there might be a possibility that tight clothes can give a negative impression to the beholders, making them feel squeezed and uncomfortable. An interviewee explains this below.

> *It's really, bad. I mean the fit is really bad. The trousers is so tight. It's so..it's so tight, especially here on the knee part. It seems not very comfortable. [..] It's, it's just too tight. It's just too tight. I mean, it makes people feel that the trousers will be exploded, I guess. It's so boasted. It's just.. ah.. it's hard to say. But makes people feel quite squeezed…cannot breathe, so… or worry about her when she will explode the trousers. (C4)*

Proportion was also discussed as a strategy that can make a person look taller and slimmer. For example, tucking the shirt in the trousers can make the upper part of one's body look shorter and the lower part longer.

> *The best choice is to change the proportion. Uh.. to be more, I mean the upper part should be shorter and down part should look longer. So, it's better to put the shirt inside, I guess. That makes people looks taller, look taller and.. or, and slim. It just look better. (C4)*

In the similar way, the proportion of clothes themselves, i.e., width and length, is probably something to be considered when a person wants to look slimmer.

> *The width and the length.. make her slim. (C1)*

4.7.3 Hats

One of the items that drew a lot of reactions from most Swedish interviewees was a hat. Many interesting interpretations were made on a person wearing a hat. According to many

interviewees, by wearing a hat, the person tries to 'stick out' from the rest and show that he or she is more original and fancy. Therefore, the person is not afraid of people looking at him or her because it takes a lot of courage and a personality to wear a hat.

> *I mean, anyone could wear a hat. But it's like the ones who do always a bit more original maybe. They want to show something that they're a bit more fancy. [..] It makes it a bit more, you know, original. It's again with the hat that people want to.. You know, it makes me think that they want to stick out. (S1)*

> *Like, people who wears a hat, I think it takes quite a lot of courage or like a personality to wear a hat, because it's really like, "look at me", unless it's like a really hot summer's day and you're on your holiday. But if you just wear a hat to school, that's, you don't see that very often, so I think, I feel like, that's the person who's not afraid of people looking at them and seeing them.(S3)*

It is further explained that it is unusual to wear a hat in Sweden or anywhere. If one does, it will probably be interpreted as 'an obvious message' that the person wants to be original and stick out, and sees himself or herself as more creative and different than the overall crowd.

> *Well, my overall impression when someone wears a hat, it's that this person's wanna say something, you know, by wearing a hat because it's over something, it stick out, it's becomes like an very obvious kind of message or something that you know, that you wanna show that you are original by wearing a hat, you know. [..] And maybe person then sees herself as a person that you know, believe, looks different maybe, more creative, or more original than, you know, the overall crowd, you know. (S5)*

> *Here I would say something like that because usually you don't see people with hats, maybe caps. So they're trying to tell something with a hat. It's not something they wear for comfort, it's something they wear to like, show, "okay, this is who I am". A bit different with this one, I would say. (S6)*

On the other hand, it was also argued that one wears a hat for a practical reason, e.g., protection from the sun or strong light, hot temperature in summer, etc.

> *But it might also be practical reason, it's very sunny outside, you know. It might be, you know, of practical reasons. (S5)*

> *With a.. I don't really know why I feel like that, but the hat kind of makes me feel like, this hat together with this is not because they want to coordinate, it's because they want to get some protection from the sun or something. It might be that. (S6)*

The identification with a hat-wearing person seems to influence the interpretation. One interviewee explained possible reasons why a hat gives her a quite negative impression. It

was something personal that she does not or could not wear a hat herself because of her
height. Besides, the 'attention-seeking' attribute of a person wearing a hat intimidates her in a
way because she does not identify herself with that person.

> *I have no idea. It's just like an instant feeling that I get. But, to be honest, I've never
> been a fan of hats. If it's on a guy, if it's on a girl, doesn't matter. But I've always
> been like, "no, I don't like it". [..]I think it's because I'm so tall that I could never
> wear one. Yeah, so that will make me even taller. So, maybe that's why. [...] Because
> I feel like, it's like, "here I am" or "look at me", and maybe that's in some way,
> intimidates me because I'm not like that. And I feel like that person is so different
> from me or something. So maybe it's something with myself. (S3)*

Conclusions and Discussions

The present study investigated how people from a high-context culture (China) and a low-context culture (Sweden) interpret/decode messages communicated non-verbally through clothing. Semi-structured in-depth interviews using photographs as visual stimuli were conducted with two national cultural groups, i.e., China and Sweden, representative of high-context and low-context cultures.

The results obtained from the interview data indicate that both Chinese and Swedish groups have the ability for interpreting clothes as non-verbal signals and attach meanings to them. The emergence of common themes (yet with different sub-themes) such as *age, appropriateness, colorfulness, personality & mood, group membership, status & golf*, suggests that there are similarities in how both groups decoded clothes. However, different decoding patterns existed which suggests a need for further research. The themes that were not common were *looseness, tightness and proportion* (in the Chinese group) and *hipster-factor and second-hand stores*, and *hats* (in the Swedish group).

5.1   Similarities

Both groups, looking at the same photographs of clothes, discussed age, appropriateness for different social occasions, colorfulness, personality and mood, group membership and social status. And sometimes the elements for such interpretations were quite similar. For example, color was one of the ways to identify age of a person and types of shoes defined the appropriateness for different social occasions for both groups. When it comes to social status and the association with golf, they showed strikingly similar patterns of interpretation. This is consistent with what Argyle (1988) claimed in his book that wealth and status are shown by clothing in all cultures (p.67).

Besides, the strong norms for what are the suitable clothes for a specific group, e.g., age, gender, were shown in both cultural groups. The idea that showing too much skin for a certain social occasion not being appropriate was commonly present. Impression management by dressing properly or the belief that well-dressed people will be taken seriously were not one cultural group's monopoly.

Such similarities in decoding clothes, i.e., what meanings cultures attach to non-verbal signals and the process, do not seem to be congruent with Hall's simplistic, dichotomous taxonomy placing different cultures at either end of a long scale or continuum. One of the Swedish interviewees (see quotation by S5 above, page 27) commented on the 'unwritten rules' and 'invisible dress code' that one just has to know without any explicit explanations is quite contradictory to the popular image of low-context culture where 'most of the information can be found in the explicit code'. Such implicit rules, codes or even a person's ability to decode such rules have allegedly belonged to high-context cultures. What this cross-cultural decoding studies in clothing tells us is that 'high-contextness', or the ability for

implicit communication of a low-context culture has been underestimated.

Tony Fang (2011) proposed a concept which can help understand these results. Unlike Hofstede or other researchers who bipolarized cultures, he conceptualized cultures "as possessing inherently paradoxical value orientations, thereby enabling it to embrace opposite traits of any given cultural dimension", and argued that "potential paradoxical values coexist in any culture; they give rise to, exist within, reinforce, and complement each other to shape the holistic, dynamic, and dialectical nature of culture" (p.26). Using the 'portfolio' metaphor, Fang (2011) proposed that "all cultures share the same potential in value orientations" (p.1). However, he also added that cultures are also different from each other since each culture is "a unique dynamic portfolio of self-selected globally available value orientations as a consequence of that culture's all-dimensional learning over time" (p.1). Therefore, all cultures have values that are simply more salient and values that are "temporarily suppressed or lie dormant" which can be potentially awakened (p.30).

Although it is not clear what brings such cultural potential into life and what are the reasons behind the similarities that both groups share (if it's something that is universal and common to all human beings or an exposure to intercultural contact due to globalization), part of the present study's findings provide a good illustration of Fang's concept of culture where all cultures have paradoxical values that have not been given a chance to 'rise to the surface'.

Possibly, globalization could account for the similarities. Globalization is blurring the border between cultures and such complex and dynamic phenomenon has made it easier for people to be exposed to other cultures. As Held and colleagues (1999) suggested, "the textiles and clothing industries are among the most widespread across the globe" (p.266) and such common access provides similar choices to people all over the world, consequently standardizing people's costume behaviors and the social meanings they attach to them.

Another possible explanation to the identified similarities, e.g., norms for suitable clothes for a specific age and gender group, showing skin, impression management by dressing up, might be the existence of display rules as one of the cultural universals. Lustig and Koester (2010) explained that "all cultures have display rules that govern when and under what circumstances various nonverbal expressions are required, preferred, permitted, or prohibited" and "the norms for display rules vary greatly across cultures" (p.201). Probably China and Sweden are not far from each other in terms of display rules related to clothing behaviors. However, the reason why they are similar demands further investigation.

The similarity could also be explained by observing that clothes and costume by nature are high-context. People probably do not think about their choice of clothes or why they prefer specific colors, and do not necessarily tell people in conversation (as a low-context act) what they are wearing today or the motivation for their choice (e.g., 'I might not know why I chose blue today, or why I like blue, and I would not necessarily tell people in conversation I am wearing blue today').

5.2   Differences

There were also differences in the way the high-context culture (Chinese) and low-context culture (Swedish) groups interpreted or decoded the clothing. Color or colorfulness is a good example showing that the Chinese group associated colorfulness, especially bright colors, with emotions or mood (e.g., happiness, passion) and also with attractiveness while the Low-context Swedish group associated color with fashionableness, Swedishness (i.e., black and white combination), weather, and economic status.

It is interesting that Chinese interviewees associated color with mood while the Swedish interviewees reported a stereotype of wearing dark and achromatic-colored clothes. Color tends to mean variety (e.g., when we think of the rainbow) and lack of color can mean the opposite. Hall's sidelight on the Chinese orthography which was claimed to be an art form and the comparison between the written language of China and other Western languages can provide some insights - "to use a Chinese dictionary, the reader must know the significance of 214 radicals (there are no counterparts for radicals in the Indo-European languages). [...] In addition, the spoken pronunciation system must be known, because there are four tones and a change of tone means a change of meaning; whereas in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, etc., the reader need not know how to pronounce the language in order to read it" (Hall, 1976, p.91-92).

It can be presumed that in Chinese culture as one of the high-context cultures one shade of color might equate to a wider lexical range and therefore more can be communicated to those who can decode the signals. The Chinese group's use of wider range of codes with color seems consistent with Hall's high-context taxonomy and also with Davis's (1992) concept of social variability in the signifier-signified relationship. As he suggested, it is impossible that people in general interpret the same symbols in clothing in the same way because "the universal meanings attaching to clothes" become substantially different depending on social identity, taste and an individual's accessibility to *the symbolic wares* of a society (Davis, 1992, p.9). Davis (1992) also mentioned color as one of the distinguishing features, along with others such as fabric, texture, cut, etc.

The majority of the Chinese interviews reacted to the looseness/tightness and the proportion of the clothes quite often while Swedish did not. Although it is difficult to define what exactly is (too) loose and tight, certain sets of clothes provoked some reactions. Interestingly, loose clothes could make a person look both poor/lazy and elegant/comfortable. This, of course, depends on the types of clothes. The important thing is that one group reacted to such stimuli and commented on them.

The fact that Chinese interviewees paid more attention to the cut and fit of clothing might be indicative of high-contextness in the sense that Chinese interviewees are socialized by their culture to consciously and unconsciously decode visual stimuli, i.e., clothing, to a high degree. It could be possible that people from high-context cultures perceive things like materials

(fabric), fit and tailoredness more than people from low-context cultures.

It is surprising that only the Swedish group mentioned political orientation based on clothing. Possibly China's one political party system might have played a role and this calls for further investigation in connection with other cultural taxonomies, i.e., collectivism vs. individualism.

The idea of trendiness or fashionableness seems to be quite different for each group. Brand names can make a person look fashionable or trendy as one of the Chinese interviewee named certain brand named shoes or shoes with 'design' to replace the 'common' sneakers to make the person look 'better'. Interestingly, China became the world's largest consumer group of luxury goods in 2012, spending 306 billion (RMB), according to *China Luxury Apparel and Accessories Market Report, 2012-2015*. The implication of such phenomena can be another subject for further research.

Swedish interviewees, on the other hand, often talked about second-hand stores in relation to trendiness or being a hipster. They regarded a person buying clothes in a second-hand store as someone who is trendy or wants to be original. Instead of buying clothes that are mass-produced, it is perhaps trendier to find something that is unique.

However, 'sticking out' too much can be interpreted negatively. Many Swedish interviewees reacted to hats claiming that the person who wants to attract some attention or stick out from the public would wear a hat. Some interviewees showed their dislike of hats. The fear of sticking out and a rather moralistic attitude towards the ones who do stick out can be possibly explained by the notion of *Jantelagen* that is seen as an element of the culture in Sweden, along with other Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Denmark. 'The law of Jante' is the cultural norm that says "you should not think you "are anything special"" (p.52, Daun, 1996). Robinowitz and Carr (2001) also argued that "Swedes internalize the concept from a very early age: don't boast about yourself" (p.85). Perhaps, people with hats can be considered as the ones who do not follow this 'invisible' law.

So what do we do with such differences? "Simply talking about "cultural differences" and how we must respect them is a hollow cliché", as Hall (1976) claimed (p.63). The reason why we study differences in cultural studies is mainly to understand them rather than to put distance. As Argyle (1988) insightfully observed, "awareness of these differences can certainly help intercultural contacts to go more smoothly" (p.69). To be able to see the differences and understand them can perhaps help prevent the sources of annoyance, irritation or even conflicts that are not necessary in the intercultural settings as similarities also bind us together as the citizens of the planet Earth, enabling us to identify ourselves with others.

The identified differences also offer insight into further research. Some of the findings, e.g., Chinese group's use of wider range of codes with color, provide depth and understanding to the studies that fall within an experimental and/or quantitative paradigm.

5.3   Limitations

There exist some limitations in this research. It is important to mention that the clothes used for the photographs do not represent universal patterns of clothes and it would be impossible to classify clothes that are agreeable with a universal taxonomy as none exists (Argyle, 1988; Knapp & Hall, 2010). The photographs were used as common stimuli for the interviews. The focus of this study is to understand the interpretation process and how this is influenced by culture, not quantifying the findings onto broader populations. There might also be a risk that the removed faces in the photographs could have unintended effects. The removed parts in the images might act as confounding variables or sources of distraction.

In the present study photo elicitation proved to be a very useful method to facilitate qualitative dialogue but there is risk of leading responses due to the possibility of endless varieties of clothing stimuli. For example, hats were used and drew data in the interviews but this might just have easily not been included in the catalogue, and perhaps other clothing items were missed that might have drawn other data. This inevitably leads to the same conclusion that Argyle (1988) and Knapp and Hall (2010) reached, i.e., there has never been any systematic measurement or classification of clothes and there is no single, reliable means to taxonomize clothing cross-culturally.

Whilst it can be argued that the findings from the present study do not represent the whole cultural groups that are being investigated it is important to note that this was not the primary aim and that insight, and interpretation, will encounter personal taste and judgment. However, approaches such as Grounded Theory aim to remove data variance caused by individuals and instead to draw common threads across interviewees.

The language used for interviews might also be a limitation. Both groups were interviewed in English, which means neither group of interviewees was interviewed in their native languages. Although there were no observed difficulties conducting interviews in English, it is difficult to know whether the same data would have been obtained if the interviews were conducted in their own languages.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that there would have been advantages in using a second coder for code development. By having a second coder, the author's judgment on the relevant key phrases during the code development process can be double-checked or even questioned.

5.4   Concluding Comment

The present study investigated how people from a high-context culture (China) and a low-context culture (Sweden) interpret messages communicated through clothing. Findings suggest that both national cultural groups have the ability for interpreting clothes as non-verbal signals and attach meanings to them in similar ways. Differences were also identified in terms of *the ways* of interpreting messages in clothing. The identified differences such as

Chinese group's use of wider range of codes with color, more attention to the cut and fit of clothing, offer insight to findings from existing research and suggest new avenues. It is hoped that the findings from the present investigation stimulates further inquiry into the role that clothing plays in cross-cultural, nonverbal communication.

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        185.

Appendix (1) Classification of Clothes (listed in chronological order)

	Classification	Context	Author/s	Journal title
1	• best looking • man I'd most like to date (or double date with) • man I'd like to have as my class president • best personality • most likely to succeed after college • most intelligent	Men's clothing (social ratings)	Hoult, T. F. (1954)	Experimental Measurement of Clothing as a Factor in Some Social Ratings of Selected American Men, American Sociological Review
2	• high status (a freshly pressed suit, shined shoes, white shirt, tie and straw hat) • low status (well-worn scuffed shoes, soiled patched trousers and an unpressed blue denim shirt)	Man violating traffic signals	Lefkowitz, M. and colleagues (1955)	Status Factors in Pedestrian Violation of Traffic Signals, Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology
3	• acceptable • non-acceptable	High school students (male/female)	Hamilton, J. and Warden, J. (1966)	Student's role in a high school community and his clothing behavior, Journal of Home Economics
4	• high status male (suits and ties) • high status female (neat dresses and either wearing or carrying dress coats) • low status male (work clothes and carrying something that would identify them as workers such as a flashlight, lunch pail, six-foot rule) • low status female (skirts and blouses, unkempt)	Men/Women asking subjects to return the dime in a phone booth	Bickman, L. (1971)	The effects of social status on the honesty of others. Journal of Social Psychology

5	• upper-middle class • working class	A stranger asking the way (male), 'Paddington Station experiment'	Sissons, M. (1971)	The Psychology of Social Class, In Money, Wealth and Class
6	• straight (a dress, a pressed coat, white shoes with medium heels, and a white handbag) • hippie (a denim jacket, slacks, and sandals)	Female petitioners	Suedfeld, P. and colleagues (1971)	Petitioner's Attire and Petition Signing by Peace Demonstrators: A Field Experiment on Reference Group Similarity, Journal of Applied Social Psychology
7	• the lowest level of authority (civilian – a sport jacket and tie) • the next level of authority (milkman with a basket containing empty milk bottles) • the highest level of authority (guard – similar uniform to a policeman's with a badge and insignia but no gun)	Males requesting pedestrians to do certain things	Bickman, L. (1974)	The social power of a uniform, Journal of Applied Social Psychology
8	• formal (a tie and suit jacket) • informal (suit pants and an open collar shirt)	A psychologist giving recommendations to parents	Wasserman, T. and Kassinove, H. (1976)	Effects of Type of Recommendation, Attire, and Perceived Expertise on Parental Compliance, The Journal of Social Psychology

9	• formal daytime dress (male – business suit, shirt and tie/female– a two piece suit with high heeled shoes) • casual attire (male – campus dress, levis, tennis shoes, and T-shirt)	'Conversatio nalists' in a corridor	Fortenber ry, J. H. and colleague s (1978)	Mode of dress as a perceptual cue to deference. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
10	• well-dressed (skirt and jacket, blouse, hose and shoes put together to form a 'pleasing color match, brief case, attaché case and/or shoulder bag) • poorly-dressed (faded and patched blue jeans or cutoffs, t shirt, and/or blouse with several noticeable mends with sandals or sneakers)	Women asking for a dime	Hensley, W. E. (1981)	The effects of attire, location, and sex on aiding behavior: A similarity explanation, Journal of Nonverbal Behavior
11	• jeans and t-shirt • formal suit	Female clothing for job interviews	Von Baeyer, C. L, and colleague s (1981)	Impression Management in the Job Interview: When the Female Applicant Meets the Male (Chauvinist) Interviewer, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin
12	• formal style 1 (with a skirt) • formal style 2 (with pants) • informal style 1 (with a skirt) • informal style 2 (with pants) • sloppy style (jeans and a t-shirt or sweatshirt)	Women's clothing	Harris M. B. and colleague s (1983)	Clothing: Communication, Compliance, and Choice, Journal of Applied Social Psychology

13	• different outfits which varied in masculinity	Women job applicant for a middle management position	Forsythe, S. M. and colleagues (1985)	Influence of Clothing Attributes on the Perception of Personal Characteristics, The Psychology of Fashion (In M. R. Solomon, 1985)
14	• conservative • trendy • casual	Newscasters	Harp, S. S. and colleagues (1985)	The Influence of Apparel on Responses to Television News Anchorwomen, The Psychology of Fashion (In M. R. Solomon, 1985)
15	• dramatic • natural • romantic • classic	Women's clothes	Sweat, S. J and Zentner, M. A (1985)	Attribution toward Female Appearance Styles, In The Psychology of Fashion
16	• daring style • conservative style • dressy style • casual style	Female garment styles	Peak, S. L (1986)	Effects of garment style on the perception of personal traits, Clothing and Textiles Research Journal
17	• black uniforms • non-black uniforms	Professional football and hockey teams	Frank, M. G. and Gilovich, T. (1988)	The dark side of self- and social perception: Black uniforms and aggression in professional sports, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology

18	• punk • preppie • new romantic • suburban leisure • lounge wear • heavy metal (Based on the key dimensions of **fasionableness, expense**, and **centrality** (mainstream))	clothing practice in modern North America	McCracken G.D and Roth V. J. (1989)	Does clothing have a code? Empirical findings and theoretical implications in the study of clothing as a means of communication, International Journal of Research in Marketing
19	• topic relevant uniforms (sheriff's and nurse's uniform) • topic irrelevant uniforms (a generic business uniform – white blouse with a navy blue skirt and blazer)	Female spokespersons asking for contributions	Lawrence, S. G. and Watson, M. (1991)	Getting others to help: The effectiveness of professional uniforms in charitable fund-raising, Journal of Applied Communication Research
20	• appropriate dress (blue jeans, shirt, pullover sweater, and shoes, with hair held back with a scarf) • inappropriate dress (a long yellow chiffon gown)	Women's dress in appropriate/i nappropriate situations	O'Neal, G. S. and Laptisky, M. (1991)	Effects of Clothing as Nonverbal Communication on Credibility of the Message Source, Clothing and Textiles Research Journal
21	• Three piece suit • Dark navy two-piece suit • Medium gray two-piece suit • Sport coat and slacks • European look • Casual look • The tourist	male (hospital salesman outfits)	Stuart, E.W. and Fuller B. K. (1991)	Clothing as Communication in Two Business-to-Business Sales Settings, Journal of Business Research

22	• different pieces of female business attire with varying degree of sexiness (the absence of clothing and the tightness of clothing)	Women's business attire on television soap operas	White, S. E. (1995)	A content analytic technique for measuring the sexiness of women's attire in media presentations, Communication Research Reports
23	• formal professional • casual professional • casual	Instructor attire (male/female)	Morris, T. L and colleagues (1996)	Fashion in the classroom: Effects of attire on student perceptions of instructors in college classes, Communication Education
24	• alternative (hippie, grunge, gothic) • casual • business	Representative of the main styles of clothing worn at the University of New South Wales (both men and women)	Reid, A. and colleagues (1997)	Clothing Style and formation of first impressions. Perceptual and Motor skills
25	• informal – formal • wrinkled – pressed • **inappropriate – appropriate** • dirty – clean • professional – non-professional • neat – sloppy • **fashionable – unfashionable**	Teaching assistant attire in the university classroom	Roach, K. D. (1997)	Effects of graduate teaching assistant attire on student learning, misbehaviors, and ratings of instruction, Communication Quarterly
26	• preppy attire • messy attire	Women asking to donate money to charity	Levine, L. R. and colleagues (1998)	Attire and charitable behavior, Psychological Reports

27	• formal professional dress (male - a conservative suit and tie with dress shoes/female – conservative jacketed business suit or dress with dressy hose and shoes) • casual professional dress (male - khaki slacks, a casual button front shirt and loafers or deck shoes/female -a skirt or slacks with a dressy blouse/sweater and low heeled shoes) • casual dress (casual jeans, a long skirt in a casual fabric or print, athletic shoes and socks, a flannel shirt, polo shirt, t-shirt or casual sweater)	Teachers attire in college classrooms	Gorham, J. and colleagues (1999)	Fashion in the classroom III: Effects of instructor attire and immediacy in natural classroom interactions, Communication Quarterly
28	• upper-middle class • lower class	Clients' appearance/mode of dress (female in Iran)	Aliakbari, M. (2013)	Does it Matter What We Wear? A Sociolinguistic Study of Clothing and Human Values, International Journal of Linguistics
29	• formal business • business casual • casual	Work place attire of city employee	Karl, K. A, Hall, L and P, J. V. (2013)	City Employee Perceptions of the Impact of Dress and Appearance: You Are What You Wear, Public Personnel Management

Status classification (7) – Blue
Formality classification (12) – Dark Pink
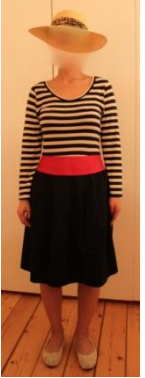Appropriateness classification (2) - Yellow
Gender-related classification (2) – Purple
Uniform-related classification (3) – Dark Green
Other 'style' (rather subjective) classification (3) – White

Appendix (2) Photographs

Male					
M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6

Female					
F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6

Appendix (3) Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Introduction

My name is Sunju. I am a student at Gothenburg University writing my thesis as part of a masters' program in communication. This interview is a part of my thesis work and it is about how people from different cultures interpret clothes. Everything you say will only be used for this particular study and related research, and although some quotations may be used, they will be completely anonymized. Your name will also be kept anonymous so that no one will identify you with your answers. Do you mind if I record the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information
- What is your nationality?
- What is your age?
- What is the highest degree/education you have completed?

"Here is a picture of a person wearing a certain types of clothes"

Messages communicated through clothing – social meaning

1. General impression
   How would you describe this person? / What impression do you get?
   (<u>Probe</u>: Can you explain why?)

2. Context - appropriateness for different social situations
   Where would you normally see this person?
   (<u>Probe</u>: Can you explain why?)

The way the messages transmitted and its effects – code elements

3. Based on the interviewees' answers and expressions,
   (e.g, old, formal, attractive..)
   You said "---- ", what is it that makes this person look "----"?

4. Based on the interviewees' answers and expressions
   (e.g, loose, red color, single items,...)
   What does "----" mean? / Can you tell me more about "---- (e.g, leather)"?

Closing questions

5. Is there anything that you want to discuss or mention?