

## Dress Code: Striking a Balance Between Modernity and Modesty in Nigerian Higher Institutions of Learning

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**Abstract:** This study looked into the introduction of dress code in Nigeria Higher institutions of learning. In particular the study focused on the dressing style of Nigerian students especially the female sex. The study highlighted factors that led to the prescribing of dress codes in the various institution of learning. The writers concluded that a lot of sex-related problems such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse will be reduced in our various higher institutions of learning if students can strike a balance between modernity and modesty.

**Key words:** Nigerian students, dress code, Nigerian Higher Institutions, female students, indecent, globalisation, modernity

### INTRODUCTION

This topic is an interesting topic that calls for a lot of value judgment. For a clear understanding of this study the following, sub-heading will be discussed:

- Meaning and purpose of putting on dresses.
- Current style of dressing among female students in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria.
- Problems associated with the current style of dressing in higher institutions of learning.
- Factors leading to the development/adoption of dress code.
- Balance between being fashionable and modest.

Within the last one decade the dressing styles adopted by students especially, the female students in Nigerian Higher Institutions of Learning have continuously called for attention. Teachers, lecturers, religious leaders and authorities of various higher institutions of learning have at various times cast aspersion on the style of dressing adopted by the female students. In 2003 this trend took a dramatic turn for the worst after the aborted Miss World Beauty Contest in Nigeria. As rightly mentioned by Iheanacho (2005) virtually all the campuses of higher institutions of learning in Nigeria went ablaze with different types of crazy fashions.

Rightly, Bandura's (1983) observational learning theory was justified as most of the female students in Nigerian Higher Institutions of Learning dressing like the

Miss World Beauty Pageants. The red-carpet reception accorded these Miss World Beauty Contestants by the Federal and State Governments no doubt must have provided great impetus for these undergraduates to imitate these models.

Bandura's theory of personality focuses generally on observational learning and particularly on social learning. He stipulates that a good proportion of learning takes place by modeling. Modeling as used in the study is defined as the method through or by which an individual (observer) acquires a new behaviour by observing an event or object (model) without any direct external reinforcement. Bandura (1986) opined that reinforcement of models often enhance the probability for the observers to imitate them. In line with this, the reaction of the female students in higher institutions of learning should not come as a surprise. This is corroborated by Iheanacho's (2005) statement that "it is no longer uncommon to observe majority of our female students in higher institutions of learning in dresses that expose their tummies, parts of their breasts, part of their back, greater part of their thighs, the exact size and shape of their buttocks and thighs..."

### MEANING OF DRESS AND WHY WE PUT ON DRESSES?

Before going further let us first of all find out the meaning and purpose of putting on dresses. Dress has been simply explained in Gem English Dictionary (1993) as cloth that is worn or put on. It is a covering for the body.

From these writers experience, a dress is basically put on for the purpose of protecting man against the effects of weather and also to cover our nakedness. Some other less important reasons for putting on dresses include supplying of information about the wearers such as the religion and enhancing of sexual appeals of the wearer.

#### **CURRENT STYLE OF DRESSING IN NIGERIA HIGHER INSTITUTION OF LEARNING**

In the earlier part of this study, attempt has been made to discuss the present mode of dressing found among our young people in Nigerian Higher Institutions of Learning and how this has come to be seriously influenced by the 2003 aborted Miss World Beauty Contest in Nigeria. There are a lot of complaints about the present styles of dressing among our young people in the Nigerian Higher Institutions of Learning. Psychologically, the current styles of dressing have within the last few years had been causing a lot of ripples among parents, guardians, lecturers and even the authorities of the various institutions. Dressing has rightly become an entirely different kettle of fish.

Taking a close study of some of the Nigerian daily Newspapers, one would see series of pictures that testify to the fact that today, dressing among young people is sexy and indecent. To find out younger pupils feelings about the present mode of dressing among Nigerian youths, basic 3 pupils aged between 7 years and 10 years were given copies of 2 Nigerian Newspapers from 1st January, 2006 to 12th June, 2006 to identify pictures of those that can be classified as people who are scantily dressed/those whose dressing can be regarded as indecent. These very children were able to identify people who in their own opinion were scantily/indecently dressed. Of all those identified not a single one of them was a male.

A male commentator looking at some of the pictures identified by the children on the screen commented thus "NAFDAC should be invited to ascertain the purity or otherwise of these boobs". Another opined that "the relevant agency should also check whether or not the boobs are also flu-free". While the last of them said "my, oh, my, what an arrant display of boobs?" such terrible remarks are what daily greet those women whose stock in trade is indecent dressing.

Uba (2006) rightly remarked that in the past years when men were men and women were submissive, the basic essence of covering the female anatomy was of grave importance. Women were proud to cover up themselves, but today all that seem to have been swept off into the dust of history. Now, hell has been let loose. To be scantily dressed is in front-burner these days. Total exposure of the mammary asset is the in thing. Wherever

you turn, on the street, in bus, in the campus, at bus terminals and even in the most sacred of all places, there, massive and extremely large boob's aptly tagged fallen heroes are screaming out of their packs. All shades and types of breast rudely and embarrassingly stare at everyone in sight. Women, now proudly and with utmost dignity flaunt them with some expression of "jump into the deep sea if you don't like it on their faces".

The statements above show how most males feel about the stupid display of parts of the female anatomy that should be properly covered. Some groups of women such as prostitutes and actresses may be pardoned for dressing scantily because they believe they are enhancing their trade or professions by so doing. What about students in higher institutions of learning in a lecture delivered to a group of fresh undergraduates at the Lagos State University during the orientation programme asked her audience especially, those of them who were likely to be guilty of indecent dressing to find answers to the following questions:

- What are you selling by dressing scantily or indecently?
- What are you advertising by dressing scantily or indecently?
- Who are you attracting through the indecent dressing?

Whatever are the answers, the point to note is that the main focus in a higher institution of learning such as the University is learning. Acquisition of knowledge is therefore the priority. Many studies have been conducted within the recent past to show that the current dressing style in vogue is a problem in many of our institutions of learning. The present trend in dressing has been condemned by many of our universities, colleges of education and polytechnics. Iheanacho (2005) in a study conducted in one of our Nigerian Universities reported his findings that skimpy, transparent and sexy dresses worn by female undergraduates who were his respondents' elicited sexual responses in males. Such dresses were dresses that show complexion of more parts of the thighs; dresses that expose the legs, dresses that expose the breast and dresses that show the exact size and shape of the buttocks. Exposing these sensitive parts of the female body send wrong signals to the males as pointed out by Ibanga (1996a).

#### **DRESSING: GLOBALISATION AND AN ASPECT OF CULTURE**

Sociologically, one significant aspect of culture is the mode of dressing in different societies. A particular way of dressing reveals the ethnic background of an

individual. The putting on of different styles of dressing today has been traced to modernity or civilization (Hansen, 2004). Modernity is a concept that has been associated with western notions of progress especially in colonial Africa.

Kimani (2004) stresses that dress is used to transgress gender and generational identities in a quest of 'modernity' and wearers invent their own new traditions by choosing what identifies them as modern. Olaoye (2005) reaffirms that the type of cloth or dress that one wears says volumes about a person. As a result dress serves as talking guide as well as decoder which communicates message about a person, place or thing.

However, the discourse of modernity and civilization as propel by globalisation through the acceleration of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have spread different modes of dressing across the globe and this has emanated nudity in the society. Kimani (2004) there fore writes:

Karen Tranberg Hansen grapples with the politics of miniskirt 'nudity' as played out in the Zambian capital of Lusaka. Nudity in the traditional setting had been perceived as an example of western 'immorality' attracted harsh criticism and even violent moral outrage in Lusaka. Thus, a young woman cried out "In Zambia, there is no freedom of dressing.

The statement above reveals that, though the age of globalisation is not a new phenomenon but the technologies helping to accelerate globalisation has also increased different dressing of different parts of the world-creating alarming situation in the different parts of the world. Osawe (2007) submits that the unspoken dress code of "bare-as-you-dare" is prevailing in many Nigerian tertiary institutions among female students; all in the name of modernity and civilization; thus, in the campuses, 'it is free to show bums, boobs' and so on. Mazrui (2001) narrates that by the 21st century people dress more alive all over the world than they did at the end of the 19th century. He further explains that men suit (western) has become almost and jeans' revolution has captured the youth dress culture of half the globe as a result of globalisation. Nyamnjoh *et al.* (2002) argue that dressing incorporates hairstyles, that in Cameroon many women curl, dry, straighten, lengthen with extensions and supplement with wigs their hair. The writers argued that this has been severely criticized depicting them as 'modern African women' revealing that such attitude is seen as active contributors to the proponents of globalisation, hair is an example of a world wide exchange styles. In view of this, it is observe that local hair do as

part of dressing in African culture is diminishing as a result of an emergent technologies in the different parts of the world. In credence of this, Teasdale (1997) submits thus:

The fact that a handful of countries enjoys a ritual monopoly of the cultural industries are distributed throughout the world to an ever growing audience is a powerful factor in the erosion of cultural distinctiveness. Predictable and all too often very trivial through it may be, this spurious 'world cultural' nevertheless conveys implicit value systems and many well production a sense of dispossession and loss of identity in those exposed to it.

This is the simpler understanding of modernity and modesty; hence, the critics of modernisation notes the potency of western styles and products to westernize, even modernize, those who try them in order to alienate them from African ways of life. For instance, the African items, whether hairstyles, cloth, music, food have been 'globalised'-which means westernized since, societies and cultures are becoming increasingly interconnected through globalisation. Thus, Deepak (2005) argues thus:

Many feel that indiscipline and rash behaviour are the effects of liberation and globalisation and globalisation is swallowing up traditional ways of thinking and living, bringing about lopsided development. This is bound to affect the young minds. The Jeans-T Shirt culture is proof of the American cultural hegemony. Everybody feels that American way is ideal because the economic system has proved itself. So what if many aspects do not suit us? We follow the west blindly tripping where they tripped and tumbling where they fell.

The excerpt, shows that cultural rights cannot be neglected in any plan aimed at achieving human development. Thus, people are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of cultural rights as globalisation and migration flows tend to suppress African identities or make them obsolete.

#### **FACTORS LEADING TO THE DEVELOPMENT/ADOPTION OF DRESS CODE**

Every culture in Nigeria disapproves of such exposure and at the same time regards such an exposure as an abomination. As concluded by Mediera (1995) exposing the buttocks and thighs suggest that these young ladies are providing information about their

personality. The most probable information could be their lack of interest in serious academic work. Ibanga (1996b) suggests that such female students that put on the offensive dresses have come to the university to distract others and sell their wares in prostitution through dressing and for Agbo (2003) "that could be the reason why our campuses are filled with prostitutes today.

Many will argue that we are in a democratic and free society and as such everybody should be free to put on whatever he or she likes to wear. This of course is true but at the same time we need to remember that teaching/learning process needs conducive environment. The higher institutions of learning in the country are for academic pursuit and should be free of all known distractions. While undergraduates especially, the female sex are free to be fashionable, this must be done with some moderation.

It is this urge to be modest and reduce distraction in the various higher institutions of learning that has led some of the institutions to formulating and prescribing dress code for their students. Universities such as the University of Lagos have put down in writing how the students should dress. To many students (both male and female), the prescription of dress code appears as an infringement on their human rights because they believe that they should be free to put on whatever they like. These writers to some extent agree with this but bearing in mind the serious purpose of being in higher institutions of learning, one would agree that if lecturers and even students are to do their work well with little or no distraction, then a sort of dress code should be put in place. It is the belief of these writers that students of higher institutions of learning are adults and as such they should be able to behave in such a way that they earn the respect of members of the society irrespective of whether or not dress code is put in place.

### **CONCLUSION**

The focus in this study has been on the dressing style of Nigerian students in higher institutions of learning especially the female students. For the male sex, problem of indecent dressing does not appear to be a problem, as most of the male students tend to be better dressed than their female counterparts.

It is the belief of these writers that a lot of sex-related problems such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse

will be reduced in our various higher institutions of learning if students can strike a balance between smodernity and modesty.

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