

OUT OF VOGUE: TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY AND THE ROLE OF
CLOTHING IN DEALING WITH EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS

By

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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

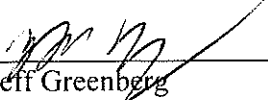
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Abstract

Clothing serves complex functions for the individual, including an opportunity for affiliation, a source of self-expression, and unique self-esteem. The present study attempts to explore the role of clothing by examining students' responses to hypothetical dress code restrictions from the perspective of Terror Management Theory. This study is designed to test the hypothesis that after a reminder of mortality, participants will express an increased liking of a fellow student who opposes the dress code, and a decreased liking of a student who supports the dress code. In contradiction of the hypothesis, results revealed that participants under mortality salience responded more favorably to the dress code than those in the control condition. This suggests that an understanding of mortality plays a role in individual attitudes towards dress.

Out of Vogue: Terror Management Theory and the Role of Clothing in Dealing with Existential Concerns

Getting dressed is a unique process that humans have participated in since the beginning of existence. The functions of clothing are diverse and multifaceted, varying with time and place. Biblically, clothing was constructed simply as a method of covering the body. In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve feel ashamed of their nakedness, so they construct clothing out of leaves. It serves a practical purpose, as clothing provides vital protection against the elements, such as sun, wind, and cold. It is symbolically used to express social status, as in ancient Rome, when the color purple represented power and opulence, and was reserved for the Emperor (“The Roman Empire: in the First Century”). It is a mode of communication, as apparel worn by military personnel, police officers, or judges portrays a message about their function in society, as well as the stripes that they have earned. Clothing is thoughtfully chosen: pastels are worn in the spring, black for funerals, and ivory on wedding days. The present study investigates the function of clothing from the perspective of Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski & Solomon, 1986). Specifically, it will address clothing’s role as a source of self-definition and self-expression, and the opportunity it provides for affiliation.

Terror Management Theory says that along with humans’ vast intellectual capacity comes an understanding and awareness of their own mortality. Humans need a way to cope with or manage this reality, because its implications can become terrifying. By surrounding themselves with a meaningful culture, and deriving self-esteem from participation in that culture, people are able to protect themselves from concerns about mortality. Cultural worldviews give life purpose and meaning, and they also allow humans to participate in something that will last beyond their own physical death. Individuals can derive self-esteem from their participation in

this culture as long as they are meeting the standards dictated by that particular culture. The cultural worldview and self-esteem provide a “buffer” against concerns about mortality. Many TMT studies have illustrated the importance of both self-esteem and faith in a cultural worldview for coping with concerns about death (see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski 1997, for a review).

The function of clothing has been looked at from the perspective of TMT, and is seen as an answer to “The Body Problem” (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). The fact that the body is made up of physical matter that will, inevitably, decay in the ground is problematic because it serves as a reminder of this eventual decline into death. According to TMT, humans put on clothing in order to adorn their bodies in a way that makes them more than simply physical matter. By donning expensive clothing and accessories, humans attempt to cope with the body’s physicality by distancing themselves from it. The freedom to wear clothing deliberately and strategically elevates humans above the rest of the animal kingdom, distancing us from our animal selves and giving our bodies greater symbolic meaning. Goldenberg et al. suggests that this could help explain why cultures attempt to transform the body into a cultural symbol by dictating the proper and acceptable ways to dress oneself and conveying the significance of physical attractiveness. This perspective highlights the importance of clothing to humans, but no TMT study has experimentally tested clothing in terms of self-enhancement or worldview defense.

According to TMT, individual self-esteem provides vital protection from concerns about mortality. Without the anxiety buffer that self-esteem can provide, an individual is no longer securely protected from the reality of mortality. Clothing provides an external way to enhance the self, and its careful exhibition can provide necessary self-esteem. It is a deliberate way

through which the personality can be expressed, and therefore interpreted by others. Observers often use static cues, such as clothing, to form impressions of the wearer (Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, and Gosling, 2009). According to Naumann et al., observers use cues such as stylishness, distinctiveness, and neatness of dress to judge characteristics such as extraversion, conscientiousness, and loneliness. Even something as seemingly insignificant as shoes can be used by observers to form impressions about the wearer (Gillath, Bahn, Ge, & Crandall, 2012). In the study, Gillath et al. revealed that after looking at a picture of an individual's shoes, participants could accurately judge the individual's age, gender, and income, and their ratings of individual characteristics such as emotional stability, conscientiousness, and agreeableness highly correlated with the individual's own ratings. Clothing can serve as an important source of uniqueness, as is evidenced by the distress felt by two people who show up at a party wearing the same outfit. For these reasons, clothing is an important source of self-expression and, through its ability to portray a unique point of view, self-esteem.

In addition to individual self-esteem, meeting the standards dictated by the worldview to which one subscribes provides an important buffer against mortality concerns. One outward representation of the worldview is the mutually expressed fashion of the context. Clothing, therefore, provides an important sense of affiliation. A good example of this is the allegiance with which humans follow fashion trends. Buried in fashion magazines and credit card debt, society dutifully follows the norms and standards put into place by the fashion culture. In 2010, American households spent 3.5% of their annual income on clothing apparel, footwear, and related services (bls.gov). Television shows such as "What Not To Wear," "Project Runway," and "Fashion Police" show viewers how to dress themselves in a way that is stylish and modern, as well as what to avoid. Why put so much time and money into something that will change so

quickly? Meeting the ideals of what is considered current is an important way to adhere to the standards of a given place, and a good way to fit in. Certain occasions call for certain fashion, and certain locations express a certain “look.” After all, it would be rare to see cut-offs at a church service, or acid-washed jeans at an East Coast country club. An individual donning either would seem disrespectful or out of place in its respective context, and would likely not enjoy a sense of affiliation. Furthermore, subcultures that develop within the larger culture identify themselves and other members through dress. For example, the preps, the goths, and the hipsters all express their membership in a certain segment of society by donning cardigans, combat boots, or fedoras, respectively. Clothing, therefore, possesses an important mode of positive affiliation. Perhaps this affiliation is ultimately a way to meet the standards of the cultural worldview to which one subscribes, which is, according to TMT, of vital significance in protecting against concerns about mortality.

Humans all value their unique point-of-view and the sense of affiliation that a clothing style can communicate, but what if these characteristics of clothing are more complex than that? Perhaps the value placed on self-expression through clothing, the self-esteem boost humans get when they wear what is current, and the pride they gain when they fit into the culture are all, ultimately, motivated by concerns about mortality. The present study will explore the motivations behind the high value of clothing by examining how participants respond to a restriction of this source of self-expression and a forced violation of this cultural norm. If TMT says that human beings need self-esteem as defined by their worldview, and they need to feel as if they are meeting the standards of their culture in order to be protected from concerns about mortality, the prospect of a dress code after thinking about death should be threatening. Under such conditions, a person is no longer able to fully dress in a way that is reflective of his/her

unique self and derive self-esteem from doing so, and is, additionally, unable to meet certain cultural standards of dress. Furthermore, since the expression of those around them is also inhibited and restrained in some way, judgments about others based on dress may be less confidently inferred.

This study will operate under the mortality salience hypothesis of TMT, which proposes that people will express an increased need for a psychological structure that provides protection from an understanding of mortality after they are reminded of death. They will, in a sense, more desperately “cling” to this structure after death is momentarily brought into their consciousness. This psychological structure could be the comfort of participation in a worldview or the acquisition of self-esteem. Part of this structure could also be the individual ability to choose what to wear, since doing so allows them to properly participate in the culture and derive self-esteem from this extension of self. One consequence of making mortality salient is to express an increased liking of a member of the in-group, and express a decreased liking of a member of an out-group (Greenberg et al., 1990). After making mortality salient, a person who avidly and intelligently supports such a dress code should be threatening because, not only are they a presumed out-group member, but they represent and personify this threat to self-expression and affiliation, while a person who opposes it confirms and supports the standards of the culture, and could be considered an in-group member.

The hypothesis for this study is that participants will express an increased liking for a fellow student who opposes dress code restrictions at the University of Arizona, and a decreased liking for a student who supports the restrictions after being reminded of their mortality, as compared to a control group. The predictions should only hold for the threat of death and not

extend to other psychological threats such as uncertainty or life being meaningless. Thus, parallel conditions will induce thinking about a neutral topic, uncertainty, or meaninglessness.

Method

Participants

Sixty nine (55 females, 14 males) undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Arizona participated in this study for course credit. Participants were told they were participating in a personality study, as well as completing an unrelated survey for the university administration. Three participants were excluded because of undue suspicion and one was excluded for failing to finish the materials.

Study Design and Procedures

Participants were brought into the lab in groups of five for an hour-long study. They each entered a separate cubicle to ensure privacy for their completion of the materials.

Once in the cubicle, the participants completed the consent form. The experimenter then came around to each cubicle individually to provide the materials and further instructions. To begin, participants first completed the packet of personality questionnaires. The exact personality measures included the Personal Attitudes Questionnaire, which measures social desirability and the Big Five Inventory that measures participants' personality characteristics. In one quarter of the packets, there was a mortality salience induction, asking participants to write about the emotions that the thought of their own death evokes in them (Rosenblatt, et al., 1989). In the other three quarters of the packets, there were items asking participants to write about the feelings that watching television, uncertainty, or meaninglessness evokes in them. Students randomly received one of the four packets, and the experimenter remained blind to conditions. Immediately after the priming questionnaire, participants completed the PANAS-X (Watson &

Clark, 1991) measure of emotions, which served as a delay before measuring the dependent variable (Greenberg et al. 1994).

For the second part of the study, participants read the supposed student written opinions and completed the subsequent questionnaires. The participants were told that the University administration is proposing dress code restrictions for class attendance for the following academic year. The parameters of the dress code were described on the first page of the packet (Figure 1). Participants then read two student-written opinions regarding the dress code, completing identical dependent variable questions in between each opinion. All the participants read the same two opinions in counterbalanced order: one in favor of the dress code (Figure 2), and one against it (Figure 3). The questions comprising the dependent variable were in reference to the opinion's author (Figure 4). They were then asked two additional questions about the described dress code overall (Figure 5). Participants rated their responses on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 9 (totally true).

When all the participants finished the materials, they exited the cubicles. As a group, the experimenter thoroughly probed for suspicion and debriefed participants.

Results

Initial analyses showed no differences between the three control conditions, so we compiled them for the primary analyses. A 2(MS condition: MS, Control) x 2(Opinion: Pro, Anti) repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to compare participants' total ratings of the authors of the two opinions. To calculate the total, we added up all of the individual items in the DV (the opinion rating scale). The DV following the pro-opinion ($\alpha = .902$) and the DV following the anti-opinion ($\alpha = .865$) were comprised of the same five items. There was a significant main effect for type of opinion, $F(1, 63) = 10.53, p < .05$ with participants rating the

author of the anti-dress code opinion ($M = 33.51$, $SD = 1.01$) significantly higher than the pro-dress code opinion ($M = 27.16$, $SD = 1.40$). The main effect for MS for total opinion was not significant, $F(1, 63) = 0.34$, $p > .1$. The interaction for opinion by MS for total opinion was nearly significant, $F(1, 63) = 3.46$, $p < .07$, which was in contradiction of the hypothesis (Table 1). Participants in the control condition rated the anti-opinion author significantly higher than the pro-opinion author, $t(63) = 4.99$, $p < .001$. Participants in the MS condition did not differ significantly in their ratings of the opinions, $t(63) = .81$, $p > .1$. For both the pro-opinion, $t(63) = 1.61$, $p > .1$, and the anti-opinion, $t(63) = 1.37$, $p > .1$, there were no significant differences in ratings.

Each of the items in the opinion rating scale was then analyzed separately in a series of 2(MS condition: MS, Control) x 2(Opinion: Pro, Anti) repeated measures ANOVAs. For item 1 (how much do you like the student), there was a significant main effect for opinion, $F(1, 63) = 12.60$, $p < .05$, with participants rating the anti-opinion author ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.96$) significantly higher than the pro-opinion author ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 2.54$). The main effect for MS was not significant, $F(1, 63) = 1.38$, $p > .05$. There was a significant interaction between MS and opinion, $F(1, 63) = 4.66$, $p < .05$ (Table 2) that was in contradiction of our hypothesis. Participants in the control condition rated the author of the pro-opinion significantly lower than the author of the anti-opinion, $t(63) = 5.58$, $p < .001$. Participants in the MS condition did not differ significantly in their ratings of the opinions, $t(63) = .81$, $p > .1$. For the pro-dress code opinion, participants in MS condition rated the author significantly higher than participants in the control condition, $t(63) = 2.20$, $p < .05$. For the anti-dress code opinion, there were no significant differences in ratings, $t(63) = 1.19$, $p > .1$.

For items 2 and 3 (ratings of intelligence and knowledge, respectively), there were no significant main effects or interactions between the groups.

For item 4 (how much do you agree), there was a significant main effect for opinion, $F(1, 63) = 19.20, p < .05$, with participants rating the author of the anti-opinion ($M = 6.92, SD = 2.17$) higher than the pro-opinion ($M = 4.23, SD = 2.71$). The main effect for MS was not significant, $F(1, 63) = 2.99, p > .05$. There was a nearly significant interaction, $F(1, 63) = 3.58, p < .07$, which was in contradiction of the hypothesis (Table 3). Participants in the control condition rated the anti-opinion author significantly higher than the pro-opinion author, $t(63) = 6.14, p < .001$. Participants in the MS condition did not differ significantly in their ratings of the two opinions, $t(63) = 1.45, p > .1$. For the pro-dress code opinion, participants in the MS condition rated the author significantly higher than participants in the control, $t(63) = 2.24, p < .05$. For the anti-opinion, there was no significant difference, $t(63) = 1.08, p > .1$.

For item 5 (how true is student's opinion), there was a significant main effect for opinion, $F(1, 63) = 13.41, p < .05$, with participants rating the anti-opinion author ($M = 7.12, SD = 1.72$) higher than the pro-opinion author ($M = 5.35, SD = 2.51$). The main effect for MS was not significant, $F(1, 63) = .10, p > .05$. The interaction was also not significant, $F(1, 63) = 1.53, p > .1$.

Two additional questions were asked at the end of the study. For the first question, *how reasonable do you think the dress code is?*, in contradiction of our hypothesis, there was a main effect for MS, $F(1, 63) = 4.24, p < .05$, with participants in the MS condition rating reasonableness significantly higher ($M = 4.88, SD = 2.30$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.44, SD = 2.55$). For the second question, *how likely is it that you would follow the dress code?*, in contradiction of our hypothesis, there was a significant main effect for MS, F

(1, 63) = 4.77, $p < .05$, with participants in the MS condition being significantly more likely to follow the dress code ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 2.99$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 2.63$). Additionally, these two questions were significantly correlated, $r = .77$, $p < .001$. We combined the two items and ran a one-way ANOVA, which was significant, $F(1, 63) = 5.13$, $p < .05$, with participants in MS condition rating the total significantly higher ($M = 10.65$, $SD = 5.71$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 7.52$, $SD = 4.58$).

Discussion

The results of this study are in contradiction of the hypothesis that a reminder of their mortality would lead participants to feel more threatened towards the enactment of a dress code at the University of Arizona. It was predicted that participants under MS would express an increased liking of a student who opposes the dress code and a decreased liking of a student who advocates for it, as compared to a control group. Results revealed that while for all of the items, participants in the two conditions rated the anti-dress code opinion author higher than the pro-dress code opinion author, a reminder of mortality seemed to make participants more accepting of a dress code. For certain items, MS minimized the gap between the ratings of the two authors and diminished the extremes of their ratings of both liking and disliking.

When asked to rate how much they liked the author of the two opinions, while participants in the control condition liked the anti-opinion author significantly more than the pro-opinion author, participants under MS showed no significant difference in their ratings. Furthermore, participants under MS rated their liking of the author of the pro-opinion significantly higher than those in the control. Additionally, participants in the control condition reported that they agreed with the anti-opinion author significantly more than the pro-opinion author. Participants under MS reported no such differences and they did, in fact, report that they

agreed with the pro-opinion author significantly more than those in the control condition. The two items asked at the end of the study proved particularly interesting: results revealed that participants under MS rated the dress code as significantly more reasonable and stated that they were significantly more likely to follow it. All of these results were in contradiction of the hypothesis.

Considering the fact that the participants were, overall, against the dress code, it seems that clothing is an important source of individual self-expression and a source of affiliation. The freedom for the participants to wear what they want when attending class was a right that they felt they were entitled, as most of them were against the restrictions. This corresponds to “The Body Problem” discussed in the introduction, according to which the deliberate adornment of clothing serves as a method through which humans elevate themselves above the rest of the animal kingdom.

Some possible explanations for the fact that participants under MS responded more favorably towards the dress code can be considered. First, for most people, getting dressed can be a time consuming process that requires a lot of thought and energy. Oftentimes, people try on many different outfits, stare at their closets, and reject one thing after another. Clothing can serve as a source of appearance-based self-esteem. Under MS, it would be especially important that the individual feel they are fitting in and wearing what is appropriate, as it is properly doing these things that serves as an anxiety buffer. The restrictions of a dress code might take some of this pressure off the choice of what to wear by narrowing the options. The prospect would, therefore, seem less threatening and more attractive. Secondly, perhaps participants under MS feel more of a drive to look professional in order to seem competent, respectable, and successful. In order to derive self-esteem from participation in the worldview, it is important that the

individual feels they are effectively and successfully meeting the standards dictated by that worldview. Dressing for success, therefore, takes on an increased importance. To these participants, the dress code offers them an opportunity to dress a little nicer without sticking out.

Mark Landau's research concerning Terror Management Theory and personal need for structure (PNS) can also help explain the present research. Reminders of mortality exhibit different effects on individuals who are high in PNS versus individuals low in PNS. Individuals high in PNS prefer simple and consistent models of the world in which they live. These models not only give structure to the world, but also "imbue nature with meaning, order, predictability, and permanence" (Landau et al., 2004). Perhaps a dress code, mandated from a respected authority from which the individual gains meaning (the University of Arizona), has the capacity to serve as one of these models where the individual gains structure and predictability. Therefore, for high PNS individuals, the effect of MS is stronger.

The present results could also be driven by the fact that participants under MS adopted a more favorable attitude toward authority. This is reflected in the fact that participants under MS reported that they were significantly more likely to follow the dress code. Previous research has revealed that MS increases subscription to the organizing principles of the worldview (Landau et al., 2004). For the present research, participants under MS may have found the dress code less threatening because it was mandated from a figure of authority that provides their lives with organization and meaning. It is possible that differences in PNS moderated the effect of MS for participants in this experiment.

Of course, participants under MS still rated the anti-opinion author higher than the pro-opinion author overall, so this explanation in terms of the reduction of pressure and a tendency towards classiness is limited. Furthermore, since the participants were not categorized according

to PNS prior to their participation in the study, there is no way of knowing whether the participants were characterized as high PNS or low PNS individuals.

A potential limitation to this study is the dress code itself. Because the idea of a dress code in college was so unattractive to the majority of the participants, this may not be the best way to gauge people's motivations in dressing themselves. In retrospect, the parameters of the dress code itself may have been too stringent. Finally, the data from only a few participants was removed because, during the debrief, they expressed their suspicion of the dress code. However, it is possible that participants questioned the believability of a mandated dress code at a public university and this influenced their responses. A future direction of the present research could be to develop a better way to capture the role of clothing that is not as controversial.

Another limitation to this study is the imbalance of participants in the control condition versus the MS condition. There were three potential control conditions that participants received: uncertainty, meaninglessness, or watching TV. Uncertainty and meaninglessness were added to eliminate the possibility that negative thoughts or psychological arousal were driving the results. In reality, we found no differences among the three control conditions. Results proved more fruitful when we combined all three control groups together, but a more equal balance among the conditions would be needed in a follow-up study.

More follow-up studies are necessary in order to determine what moderators may be influencing the present results. As previously mentioned, in order to gain a deeper understand of where the effect is occurring, participants should be categorized according to PNS prior to the study.

The present research indicates that mortality salience plays a role in individual attitudes towards a dress code. The implications of this research are relevant to everyday life, as we all

get dressed on a daily basis. If mortality salience effects individual attitudes towards dress as these results suggest, this research provides some understanding of the heavy emphasis our culture places on fashion and physical appearance. The present research seems to support the notion that clothing can serve a myriad of purposes, and that an understanding of mortality plays a role in the answer to the age-old question, “What should I wear today?”

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Appendix

Table 1: Total Means and Standard Deviation

Opinion	MS (n = 17)		Control (n = 48)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pro Dress Code	29.41	11.87	24.92	9.14
Anti Dress Code	32.12	7.45	34.89	7.08

Table 2: Item 1, “How much do you like the student who wrote this opinion?” Means and Standard Deviation

Opinion	MS (n = 17)		Control (n = 48)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pro Dress Code	5.82	2.58	4.29	2.43
Anti Dress Code	6.53	1.94	7.19	1.96

Table 3: Item 4, “How much do you agree with this student’s opinion of the proposed dress code?” Means and Standard Deviation

Opinion	MS (n = 17)		Control (n = 48)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pro Dress Code	5.06	3.21	3.40	2.39
Anti Dress Code	6.59	2.34	7.25	2.09

Figure 1: Dress Code parameters

In recent years, both instructors and students have expressed concerns about the choice of clothing worn by a number of students in class attendance. With certain fashion trends appearing, problems with wardrobe choices have recently started emerging. This has affected not only the students donning them, but other students in the class, as well as the instructors. As an institute of higher learning, it is important that University of Arizona students create an atmosphere of professionalism and respect in the classroom.

For these reasons, we are proposing the enactment of a few dress code guidelines for class attendance, tentatively beginning next year. These guidelines will encourage an environment of respect in the classroom, free from distractions and conducive to learning.

- | Men | Women |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• No hats• No tank tops• No torn or ripped clothing• No pajamas or sweatpants• No undergarments showing• No clothing with profanity, explicit images, or offensive images | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• No midriff• No visible bra straps• No hats• No strapless tops• No excessively short shorts, skirts, or dresses• No ripped or torn clothing• No pajamas or sweatpants• No clothing with profanity, explicit images, or offensive images. |

The dress code will more closely resemble guidelines than restrictions; students will be encouraged to follow them, and it will be up to the discretion of the instructor to determine whether they consider the students to be properly prepared for class.

Figure 2: Pro-dress code opinion

Name

Student ID

I have no problem with this dress code. I actually think it is a good idea. Our professors are experts at what they do, so I think it is important to appear before them dressed in a way that is respectful. I also think it is distracting when someone is sitting in front of me ~~with~~^{has} their bra showing, or their pajamas on, or something like that. It makes it seem like they do not really care to be there, and that is frustrating for me because I do. I think this will be a good preparation for the professional world because it teaches us discipline. College is supposed to prepare us for our careers and I doubt anyone will be allowed to wear pajamas or tank tops to work after they graduate!

Figure 3: Anti-dress code opinion

Name [REDACTED]

Student ID [REDACTED]

I am completely against these dress code restrictions. We are in college. We are all adults, and I think we have a right to choose what we wear. What I chose to wear is an important part of who I am. I like being able to pick my clothes, and I do not want to have to follow rules that will restrict that. College is a time to meet a variety of people who are all different, and this variety should be reflected in the clothes we wear. Clothes are a way people can express their individuality + uniqueness. There is nothing wrong with that. School is hard enough, and I think this will just become an unnecessary burden.

