

Examining Strategic Self-Presentation Through Clothing as a Means of Belonging for Fat-Identified Students



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BACKGROUND

- The basic human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is especially salient during specific life stages, including late adolescence (Sanford, 1962), which is when most students attend college
- Clothing choices map onto one's identity and can therefore function as a tool to aid belonging
- Clothing is powerful - people can use clothes as a social communication tool to project particular impressions to others (El-Ammar, 2004; Johnson et al., 2014)
- Those with marginalized identities often experience a lowered sense of belonging (Cabrera et al., 1999; Drysdale et al., 2020; Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Long & Chalk, 2020; Murphy et al., 2018; Pande, 2022; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Rainey et al., 2018; Riggers-Piehl & Lehman, 2016; Swail et al., 2004; Thomas & Perna, 2004)
- Fat people are a marginalized group who are highly stigmatized due to their body size and encounter many types of prejudice and discrimination (Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Strings, 2019; Tomiyama & Mann, 2013)
- Research question: How does the use of clothing as a social communication tool map onto fat students' collegiate sense of belonging?**

HYPOTHESES

- H1:** Lower belonging scores for fat students
- H2:** Fat students will report using clothing to "camouflage" and "blend in" more

METHODS

- Participants: 231 undergraduate students at Reed College, Portland, Oregon
 - Fat identified ($n = 53$)
 - Not-fat identified ($n = 178$)
- Procedure: Qualtrics survey
- Measures:
 - Quantitative scale of collegiate belonging (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996)
 - Open-ended questions about how participants used clothing to strategically present themselves in a college setting

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

- Inconsistent with **H1**, two Mann-Whitney U tests revealed no difference in belonging between fat participants and not-fat participants
- The first Mann-Whitney U test included all responses
 - This analysis revealed that fat participants did not report a different sense of belonging (Median = 3.15, $SD = .65$) than their peers that were not-fat (Median = 3.31, $SD = .740$; 95% CI of the difference = $[-.15, .31]$), $z = -.53$, $p = .51$
- The second Mann-Whitney U test excluded respondents who answered "Other" to the fat identity question
 - The results of the analysis suggested that fat participants did not rate belonging differently (Median = 3.12, $SD = .64$) than their peers who were not-fat (Median = 3.31, $SD = .73$; 95% of CI of the difference = $[-.15, .38]$), $z = -.47$, $p = .43$

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

- Thematic analysis was used to code and interpret students' narrative responses
- Coding was done while blind to fat identity
- Significant findings (see Table 1):
 - All fat participants used clothing strategically
 - Fat and not-fat participants created different impressions through clothing
 - Fat participants addressed cultural norms regarding weight and body size with clothing
 - Fat students used clothing to aid belonging

Code	Fat-Identified ($n = 41$)	Not-Fat-Identified ($n = 114$)
No Strategic Use of Clothing*	0%	7.9%
Physical Comfort	24.4%	18.4%
Belonging*	58.5%	47.4%
Others' Perception of Physical Appearance	80.5%	71.1%
Attractive	26.8%	19.3%
Cool or Interesting	17.1%	24.6%
Smart or Competent	2.4%	4.4%
Confident*	7.3%	15.8%
Intimidating or Aggressive	9.8%	4.4%
Creative or Unique	17.1%	8.8%
"Put Together"	26.8%	29.8%
Self-Expression	39.0%	36.8%
Subcode: Gender Affirmation	17.1%	21.1%
Mood	4.9%	4.4%
Manipulating Body	36.6%	9.6%
Perceptions*		
Blending In*	17.1%	8.8%
Right to Take Up Space*	7.3%	0%
Situation-Specific "Reedie Aesthetic/Attitude"	73.2%	72.8%
No Alienation Due to Clothing*	31.7%	45.6%
Alienation Due to Clothing*	68.3%	46.5%

Note. *Denotes codes that were meaningful in thematic analysis.

Table 1: Code Frequency by Fat Identity

CONCLUSION

- Clothing plays an essential role in social interactions, regardless of fat identity
- Fat students used clothing differently than not-fat students
- Clothing was reported more by fat participants as a source of both belonging and alienation in college
 - This may be because they are overcorrecting for their perceptions about the way they will be mistreated or negatively judged by others due to anti-fat bias
- Fat students appear to be using clothing as a more general protective mechanism against potential prejudice they might encounter
 - They are projecting positive personality traits
 - They are also using clothing as a means of relating to other students

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