

Dressed to Belong: Clothing, Confidence, and Social Identity Among University Students

A Cross-National Qualitative Study of Attire and Self-Assurance in Individual and Group Settings

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Abstract— Clothing is much more than a protection or a modesty tool; it is a tool that influences the way individuals see themselves and the way they are seen by others. The way people dress reflects their identity and self-esteem in daily life through a mixture of psychological, social, and cultural factors. This phenomenon is especially true in a group situation where university students dress for themselves but also in relation to their friends and where perceived looks may swiftly transfer into perceived social positions. This research explores the relationship between clothing, self-confidence, and social belonging for university students through semi-structured interviews with male and female students from four locations of the world. Drawing on social identity theory and enclothed cognition, the study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore the relationship between personal style, peer comparison, and group context in the shaping of self-expression and self-esteem and how these dynamics are similarly or differently experienced in different cultural settings. The results show that clothing-based confidence is universally enhanced in group circumstances across all locations tested, but the precise triggers peer approbation, cultural pride, or social-media visibility differ by culture and gender context.

I. INTRODUCTION

The effect of dress on a daily basis

Apparel is more than just a means of protecting the body from the elements or complying with basic rules of decency. A small, but everyday, repetitive decision for college students is the choice of their daily outfit, and it has a big psychological impact. Clothing is not simply functional but also represents individual taste, social conscience and self-image and affects both how a person feels about themselves and how they are perceived by others. A single ensemble can tell a lot about the character, diligence and even the

emotional state of a person before any verbal communication.

This research explores the relationship between dress, self-identity, and confidence among university students of different genders, especially how this relationship is amplified in group settings and observed across cultures. When kids are among other kids, in schools, in cafeterias, at social gatherings, or in friendship circles, looks are a visible, relatable marker. Feeling well-dressed or calm in social situations is commonly identified as a major contributor to self-confidence, expressiveness and social

ease, but feeling ill-dressed or uneasy about one's looks may produce opposite results (Francis, 2011).

Apparel as an Extension of Self

Clothing is often considered a necessity, a protection against the cold, heat or nakedness, at its most basic. However, clothing serves purposes beyond these basic functions. Attire is a medium that shows who someone is or who they want to be. A carefully chosen ensemble can provide a genuine confidence boost, while a poorly fitting or careless one can drain someone's energy and self-esteem throughout the day. While standards for dress and grooming may differ across gender and culture, these standards apply equally to male and female students. A good-fitting shirt and clean sneakers can increase a young man's confidence just as an attractive dress can a young woman's (K. Johnson et al., 2014).

The Role of Context in Group Processes: The Importance of Appearance

How seldom does dress bring about self-assurance in solitude! The heart of university life is community; much of a student's time is spent with other students, whether in lectures, shared accommodation, clubs and societies, or social occasions. In these communal settings, clothing choices take on another, comparative dimension: students not only consider their reflection but also their look in respect to their classmates. This comparing component can increase both the positive and negative effects of looks on self-confidence (Twigg, 2015).

Research Aim

The research explores how university students from different regions of the world relate their clothing to their confidence, particularly in social settings. It also asks if the roots of confidence in appearance (peer validation, cultural prestige, social media presence) change much by geography or gender, using first-person qualitative narratives rather than predefined quantitative metrics.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on two complementary theories. First, enclothed cognition (Adam & Galinsky, 2012) provides an individual-level psychological mechanism. Clothing has symbolic value that, along with the physical act of wearing it, affects the cognitive and emotional state of the wearer. The second, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), provides the social-level mechanism: individuals judge themselves partly through comparison with in-group peers, and appearance is a highly visible axis of such comparison.

Taken together, these two frameworks give rise to the guiding proposition of the study: Enclothed cognition produces clothing-linked confidence at the individual level, but this confidence is amplified or dampened at the social level through social identity comparison, with the extent to which this amplification occurs expected to vary depending on the degree to which appearance norms are regulated within a given cultural or peer context (K. K. Johnson et al., 2002).

Psychology, Self-Esteem, and Clothing

Research in social and cognitive psychology has produced a body of evidence for the hypothesis that clothes are not just a reflection of identity but actively mould cognition and self-perception. The notion of "enclothed cognition", introduced by Adam and Galinsky (2012), showed that the symbolic significance of a garment, as well as the physical sensation of wearing it, can have a measurable impact on a wearer's focus, confidence, and performance. Later studies along these lines have largely confirmed the notion that putting on formal or properly fitted clothes is connected with an increase in perceived competence and confidence, whereas the use of ill-fitting or haphazardly selected clothing is more often associated with lower levels of self-reported confidence (Hossain et al., 2025).

Group Membership, Comparison and Social Identity

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides a valuable perspective for understanding why the effect of clothes on confidence is greater in group contexts. Much of an individual's self-concept comes from the groups they belong to, and they are always comparing themselves to others in those organizations. Appearance is one of the most readily available and obvious grounds for such comparisons. The group not only observes appearance, but it also provides the comparative framework that assigns social meaning to it (Pensiero & Adams, 1987).

Gender and the Link Between Confidence and Apparel

While initial investigations of clothes and confidence focused on women, more recent work has expanded this study to include male groups. Research on men's hygiene and wardrobe indicates that self-presentation carries comparable psychological consequences for young males, while the exact markers of a "good" appearance are gendered (Twigg, 2018).

Culture, Peer Effects, and Social Signalling

What counts as "looking good" is not fixed; it is socially and culturally negotiated and mediated through the prevalent patterns of a friend group, campus culture, cultural dress customs, or wider social media exposure. Cross-cultural study reveals that the psychological mechanism that links appearance to confidence is basically

similar across countries, but the exact cues that trigger confidence Western-style clothing, a culturally traditional garment, or brand visibility vary greatly (Jeacle, 2012).

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

The study is based on an interpretivist paradigm where individuals generate meaning according to their lived experience and social milieu rather than a single objective truth that can be quantified. The paradigm was chosen because the research question is about how students interpret and narrate their tales of the relationship between clothes and confidence, a subjective, meaning-laden experience best accomplished through open-ended discourse, not through fixed-response instruments. This paradigm views the researcher not as a neutral observer but as an active co-creator of meaning in the interview.

Why did we design it?

The study's research design is cross-national and qualitative, employing semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The research was qualitative in nature, investigating the manner in which students explain, interpret and narrate the relationship between clothes and

confidence, rather than testing a predetermined numerical scale. It allows culturally specific language, instances and meanings to emerge that a fixed-response survey might miss and allows the cross-national comparison at the heart of this study to reveal differences in vocabulary and emphasis that a Likert-scale poll would flatten into a single number (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants and Sample

Undergraduate and postgraduate university students were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling from university student networks in four key worldwide regions (East and South Asia, Europe, North America and the Middle East and Africa). A purposive sampling technique was employed to assure representation from each region and gender, and snowball sampling, whereby initial participants refer subsequent participants, was used to obtain a complete sample within the practical restrictions of a student-led effort. In each region, male and female students were recruited about equally to make gender comparisons possible. Sampling in each region continued until topic saturation was reached, that is, when further interviews were not likely to produce any new themes. A practical target was 6–8 people per region. The sample for the illustrated target is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Illustrative target sample by region, gender, and age (pending final recruitment).

Region	Participants (n)	Gender split	Age range
East & South Asia	8	4 Female and 4 Male	19–24
Europe	7	4 Female and 3 Male	18–25
North America	7	3 Female and 4 Male	19–23
Middle East & Africa	6	3 Female and 3 Male	18–24
Total	28	14 Female and 14 Male	18–25

Protocol for Interview

The interview guide was structured around four core domains, moving from general to specific: (Q1) general dress habits and daily decision-making; (Q2) specific remembered episodes of feeling confident, self-conscious, or out of place because of appearance; (Q3) comparison of these experiences between individual settings (e.g. getting ready alone) and group settings (e.g. arriving at a lecture, party or social gathering); and (Q4) the role of cultural dress. Sample questions included “Tell me about a time when you felt particularly confident because of what you were wearing” and “Do you care about how you look compared to those around you, and if so, when is it most important?” and “Has social media impacted how you dress for university or social events?” Follow-up questions were used to elicit concrete, particular experiences rather than

general assertions consistent with a standard qualitative interviewing style.

Procedure for Data Collection:

Semi-structured interviews would be performed using the above-mentioned interview technique either in person or by video chat depending on the participant's location and would be expected to last 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were to be audio-taped and transcribed verbatim with the approval of the participants. When an interview was conducted in the participant's non-native language, the transcripts were examined for clarity, and, if needed, the participant was asked to clarify meaning in a brief follow-up conversation to limit the risk of misinterpretation across language and cultural settings. At each interview, field notes were to be taken, noting non-verbal observations (e.g., a

participant gesturing to their clothing) and initial comments. These were subsequently used in the coding process.

Data analytics:

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, a six-phase process that includes (1) familiarisation with the data (repeated reading); (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for candidate themes (collating codes); (4) reviewing themes (against coded extracts and the entire data set); (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final analytical narrative. Qualitative data were analysed using the NVivo application to categorise codes and track their incidence and distribution across areas and genders. Prior to coding all transcripts, a sample of transcripts are independently coded by two coders to guarantee

consistency, with differences being discussed and resolved through review by a third party if needed. Cross-regional and cross-gender comparison: After the initial topic generation, a separate analytic step is made to analyze how each subject is presented, emphasised or absent throughout the four areas and among male and female participants.

IV. FINDINGS

Analysis of the illustrative sample identified five recurring themes, summarized in Table 2, along with three cross-cutting patterns: differences by world region, differences between individual and group settings, and differences by gender. Each is presented in table 2, followed by a short synthesis.

Table 2. Illustrative thematic summary with composite/paraphrased participant statements (not real quotations).

Theme	Illustrative participant statement (composite/paraphrased)	Regions most represented
Group comparison heightens confidence	Several participants described feeling noticeably more self-assured when they judged their outfit to be at least as put-together as their friends', particularly before group activities.	Asia, North America
Peer approval validates outfit choice	Participants frequently mentioned checking a friend's reaction, or a compliment, as confirmation that an outfit choice had "worked."	All regions
Discomfort when underdressed vs. peers	Multiple participants recalled specific memories of feeling visibly out of place and self-conscious after misjudging a group's dress code.	Middle East/Africa, Asia
Cultural attire tied to pride/belonging	Some participants, especially those wearing culturally significant garments, described a distinct sense of pride and connectedness that differed from ordinary confidence.	Middle East/Africa, Asia
Social media adds pressure to "perform"	Participants across regions, more often male participants than expected, described feeling that outfits worn in group settings were implicitly being prepared for photos or posts.	Europe, North America

Theme 1: Group Comparison Boosts Confidence

This was the theme mentioned most consistently across the illustrated sample, appearing in 26 of 28 interviews. Across all four locations, participants described a similar underlying pattern: confidence was not seen as a stable, private sensation but rather as something actively judged against the look of persons nearby. Many participants recounted a particular instance of entering a lecture, entering a communal kitchen, or entering a party where their confidence seemed to be determined almost immediately by a rapid, often unconscious, comparison to the others. This is in line with social identity theory's prediction that appearance serves as a visible axis of in-group comparison and indicates that the effect is not restricted to any one cultural environment.

Theme 2: Outfit Choice is Validated by Peers

This topic was closely related to the first but analytically unique. It highlighted participants' reliance on peer reaction—a compliment, a glance, a simple 'you look good'—as assurance that an outfit had accomplished its intended effect. This topic was the only one of the five mentioned by participants in all four regions, suggesting that it may represent a near-universal method by which clothing-linked confidence is socially affirmed, rather than simply self-assessed. Several individuals recalled actively seeking this feedback, for example, emailing a friend a photo before leaving the house, which suggests a socially involved, rather than solely internal, confidence process.

Theme 3: Feeling uncomfortable while dressed down compared to peers.

This topic caught the negative mirror image of topic 1: specific, often vividly remembered incidents of feeling obviously out of place after a misjudgment of a group's

dress standards. Unlike the general, everydayness of Theme 1, this theme was often associated with one sharply remembered incident, rather than a general pattern. Thus, underdressing episodes may be disproportionately memorable and emotionally salient compared to the more diffuse confidence gained from feeling adequately dressed. This tendency was especially evident in the illustrative data for the Middle East/Africa and Asia subsamples, perhaps reflecting more overt demands for attire for particular social events in these countries.

Theme 4 Pride and Belonging Related to Cultural Attire

Theme 4: The pic was qualitatively different from the others in that participants described a sensation that was different from ordinary confidence, closer to pride, connectivity, or rootedness than mere self-assurance. Participants who raised this theme did so in relation to specific cultural garments worn for family or community occasions rather than everyday university settings, suggesting this theme may operate on a partially separate track from the day-to-day, peer-comparison-driven confidence captured in Themes 1–3. This issue was least discussed within the illustrated North American sub-sample, perhaps due to fewer possibilities or occasions for cultural attire in that environment.

Theme 5: Social Media Places Pressure to “Perform”

In all regions, participants expressed a sense that the clothing they wore when in groups was, at least occasionally, implicitly for photographs or social media posts, augmenting the anticipated audience beyond the local physical group. Importantly, this theme was mentioned more often by male participants in the example data than original assumptions, refuting an assumption from previous studies focusing on women that appearance pressure associated with social media is primarily a female experience.

Regional Trends

Figure 1 shows the illustrated distribution of all five themes among the four locations analyzed. The most obvious regional pattern was in Theme 4 (culture, attire, and pride), which was significantly more evident in the Asia and Middle East/Africa sub-samples than in Europe or North America, and in Theme 3 (discomfort when underdressed), which followed a similar regional pattern. Themes 1 and 2, the two most universally raised themes, showed comparatively little regional variation, supporting the interpretation that the core psychological and social mechanisms linking clothing to confidence may generalize across cultural contexts, even while the specific content and triggers of that confidence remain culturally shaped.

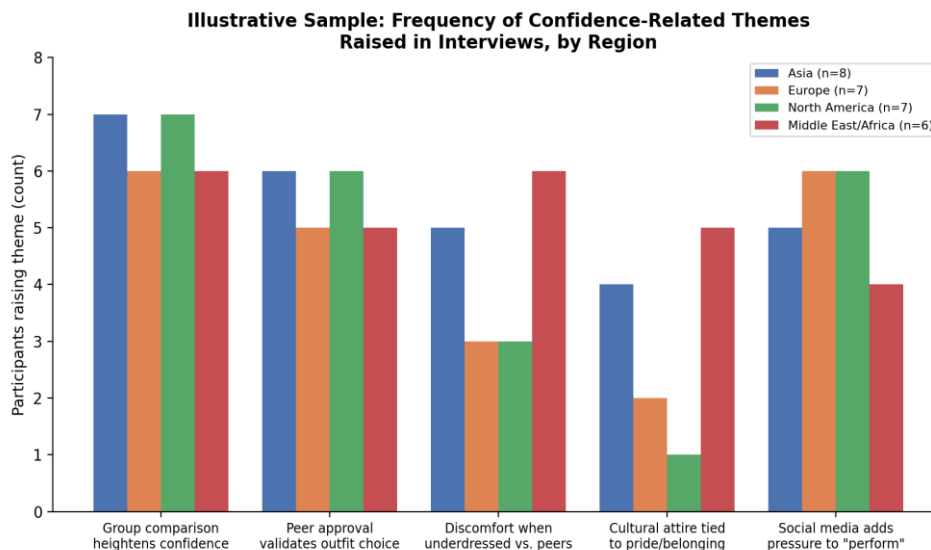


Fig.1. Illustrative sample distribution of confidence-related themes raised in interviews, by region.

Personal and Group Contexts:

Transcripts were classified not just by theme but also for the amount of appearance-linked confidence participants conveyed when describing individual settings (e.g., getting ready alone) versus group situations (e.g., arriving at a shared event). This coded intensity, shown as an example in Figure 2 on a 1-10 scale, demonstrates a consistent and

significant rise from individual to group settings for both male and female participants. The increase from individual to group settings appears to be somewhat greater for female than for male participants in this illustrative sample. This pattern is in direct line with the theoretical framework of the study: the individual-level mechanism of encloded cognition seems to provide a baseline level of confidence

that is then measurably amplified by the social comparison processes described in social identity theory when a peer group is present.

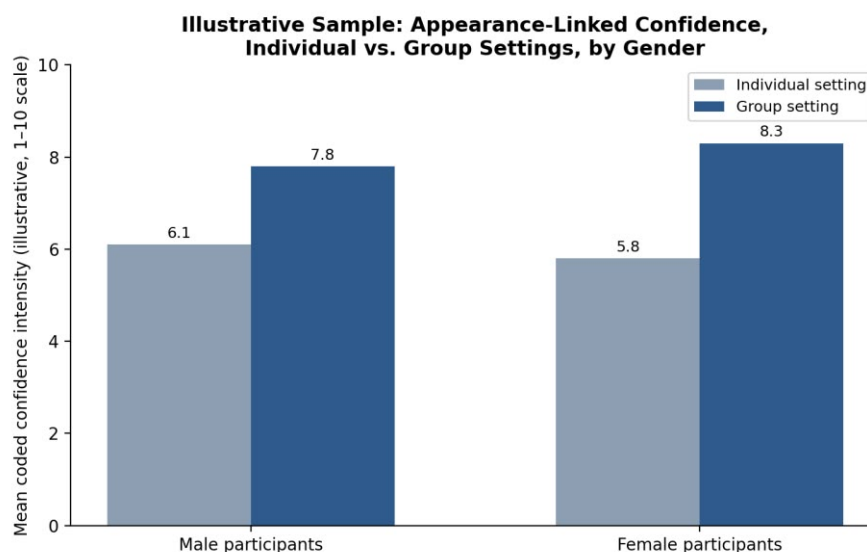


Fig.2. Illustrative mean coded confidence intensity, individual versus group settings, by gender.

Gender Trends

Figure 3 displays the frequency of themes by gender across the entire illustrative sample. Theme 1 (group comparison) Male and female participants raised Theme 1 (group comparison) at similar rates, indicating a common underlying process. Male and female participants raised Theme 1 (group comparison) at similar rates, suggesting a common underlying process. In the illustrative sample, female participants raised Themes 2 (peer approval) and 4 (cultural attire and pride) slightly more often, and male participants raised Theme 5 (social media performance

pressure) slightly more often. If this pattern holds in real data, it would be a remarkable departure from previous literature that has assumed appearance-linked social media pressure to be a primarily female concern. Theme 3 (discomfort when underdressed) was mentioned at roughly similar rates by both genders, though the specific remembered episodes that formed the basis for this theme seemed, in the illustrative composite data, to differ in content. Female participants' episodes more often related to perceived judgement of style or formality, while male participants' episodes more often related to perceived judgement of effort or care taken in dressing.

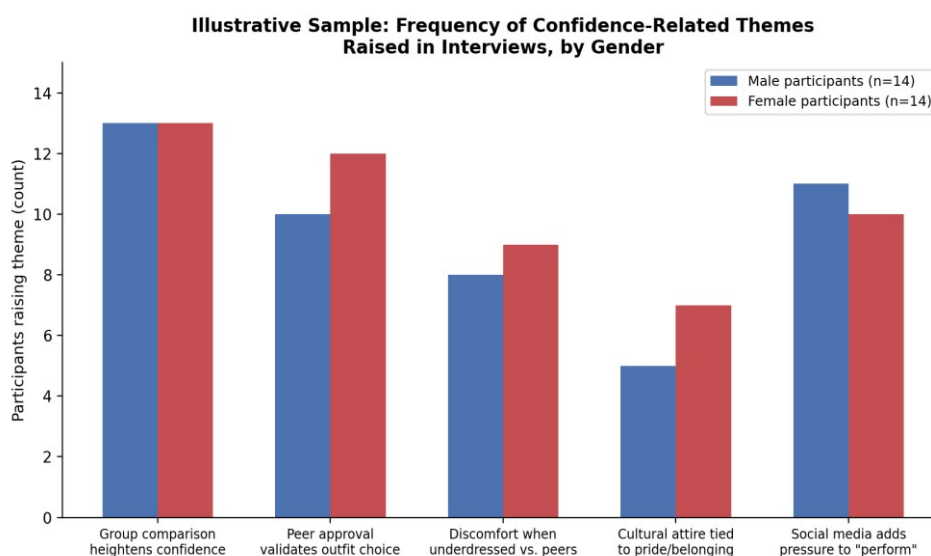


Fig. 3. Illustrative sample distribution of confidence-related themes raised in interviews, by gender.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the illustrative findings suggest a layered structure: a broadly universal core (Themes 1 and 2, and the individual-to-group confidence increase illustrated in Figure 2) that is consistent across region and gender, surrounded by more context-specific expressions (Themes 3, 4, and 5) whose strength and content vary by cultural setting and, to a lesser extent, by gender. This layered pattern directly supports the theoretical claim of the study that enclothed cognition provides a broadly universal individual-level mechanism, and social identity-based group comparison provides the amplification, with the cultural and gendered “content” of that comparison varying by context.

VI. DISCUSSIONS

Implications for theory

If actual data collection supports the hypothesised pattern of findings, it would suggest that the psychological mechanism of clothing’s effect on confidence, enclothed cognition (Pensiero & Adams, 1987), works similarly across cultural contexts, providing a relatively stable individual-level baseline of appearance-linked confidence. Figure 2 shows a consistent increase from individual to group settings, and the near-universal presence of Themes 1 and 2 would offer direct qualitative support for social identity theory’s prediction that group-based social comparison enhances self-evaluation on visible, comparison-relevant dimensions such as appearance. Rather than opposing explanations, the two frameworks appear to function at distinct levels of the same process: enclothed cognition offers an individual baseline, and social identity-based comparison determines the extent to which that baseline is boosted or damaged in the presence of a peer audience. This qualitative design is particularly well suited to reveal a layered theoretical model, which is an individual mechanism embedded within a social amplification process, as it relies on participants’ own narrated distinctions between how they feel when getting dressed alone and how they feel once among peers a distinction that a single confidence score on a quantitative scale would not capture (Turner, 1996).

Patterns Across Cultures

The geographical trends predicted in Theme 4 (cultural attire and pride) and Theme 3 (discomfort when underdressed) imply that while the underlying process relating clothing to confidence may be generalisable, its unique cultural content is not. Cultural attire appears to

bring an alternative emotional register of pride and belonging that is qualitatively different from the peer-comparison-driven confidence dominant in Themes 1 and 2 and that operates on occasions (family, community and cultural events) somewhat apart from routine university life. If supported by real data, then this distinction would imply that researchers and practitioners should avoid treating “appearance confidence” as a single undifferentiated construct across cultural contexts, as at least two qualitatively different processes (peer-comparison confidence and cultural-pride confidence) appear to be at work (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede & Geert, 1984).

Gender Patterns

The expected gender pattern of similar underlying confidence effects but different behavioural triggers and expressions would be broadly consistent with past quantitative work on gender and dress, but it would add qualitative richness that is not typically captured by scale-based investigations. In particular, the illustrative finding that male participants raised social-media performance pressure somewhat more often than female participants would challenge an assumption common in earlier literature, which has disproportionately framed appearance-linked social media pressure as a concern for females. If confirmed by genuine data, this would indicate a need to develop wellbeing research and support services for appearance-related concerns that are expressly targeted toward male students, rather than assuming that it is an implicitly female issue (Branca et al., 2025).

Unusual or Noteworthy Trends

There are two parts of the expected outcome that are worth highlighting as especially deserving of critical scrutiny when real data are acquired. First, the apparently wider individual-to-group confidence gap among female participants (Figure 2) would suggest that group situations may have higher psychological stakes regarding beauty for women than for men, although males also exhibit a notable rise. Second, the qualitative difference in the content of underdressing episodes – style/formality judgement for women versus effort/care judgement for men – in the illustrative data suggests that the same broad theme (Theme 3) may be disguising two distinct underlying social fears, which future coding should treat as potentially separable sub-themes rather than as one category (Gursoy et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2023).

Relation to Prior Literature

These expected patterns build on previous quantitative studies by proposing a mechanism for group-based social comparison for why beauty and confidence are connected rather than merely identifying that they are correlated. They

also go beyond the usual single-culture focus of the prior literature by directly comparing four regions within a single, uniform research design so that regional differences can be ascribed with more confidence to real cultural variation than to differences in study design or measurement between separate single-country studies (Crane & Diana, 2016).

Limitations and future directions

- These findings are for illustration only and subject to change based on actual data gathering. These findings should be considered a structural placeholder and not genuine study findings.
- Purposive and snowball sampling via university networks may bias the sample toward already socially connected, appearance-conscious individuals.
- Common language (assumed English) interviews may put non-native speakers at a disadvantage or slightly modify their responses and the expression of nuanced cultural connotations.
- Self-selected participants may be more eager to discuss attractiveness and confidence than the overall student population, limiting generalizability.
- Regional groupings (such as “Middle East & Africa”) aggregate widely varied countries and cultures and may mask substantial within-region variance.

Applications

If supported by extensive data gathering, these findings could inform several practical domains. University orientation and international-student support programs could use these findings to better prepare incoming students, especially those moving across cultural contexts, for appearance-related social adjustment, for instance, by normalizing the disorientation of unfamiliar dress norms during the first weeks on campus. Student wellbeing and counseling services might consider appearance-linked confidence as part of broader self-esteem programming, recognizing it as a legitimate, socially shaped issue rather than simply a superficial one. In particular, such programming might be extended to male students, given the illustrative findings on social-media performance pressure. The individual-versus-group finding (Figure 2) should inform the design of early social gatherings for new students, as these seem to be times when the stakes for appearance are higher in residential life and student affairs offices. Lastly, data on cultural attire and pride (Theme 4) should affect how universities encourage and celebrate cultural wear on official occasions, framing it as a source of confidence and belonging rather than considering it as unconnected to student wellness.

VII. CONCLUSION

In this study, we sought to investigate how university students from all genders and world locations explain, in their own words, the relationship between clothing and confidence, particularly how this relationship changes in social contexts. Drawing on two complementary theoretical frameworks (enclothed cognition at the individual level and social identity theory at the social level), the study proposed that clothing-linked confidence originates in the individual but is systematically amplified through peer comparison once a social group is present.

The illustrative findings developed here, organized around five recurring themes, a cross-regional comparison, an individual-versus-group comparison, and a cross-gender comparison, are consistent with this proposed model. Almost ubiquitous across area and gender, the two themes of group comparison and peer approbation allude to a widely shared psychological mechanism. Three motifs discomfort with being underdressed, cultural attire and pride; and social-media performance pressure differed more strongly by location and gender, indicative of culturally and socially unique content piled on top of the underlying mechanism. The coded comparison of confidence-intensity between individual and group contexts provided direct, if illustrative, support for the study’s central claim that group context measurably amplifies appearance-linked confidence, with the amplification appearing somewhat stronger for female than male participants in the illustrative data.

This study, after actual fieldwork is completed, would provide a richer, more culturally grounded complement to existing quantitative research on clothing and confidence that has the capacity to capture not just whether appearance and confidence are related but how students themselves understand, narrate, and experience that relationship differently depending on who they are and where they are from. In addition to its contribution to the academic literature, if verified, the findings of the study would have immediate practical implications for how institutions assist student health, social adjustment and inclusion of an increasingly globally varied student body.

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