

An Investigation into the Causal Factors of Clothing Language among Female Undergraduates in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract - Clothing language, a concept rooted in semiotics and fashion psychology, refers to the non-verbal communication conveyed through attire, reflecting personal identity, social status, and cultural affiliation. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, the clothing choices of female undergraduates have become a topic of considerable interest, given their implications for gender norms, societal expectations, and institutional policies. This investigation explores the causal factors influencing the "clothing language," of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions, where cultural, religious, and social dynamics are deeply intertwined with daily life. A mixed-methods approach was utilized using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to gather data from female undergraduates across various Nigerian tertiary institutions. The study revealed that cultural background, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, peer influence, and media and popular culture significantly shape students' clothing choices. Each of these factors was analyzed in relation to the research questions and hypotheses, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights into the patterns, motivations, and symbolic meanings associated with clothing among female undergraduates. Clothing choices made gives an insight into what shapes the social interactions of these students thereby reflecting the role such choices play in understanding students' culture. These findings will inform university policies, enhance campus inclusivity, and enrich academic literature on clothing and fashion in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Clothing language, culture, peer pressure, socioeconomic status, social media and religion.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Nigerian tertiary institutions, the clothing language of female undergraduates is shaped by a multitude of factors, reflecting broader societal values and individual choices. Clothing describes a very essential

component of human existence and proactively reflects human identity. It performs many functions; it is worn not just to cover and protect the body but also to express religious affiliation, marital status, occupation, gender, and socio-economic class, tribe, and so on (Sarpong Nyantakyi & Adu-Agyem, 2016). Over the years, the use of unique fashion styles has gained global recognition, especially by university undergraduates, popularly known as campus fashion. Fashion has become a significant form of social communication and personal expression among the youth. It has positioned itself as a social instrument that reflects a person's status, class, and identity. Fashion has become an important social language through which today's society expresses global trends, experiences, attitudes, and lifestyles. Fashion is a distinct social language that incorporates specific codes, symbols, and modes of representation. The literary background of female undergraduates entering tertiary institutions today is not the same as it was ten years ago. Female undergraduates today are more exposed to films, advertisements, peer pressure, modelling, socialisation, and both domestic and foreign fashion styles spread through the media.

The acceptance or rejection of a clothing style by an individual is usually based on the perception of others, which is commonly termed clothing language. Perception usually emanates from the interpretation of stimuli received through the five human senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Clothing language is the indirect use of clothing by wearers to communicate intentions, feelings, or thoughts to observers (Sarpong Nyantakyi & Adu-Agyem, 2016). It is considered a broad area of non-verbal communication. Therefore, clothing selection by individuals is socially determined. Dress is like other types of non-verbal communication symbols, and understanding it requires knowledge of the system of imparting a message by the arrangement of elements. Any clothing style chosen signifies something (Ofori et al., 2014). Matching a wearer's external appearance to the intended communication through clothing is fundamental to understanding clothing systems. In many African contexts, including Nigeria, clothing is deeply embedded in cultural traditions and societal expectations, influencing how

individuals dress (Oyerinde & Banwo, 2015). University dress codes in Nigeria often dictate acceptable clothing styles, reflecting institutional attempts to maintain decorum and cultural values (Adebayo, 2019). Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending how female students navigate their identities within the academic environment and broader society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nigeria's cultural and religious diversity creates a unique environment in which clothing language is both a personal and collective statement. As Mernissi (1991) observes, "In societies where religion plays a significant role, clothing often becomes a symbol of faith and adherence to religious norms." Nigerian tertiary institutions serve as a melting pot of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, providing a rich context for examining how clothing language evolves and is influenced by various factors. Clothing language, which refers to "the non-verbal communication expressed through one's attire," plays a critical role in conveying identity and personal values. In the context of Nigerian tertiary institutions, female undergraduates' clothing choices are influenced by a complex array of factors including cultural heritage, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, and social pressures. As Entwistle (2000) notes, "Clothing is a medium through which individuals express and negotiate their identities and social positions."

Culture is a fundamental determinant of clothing choices, as "cultural norms and values dictate acceptable forms of dress" (Kaiser, 2012). In Nigeria, with its diverse ethnic groups, traditional attire often symbolizes cultural pride and identity. Okeke (2019) notes that "the tension between traditional and contemporary styles creates a dichotomy in clothing language," as female students navigate the expectations of both cultural heritage and modern fashion. This balancing act is a significant aspect of how clothing language is expressed in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Religion significantly influences clothing language, particularly in a country like Nigeria, where "religious diversity is reflected in diverse clothing practices" (Mernissi, 1991). Religious beliefs, especially among Muslims and Christians, dictate modesty in dress, which is reflected in the clothing choices of female undergraduates. Amadiume (2000) emphasizes that "religious identity is often communicated through attire, with garments like the hijab serving as visible markers of faith." The impact of religion on clothing language is thus profound, shaping not only individual choices but also societal perceptions. Socioeconomic status is another critical factor affecting clothing choices, as "economic background determines access to fashion and trends" (Crane, 2000). In Nigerian tertiary institutions, students from wealthier

backgrounds are often able to afford trendy and fashionable clothing, which can elevate their social standing among peers. As Nwafor (2015) states, "the disparity in clothing access based on socioeconomic status can lead to social divisions and feelings of exclusion." This dynamic underscores the role of economic factors in shaping clothing language.

Peer pressure is a well-documented influence on clothing language, particularly among young adults. Adebayo (2018) argues that "the desire for social acceptance drives female undergraduates to conform to peer group norms in their clothing choices." This conformity is especially evident in university settings, where fashion trends are often used to signal group identity and social status. Peer influence, therefore, plays a crucial role in determining how clothing language is articulated within these institutions. The influence of media and popular culture on clothing language has grown in the digital age, with "social media platforms becoming key disseminators of fashion trends" (Lewis, 2015). In Nigerian tertiary institutions, the impact of global fashion trends is visible as students increasingly emulate styles seen in popular media. Akpan (2020) notes that "media exposure shapes perceptions of beauty and fashion, leading to the adoption of clothing styles that may reflect global rather than local cultural norms" This influence highlights the role of media in shaping clothing language among female undergraduates. Female undergraduates' perceptions of their clothing language are closely tied to how they believe others perceive them. Sanda (2017) suggests that "clothing choices can affect social interactions, influencing how individuals are treated by peers and faculty." In the context of Nigerian tertiary institutions, where issues of gender and identity are highly relevant, clothing language can have significant social implications. Davis (1992) emphasizes that "clothing serves as a tool for navigating social hierarchies, allowing individuals to assert independence or conform to societal expectations. The relationship between clothing language and academic performance is an emerging area of study. Osagie (2021) posits that "pressure to conform to certain clothing standards can affect students' focus and academic engagement." Furthermore, the social judgments based on clothing choices can create an environment that either supports or hinders academic success. For instance, Solomon and Rabolt (2009) argue that "clothing that aligns with institutional norms may facilitate better relationships with faculty, while non-conforming attire could lead to bias or discrimination." This suggests that clothing language not only influences social dynamics but also has the potential to impact academic outcomes. The literature highlights the multifaceted nature of clothing language among female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions. As Crane (2000) succinctly puts it, "clothing is a medium through which social and cultural identities are negotiated and expressed." Cultural, religious,

socioeconomic, peer, and media influences all play significant roles in shaping clothing choices, with far-reaching implications for social interactions and academic experiences. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing policies and programs that foster an inclusive and respectful campus environment, ultimately enhancing the educational experience for all students.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT/JUSTIFICATION

The clothing choices of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions have become a topic of significant debate, with opinions divided on the implications of these choices on societal norms, academic performance, and personal safety. Clothing language—the way individuals communicate their identity, status, and beliefs through their attire—play a critical role in how female students are perceived and treated within these institutions. Despite the cultural, religious, and social diversity in Nigeria, there is limited empirical research exploring the factors that influence the clothing language of female undergraduates. Understanding these causal factors is essential for addressing issues related to gender dynamics, societal expectations, and the overall academic experience of female students. This research is necessary because it addresses a gap in the existing literature regarding the intersection of fashion, identity, and social interaction within the context of Nigerian higher education. By investigating the causal factors behind female undergraduates' clothing choices, the study aims to provide insights into how cultural, economic, religious, media and peer influences shape these decisions. The findings could inform policies and programs aimed at promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment for female students, reducing instances of discrimination or harassment based on clothing choices, and enhancing the overall educational experience. Additionally, this research could contribute to broader discussions on gender and identity in African societies, offering a nuanced understanding of how young women navigate complex social expectations through their attire.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to;

1. Examine the Influence of Cultural Background on Clothing Language.
2. Explore the Impact of Religious Beliefs on Clothing Preferences.
3. Assess the Role of Socioeconomic Status in Determining Clothing Choices.
4. Investigate the Effect of Peer Pressure on Clothing Language.
5. Analyze the Impact of Media and Popular Culture on Clothing Language.

V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does cultural background influence the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
2. How do religious beliefs influence the clothing preferences of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
3. What is the role of socioeconomic status in determining the clothing choices of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
4. How does peer pressure affect the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
5. What is the impact of media and popular culture on the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

VI. HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses will be tested in the course of the study:

1. Cultural background significantly influences the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions.
2. Religious beliefs have significant impact on the clothing preferences of female undergraduates.
3. Socioeconomic status plays a significant role in determining the clothing choices of female undergraduates.
4. Peer pressure significantly affects the clothing language of female undergraduates.
5. Media exposure, including social media, significantly influences the clothing language of female undergraduates.

VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

a) Research Design

A mixed-methods approach will be utilized using both quantitative and qualitative research method. A cross-sectional survey will be conducted to gather data from female undergraduates across the eighteen (18) Nigerian tertiary institutions to be used.

b) Population

The target population includes all female undergraduates in Nigerian Universities, Polytechnics, and Colleges of Education.

c) Sample and Sampling techniques

A stratified random sampling technique will be used to ensure representation from different institutions, regions, and cultural backgrounds. A total sample size of Nine hundred (900) female undergraduates will be selected from eighteen (18) Tertiary Institutions in Southwest Nigeria (Three (3) from each of the six (6) States in the Southwest) using appropriate statistical techniques to ensure reliability and validity, taking cognizance of the Federal, State and Private status.

d) Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaires will be used to collect quantitative data on the factors influencing clothing choices, including cultural, religious, socioeconomic, peer, and media influences.

e) Data Analysis

Quantitative data will be analyzed using Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage) and inferential statistics (Correlation and Regression analysis) to test the hypotheses while qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the participants' responses.

VIII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) Demographic characteristics

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	16-19	150	17.2
	2-23	480	55.2
	24-27	180	20.7
	28+	60	6.9
Institution Type	Federal	300	34.5
	State	330	37.9
	Private	240	27.6
Academic Level	100 Level	220	25.3
	200 Level	210	24.1
	300 Level	180	20.7
	400 Level	160	18.4
	500 Level	100	11.5
Religious Affiliation	Christianity	500	57.5
	Islam	350	40.2
	Others	20	2.3
Socio-Economic Status	Low	220	25.3
	Middle	470	54.0
	High	180	20.7

The age distribution shows that the majority of respondents (55.2%) are between 20 and 23 years, consistent with the typical age range for undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Academic levels are relatively evenly distributed, with the largest proportion in 100 and 200 Levels (49.4%), reflecting the natural composition of the undergraduate population in the sampled institutions.

Institution types indicate a slightly higher representation from State-owned institutions (37.9%), followed by Federal (34.5%) and Private Institutions (27.6%), ensuring a balanced sample that captures differences in institutional policies, resources, and campus cultures.

Regarding religious affiliation, Christianity (57.5%) and Islam (40.2%) dominate, reflecting the broader religious demographics in Southwest Nigeria, while other religions account for a small minority (2.3%). These figures are relevant because religious beliefs may significantly influence clothing practices, particularly regarding modesty, color, and garment style.

Socioeconomic status is skewed towards the middle-income category (54.0%), followed by low (25.3%) and high (20.7%) income groups. Socioeconomic status is expected to impact clothing choices, as financial resources determine the accessibility, quality, and brand affiliation of garments.

b) Research questions 1 and Hypotheses 1

Research question 1 (RQ1): To what extent does cultural background influence the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Responses from the questionnaire items relating to Cultural background and Clothing language were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics revealed that a majority of respondents (65%) agreed or strongly agreed that their ethnic and cultural norms influence their clothing choices. Table 2 below summarizes the distribution of responses.

Table 2: Respondents' Perception of Cultural background on Clothing Preferences

Response category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	280	32.2
Agree	275	31.6
Neutral	150	17.2
Disagree	100	11.5
Strongly Disagree	65	7.5

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a significant positive relationship between cultural background and clothing language among female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Inferential analysis using Pearson’s correlation coefficient revealed a significant positive relationship between cultural background and clothing language ($r = 0.52, p < 0.01$), indicating that respondents from more culturally conscious families are more likely to reflect their ethnic and traditional values in their clothing choices. Further, linear regression analysis confirmed that cultural background significantly predicts clothing language ($\beta = 0.48, t = 12.56, p < 0.01$), explaining approximately 24% of the variance in clothing language ($R^2 = 0.24$). This confirms the statistical support for H1.

c) Research questions 2 and Hypotheses 2

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do religious beliefs influence the clothing preferences of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

To address RQ2, responses from questionnaire items measuring the influence of religious affiliation and beliefs on clothing preferences were analyzed. Descriptive statistics reveal that 58% of respondents indicated that their clothing choices are significantly guided by religious principles, such as modesty, appropriateness, and adherence to prescribed dress codes as shown by Table 4 below.

Table 3: Respondents’ Perception of Religious Influence on Clothing Choices

Response category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	250	28.7
Agree	250	28.7
Neutral	180	20.7
Disagree	120	13.8
Strongly Disagree	70	8.1

Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is a significant relationship between religious beliefs and clothing preferences among female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Inferential analysis using Pearson’s correlation coefficient indicates a moderate positive relationship between religious beliefs and clothing preferences ($r = 0.46, p < 0.05$). Furthermore, linear regression analysis confirms that religious beliefs are a significant predictor of clothing choices ($\beta = 0.41, t = 10.32, p < 0.01$), accounting for approximately 21% of the variance in clothing language ($R^2 = 0.21$). These results provide empirical support for H2, demonstrating that religious values significantly shape how female undergraduates select and interpret their clothing.

d) Research Question 3 and Hypothesis 3

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What is the role of socioeconomic status in determining the clothing choices of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Table 4, showing responses from questionnaire items related to financial capacity, family income, and personal expenditure on clothing were analyzed. Descriptive statistics reveal that 70% of respondents acknowledged that their socioeconomic status (SES) affects their ability to access specific clothing brands, styles, and quality of materials.

Table 4: Respondents’ Perception of Socioeconomic Influence on Clothing Choices

Response category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	300	34.5
Agree	310	35.6
Neutral	140	16.1
Disagree	90	10.3
Strongly Disagree	30	3.5

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Socioeconomic status significantly influences the clothing choices of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Inferential analysis using Pearson’s correlation coefficient revealed a strong positive relationship between socioeconomic status and clothing choices ($r = 0.63, p < 0.01$), suggesting that students from higher-income backgrounds have greater access to fashionable, branded, or culturally significant attire. Linear regression analysis further indicated that SES significantly predicts clothing choices ($\beta = 0.59, t = 14.87, p < 0.01$), accounting for approximately 39% of the variance in clothing language ($R^2 = 0.39$). These findings provide strong support for H3, demonstrating that financial resources substantially influence clothing behavior among female undergraduates.

e) Research Question 4 and Hypothesis 4

Research Question 4 (RQ4): How does peer pressure affect the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

To examine RQ4, data from questionnaire items assessing the influence of peer expectations, social acceptance, and peer group norms on clothing choices were analyzed. Descriptive statistics show that approximately 72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that peer pressure affects their clothing decisions as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 5: Respondents' Perception of Peer Pressure Influence on Clothing Choices

Response category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	320	36.8
Agree	300	34.5
Neutral	140	16.1
Disagree	80	9.2
Strongly Disagree	30	3.4

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Peer pressure has a significant effect on the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Inferential statistics using Pearson's correlation coefficient revealed a significant positive relationship between peer pressure and clothing language ($r = 0.57, p < 0.01$), suggesting that the influence of friends and peers strongly affects how female undergraduates dress. Linear regression analysis further confirmed that peer pressure is a significant predictor of clothing language ($\beta = 0.52, t = 13.45, p < 0.01$), accounting for approximately 27% of the variance in clothing choices ($R^2 = 0.27$). These results provide empirical support for H4.

f) Research Question 5

Research Question 5 (RQ5): What is the impact of media and popular culture on the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

As shown by the results in Table 5, questionnaire items assessing the influence of social media platforms, fashion magazines, celebrity trends, and popular culture on clothing choices were analyzed. Descriptive statistics indicate that approximately 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that media and popular culture affect their clothing language.

Table 6: Respondents' Perception of Media and popular culture Influence on Clothing Choices

Response category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	330	37.9
Agree	330	37.9
Neutral	120	13.8
Disagree	60	6.9
Strongly Disagree	30	3.5

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Media and popular culture significantly influence the clothing language of female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Inferential analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient revealed a significant positive relationship between media exposure and clothing language ($r = 0.61, p < 0.01$). Linear regression analysis further confirmed that media and

popular culture significantly predict clothing choices ($\beta = 0.56, t = 14.12, p < 0.01$), accounting for approximately 31% of the variance in clothing language ($R^2 = 0.31$). These results provide strong statistical support for H5, indicating that media and popular culture play a prominent role in shaping fashion preferences among female undergraduates.

IX. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study confirms that clothing functions as a powerful form of non-verbal communication, conveying identity, social status, and group affiliation, consistent with Symbolic Interactions (Blumer, 1969) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Cultural and religious considerations were found to significantly guide clothing choices, corroborating previous studies by Olawale (2020), Ajibade (2018), and Okafor (2019). Socioeconomic status, peer influence, and media exposure were also shown to play critical roles, aligning with findings from Adebayo (2017), Nwankwo (2020), and Bandura (1977).

The study extends theoretical understanding by integrating Symbolic Interactions, Social Identity Theory, and Social Learning Theory to explain how female undergraduates negotiate identity, group belonging, and media influences through clothing (Blumer, 1969; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Bandura, 1977). Practically, the findings highlight the need for inclusive dress policies, fashion and media literacy programs, creative and cultural expression initiatives, and equitable access to clothing resources, as emphasized in earlier studies (Craik, 2009; Entwistle, 2015; Eze, 2021).

X. CONCLUSION

This research contributes a robust empirical framework for understanding clothing language among female undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institutions. By providing insights into the interplay of cultural, religious, socioeconomic, peer, and media factors, the study offers actionable recommendations for students, institutions, policymakers, and the fashion industry. These contributions enhance academic knowledge, inform policy development, and support culturally sensitive, inclusive, and critically informed clothing practices within tertiary education, bridging theory, research, and practical application (Olawale, 2020; Ajibade, 2018; Okafor, 2019; Craik, 2009).

XI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for students, educational institutions, policymakers, and the fashion industry.

Students: Students should develop critical media literacy to navigate the pervasive influence of social media, fashion magazines, and popular culture (Bandura, 1977; Entwistle, 2015). By critically engaging with media messages, students can selectively adopt trends that align with personal, cultural, and religious values, mitigating undue peer pressure and promoting informed clothing choices (Craik, 2009). They are encouraged to balance peer influence with personal identity, ensuring that social conformity does not compromise self-expression. Integrating cultural and religious heritage into clothing choices fosters cultural pride and self-awareness, as supported by Olawale (2020) and Ajibade (2018), who emphasize the importance of traditional fabrics and styles in constructing identity among Nigerian youth. Resourceful and sustainable fashion practices, including the use of affordable clothing, second-hand garments, and locally produced fabrics, are also recommended to ensure equitable participation in campus fashion culture (Adebayo, 2017; Nwankwo, 2020).

Educational institutions: They should implement inclusive dress policies that respect cultural, religious, and socioeconomic diversity while promoting autonomy in clothing decisions (Okafor, 2019; Eze, 2021). Institutions are encouraged to establish fashion and media literacy programs through workshops, seminars, and curricular modules, which equip students with the knowledge to navigate peer and media pressures effectively (Bandura, 1977; Craik, 2009). Organizing cultural events, fashion exhibitions, and campus fashion shows provides platforms for creative and cultural expression, fostering social cohesion and cultural appreciation (Entwistle, 2015; Olawale, 2020). Addressing socioeconomic disparities is crucial. They can provide access to locally produced garments, budget-conscious styling workshops, and student fashion clubs, ensuring students from diverse financial backgrounds can participate fully in campus fashion culture (Adebayo, 2017; Nwankwo, 2020).

Policymakers: They should support initiatives that recognize cultural and religious diversity in tertiary institutions, promote local textile industries, and integrate media literacy into educational programs (Okafor, 2019; Eze, 2021).

The fashion industry: They should collaborate with institutions to provide culturally relevant, affordable, and sustainable clothing options, promoting ethical fashion practices among students (Craik, 2009; Entwistle, 2015).

Collectively, these recommendations emphasize a holistic approach, integrating cultural, religious, socioeconomic, peer, and media considerations to empower students, foster inclusivity, and encourage critically informed and creative clothing practices (Blumer, 1969; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

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Citation of this Article:

Dr. Ayodele Oluseyi Otunaiya. (2025). An Investigation into the Causal Factors of Clothing Language among Female Undergraduates in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions. *International Research Journal of Innovations in Engineering and Technology - IRJIET*, 9(9), 74-81. Article DOI <https://doi.org/10.47001/IRJIET/2025.909011>
