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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

MEANING OF DRESS AND WHY WE PUT ON DRESSES?

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

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

CURRENT STYLE OF DRESSING IN NIGERIAN HIGHER INSTITUTION OF LEARNING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DRESSING: GLOBALISATION AND AN ASPECT OF CULTURE

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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