Contemporary Consumer Culture’s Definition of Deviance in
Application to Dress Code Violators

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Deviance is a violation of social norms (Fey 2013, Lecture 2a). These norms that we have are behavioral codes and scripts that we must abide by to conform to these standards to guide our actions and self-presentations (Fey 2013, Lecture 2a). You learn how to do something by doing it wrong and having it be corrected by informal sanctions from others.

We live in an elite culture where, by simply living a certain way; it will happen without actually making it an official “law.” “Socio-Cultural Theory attributes the high levels of body image concerns among Western women to the media’s projection and promotion of unrealistically thin models” (Ashikali & Dittmar 2012, pg 514). We care so much about celebrities by “modeling” ourselves after them and mimic their actions to try to make our lifestyles like their own. Humans in power live their lives a certain way and are viewed by everyone on shows like, “Keeping up with the Kardashians.” To analyze the extent of the differences of the definition of deviance in our society’s contemporary consumer culture, my friends and me went out in Tempe, walking the streets around ASU and on the hotspot Mill Avenue wearing ridiculously bright clothing, including tutus, neon knee-high socks, neon booty shorts, neon tanks, openly being deviant to the social norms with the intention of gathering reactions of other young adults that are aware of our culture’s norms to analyze: why do we react to others’ appearances in hope of proving the strong materialistic values that are constantly instilled in our everyday lives?

Theory/Literature Review

In Tempe, there are various social norms we follow when we are ‘going out.’ Because we admire the way celebrities we watch on TV live and go out, we model the way we should go out to be like them. Abiding by the Conflict Model for the creation of norms (Fey 2013, Lecture 2a),
there is a known ‘dress code’ that mimics those of the lives of the celebrities that we enforce upon each other by using informal sanctions. Girls generally wear a nice blouse with a skirt or designer jeans. Most commonly; however, you’ll see a parade of girls walking down Mill Avenue by Arizona State University, linked arms, all wearing skin tight dresses with heels so high they can barely walk in them, attempting to mimic the appearance of the lives of the rich and famous, as presented in the media. As with Dittmar’s study of their culture in England, our society’s social norms stem from the materialistic values we have that are fully enforced by the media’s depiction of how we should live to attain the perfect body and material good life ideals (2012). The social norm that everyone expects you to abide by when going out in Tempe is that you wear your best clothes made-up with makeup, jewelry, and other things to attain that best possible celebrity-like appearance. “What is deviant in one society, culture, or subculture is not deviant in others” (Fey 2013, Lecture 2b); however, in our culture, one is considered deviant if you go out any other way. Appearance plays a big role in identity formation. According to Fey in the Unit 8 lecture, identity formation “is a reciprocal process between the individual and society.” The way society views you is often based upon your appearance, especially in our culture. Vilhjalmsson and Thorlindsson note “how important it is to reconsider theories in the light of presumed and real changes in social reality” (2002), leading to my examination of the literature on further aspects of sociology in our culture. Fey introduces to us two laws of our social identity. The first being the ‘Law of Economy’ – “once a behavior is categorized we resist other interpretations of behavior” (Fey 2013, Lecture 8). Our appearance is constituted by the way we present ourselves: how we dress. There are many different styles and ways to dress. They can all be viewed as different behaviors, all being their own category. We give each style its own traits and characteristics.
The second is the ‘Law of Consistency’ – “once categorized we will organize past and future identities in line with the new one (retrospective interpretation)” (Fey 2013, Lecture 8). These ‘style categories’ are based off of the differences in appearance that they have. As a society, we judge people based off of what category they fit into, reflected by their chosen style. Once we have categorized whether their style is appropriate or not for the current situation or event, this information sticks in our head for the future. This information is used by us to make judgments on how we should treat other people; whether or not we should show them signs of approval or use informal sanctions to show our disproval of their deviance.

Fey introduces to us the concept of ‘dualistic thinking’: we divide categories into oppositions: us and them, insiders and outsiders. Usually one group is valued more than the other (Fey 2013, Lecture 8). Within this ‘differential valuing’ system, the dominant group reflects the norms of what is socially accepted to wear. ‘Othering’ occurs when the subordinate groups that are dressing differently are treated as outsiders, deviant, and subjected to inequality. Because the ‘dominant group’ is generally the majority, they define what is ‘deviant’ by setting the norms of that culture (Fey 2013, Lecture 8). The ‘normative behavior’ in this case is dressing in a way that abides by this unwritten dress code. In our society, the way we present ourselves, our appearance, is highly important. It is a way to show our identity and reflect our ‘self’ to the community. Other societies don’t have as big of an importance on looks like we do, such as private schools, places with uniforms, other states, and definitely other countries; and therefore, significantly less judgments are made based off of one’s appearance and their definition of what is deviant is different than ours. To analyze the extent of the difference of the definition of deviance in society, my friends and me went out in Tempe, walking the streets around ASU and on the hotspot Mill Avenue wearing ridiculously bright clothing, including tutus, neon knee-high
socks, neon booty shorts, neon tanks, openly being deviant to the social norms.

“The effect of priming materialism on women’s responses to thin-ideal media” by Eleni-Marina Ashikali and Helga Dittmar presented the vital information that contemporary “consumer culture is characterized by two prominent ideals: the ‘body perfect’ and the material ‘good life’” (2012, pg 514). In Tempe, our society definitely abides by the concepts represented in a contemporary consumer culture; therefore, we can greatly compare this Socio-Cultural analysis of society to our own, having the same MV (materialistic values). Dittmar’s goal was to find the “impact of materialism on body image,” (2012, pg 517) through the use of the Socio-Cultural Theory. The authors compose 3 studies to seek the validity of this statement by analyzing the research they collected based off of MVS (Material Values Scale) and SATAQ-3 (Socio-Cultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire). In all of the studies, the information collected proved that “the materialism prime will impact on women’s state body image” (Dittmar 2012, pg 521), causing a reaction to anything that doesn’t abide by the social norms of attaining the body perfect ideal. Also concluded, the “individual differences in MV (materialistic values) are likely to play an important role in how women respond to depictions of consumer culture ideals” (Dittmar 2012, pg 521), which is reflected in our outfit choices when we go out.

Methods

I based my experiment off of my research journals and the literature of sociology we know that reflects our materialistic values of appearance as social norms. When internalized, the materialistic values abide by the socio-cultural theory in the media’s influence on our social norms that dictate what we approve of as proper ‘going-out’ attire. My target audience was mostly other college students that makeup the nightlife of Tempe around ASU and particularly, on Mill Avenue. This population is mostly Caucasian, 50% male/female, and falling in the age
range of 19-27 years of age. As me and my friends carried out my deviant act experiment of walking the streets of Tempe openly going against the social norms that dictate our unwritten dress code by wearing extremely vibrant neon clothes, including tutus, booty shorts, hats, and tanks, we measured the reactions of others by comparing society’s reactions on them to a typical night out that we have when we abide by the social norms based on materialistic values instilled in us by the media and other people in our social groups. We walked around Tempe around Vista del Sol, the Vue on Apache and finally on Mill Avenue.

Analysis/Discussion

This social norm of what you’re expected to wear when going out in Tempe with your friends is a known ‘dress code’ which is kept in check by other people by informal sanctions. There is no actual ‘dress code’ for going out to places in Tempe around ASU, unlike Old Town in Scottsdale where clubs have actual rules on what is acceptable to wear if you want to get in. In this case, these rules of the dress code in Old Town are formal sanctions enforced by employees of the club, particularly the security guards at the door whether or not someone is abiding by the rules in order to grant them entry into the clubs. In Tempe, there are many examples of the informal sanctions that help to maintain this unwritten celebrity-like dress code, such as people looking you up and down as you walk by. Other people will give you a look of approval if you are following this unwritten dress code. They will smile at you or give the head-nod signifying their consent of you abiding to the social norms. In addition, people will make positive compliments to you on your outfit. They will say things such as “cute dress” or “I love your jeans! Are those True Religions?” Girls will ask, “Where’d you get your shirt?” if they like what you are wearing and are abiding by the unwritten dress code that we are all aware of when deciding what to wear for the night. In Tempe, people are constantly seeking approval of others
on their outfit so that mentally, they know they are following the social norms. As a society, we feel the need to gain the acceptance of others and seek all of these forms of positive reinforcement of the unwritten dress code for approval.

Likewise, there are several informal sanctions that we receive if one is not following the socially accepted unwritten ‘dress code’ for going out in Tempe. If your outfit doesn’t follow the above stipulations: wearing your best clothes and appearing your best and classiest, then people will treat you differently, in a way that makes you well aware you do not have their approval and are being deviant to the social norms of going out. People will look you up and down in disgust, rather than admiration and consent. They will stare at you in the most obvious ways to make you feel insecure about your outfit if it isn’t following the norm and you stand out in a way they don’t approve of. Dirty looks from girls and evil-eyed glares are common informal sanctions received by people who aren’t following the unwritten dress code expected of them. Some people will go as far as to laugh at the way you present yourself when you aren’t following inline with society’s expectations and is commonly accompanied by snickering. The more confident people who feel it is their job to make you aware of your deviancy will make sarcastic comments on your outfit straight to your face on your chosen appearance such as “nice shirt” and “did you get that at the clown store?” People who want to be straight-up honest about the fact that you are being deviant based on your outfit will make rude comments to your face such as “What are you wearing?” or ask “Why are you wearing such a ridiculous outfit?” Generally, all of the above informal sanctions are carried out by girls in our society to maintain this unwritten dress code that reflects the shallow, body and appearance conscious community of Tempe.

Guys have different ways of enforcing the unwritten dress code. They will give out positive attention to girls in various ways when they are abiding by the social norms by checking
a girl out or complimenting her so she knows that her chosen outfit is, in fact, following the norms of going out that we are expected to follow. Offering to buy a girl a drink, hitting on her, flirting, and asking for her number are all signs of approval that guys use to emphasize the importance of looking your best when going out, which keeps girls constantly aware of the importance of following the unwritten dress code. Guys use negative attention when girls are being deviant by not abiding by the unwritten rules. They will commonly ignore her or act as if she isn’t even there, making her feel inhumane if she has chosen to be deviant by her appearance. Arizona State University is known for having the hottest girls and this causes high expectations from guys, making every girl to be extremely conscious of her looks so she won’t be considered deviant and will feel accepted by our culture. It is obvious that most females seek male attention and even plan their outfits accordingly to get this desired attention from males. Like girls who disapprove of another girls outfit, guys will also not put it past themselves to laugh at a girl and make rude comments to make a girl feel insecure so that next time when she plans her outfit she will follow the ‘all important’ unwritten dress code. Our ASU culture as a whole makes people feel extremely insecure about their appearance with all of these informal sanctions to keep the reputation of having the hottest girls.

Conclusion

My research question was answered with a multitude of backup proving the strong correlation between media’s role in dictating our social norms and our society’s need to follow these stipulations in our contemporary consumer culture. When we envy the life of someone we see, in this case a celebrity, we model our lives the way they live. We seek their body perfect and materialistic valued ideals that are in their lives in an attempt to achieve the status of living out these ideals that our culture holds so high. The informal sanctions we impose on others when
they are not abiding by the unwritten dress code further prove our need to keep these stipulations in line to subconsciously try to achieve the lifestyle of the rich and famous in our own hometown. Arizona State University is known for partying and so is the celebrity culture. We, therefore, use the media’s depictions of the proper way of living this lifestyle to form our own social norms on the way we should dress and appear to achieve this sought out idealized life.
References
