



The Prime Aesthetic: Imprinted Aesthetic Dress Preferences

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Taste has been defined as “an individual preference or inclination toward or for a particular style” (King & Ring, 1980, p.13). An individual’s taste is representative of their preferences for the aesthetic attributes of dress, which will be called Aesthetic Dress Preferences (ADP) in this paper. ADP is affected throughout the lifespan by numerous outside stimuli including social, cultural, and personal influences (Chattaraman & Rudd, 2006; Rudd & Lennon, 2001). Some of these socio-cultural impacts on ADP take the form of dress rules (Johnson & Lennon, 2017; Kimle & Damhorst, 1997; Workman & Freeburg, 2009), cultural movements such as modernism and postmodernism (Morgado, 1996; West, 2011), the importance of identity formation on dress practices (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Stone, 1975), and the body (DeLong, 1987). Although these influences on ADP exist throughout the lifetime, literature suggests that there are developmental periods wherein individuals become psychologically hypersensitive to the impression of aesthetic taste (Bornstein, 1989; Havlena & Holak, 1991). These pivotal moments in human development, one of which occurs during the transition from adolescence into adulthood have far-reaching psychological influences (Arnett, 2000; Bornstein, 1989; Erikson & Coles, 2000; Kozulin, 1990). This period is known as emerging adulthood (EA), ranges from the late teens through the twenties (Arnett, 2000). The imprinting of taste in music, for example, peaked in EA “for pieces that were hits when the respondent was in late adolescence or early adulthood (23.5 years of age)” (Holbrook & Schindler, 1994, p. 412). Thus, it was theorized that ADP may also be formed in EA.

The current research will introduce a new theoretical concept, the Prime Aesthetic. The Prime Aesthetic is representative of the cumulative ADP imprinted from all influences during an individual’s Prime of Life, theoretically positioned during the sensitive period of EA. Eckman (1997) suggested that “exploration of critical periods in the development of aesthetic preferences for fashion could enhance understanding of preference formation” (p. 195). However, no researchers have investigated the relationship between EA and an individual’s ADP development. The purpose of this research was to explore the theoretical concept of Prime Aesthetic through the investigation of individual ADP from past and present, and to locate the Prime Aesthetic for dress on the human development timeline to determine if these preferences were formed during EA.

Methods and Procedures

To investigate, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants. Participants also completed an online screening survey containing questions about when participants felt they looked their best in clothes, differences in their ADP from that time and the present, and for those differences in ADP, what influences they thought had caused those changes. To qualify for the study, participants had to have been born before 1992, raised in the U.S., identify as female, and have some interest or knowledge in fashion. Following IRB approval, a digital research solicitation flyer was posted on listservs and social media related to fashion. A total of 30 participants were sampled. Online interviews were conducted via Zoom™ in early 2022.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which treats data using open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, data are broken down into units of meaning or concepts and given named codes that represent concepts, these codes are then grouped into categories based on common traits. In the second phase, or axial coding, subcategories are joined to the categories created during the open coding phase. The final phase of selective coding is a stage of refining categories for emergent themes in the pursuit of developing a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Participants were asked to indicate the year when they thought they looked and felt their best in clothing. The mean for the sample was 29.03 (SD =12.49), the median score was 23, and the mode was 22.5. Most participants (66.7%, n=20) fell within the range of the EA. The theoretical age of 23.5 that Holbrook and Schindler (1989) proposed in their study on musical tastes. The mean age score represents a difference of six years from the approximate theoretical EA age of 23.5 (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989). This difference is explained by 10 outliers in the data, who consciously chose ages outside the period of EA.

Qualitative data analysis revealed four themes that contributed to a possible shift of the Prime Aesthetic away from the period of EA: *Financial Reasons*, *Pivotal Moments*, *Body Issues*, and *Emotionally Destabilizing Period*. Some participants expressed they did not have money to wear the things they wanted during that period, “In my 20s, I didn’t have any money” (P 12). Thus, they preferred their ADPs later when they could afford better clothes, like Participant 11 who specified that “I’ve reached the point in my life, where I’m willing to spend money on clothes.” Others stated that there were pivotal moments in their lives after EA that displaced their Prime Age to later, such as “it was when I spent the most time on dressing when I first started teaching” (P 13). Another example involved more formal learning about fashion, “I could really kind of pinpoint it to...when I went into training to be a ‘Color Me Beautiful’ consultant...the whole premise of that training was to teach people how to develop a wardrobe based on your body type and your colors (P 21). This same theme also incorporated an individual’s ADP based on new or changing employment. Others stated body issues, either positive later in life, or

negative during EA. For one participant she stated that at age 45, she was in better physical shape, so she chose that age, “um I was very physically fit, I had just run a half marathon” (P 12). The final theme that emerged from the data that displaced the Prime Age away from EA were episodes where the participants underwent an emotionally destabilizing period, as one participant expressed “it was miserable because I had to break off from the love of my life due to religious differences, and I never married” (P 27).

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that the concept of Prime Aesthetic in dress does find theoretical purchase in the data from this sample for ADP imprinted during EA similar to the Holbrook and Schindler (1989) study for the age of 23.5. Therefore, it could be argued that a foundation of an individual’s tastes in dress aesthetics or ADP are formed during the years of EA and can potentially last throughout the lifespan. One prospective explanation may be linked to emerging identity, or “when I came of age” (P12). However, in some instances or perhaps due to the difference between music and dress items, several factors can move the perceived Prime Aesthetic away from the EA period. Specifically found in these data were four themes that were catalysts for this movement. Not having money during EA or having a better income later in life to buy a desired wardrobe motivated a change in Prime Age. Pivotal and influential moments that affected dress practices at times beyond EA, as well as a myriad of issues addressing the body during or after EA, and different types of emotionally difficult events during EA emerged from the Data. Future studies could replicate this study to ensure validity and test more diverse samples, including males, and work to develop a quantitative scale for better generalization.

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