



Etiquette of dress: A comparison of 1960 and 2010

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Virginia Postrel (2003) discusses aesthetic meaning from two aspects of authenticity: objective and subjective. ‘Objective’ is the ideal and is informed by a set of codified rules and guidelines, or “which elements are acceptable in which setting” without allowing for any individual interpretation (p.110). It connects the “surface with substance in some authoritative and clearly observable way” (p.110). On the other hand, the ‘subjective’ view of aesthetic meaning derives from the inside out; individuals can decide for themselves what is authentic in a given situation, “what matches surface with substance, form with identity” (p.113). Dress can be considered the ultimate form of personal aesthetic expression; clothing is the surface that is expressing the substance of the individual. Since dress then expresses individual aesthetic meaning deciding or knowing what to wear when and how becomes vitally important. Additionally, it is necessary to know by what type of aesthetic meaning authentic or appropriate dress is determined: objective or subjective.

By comparing the years 1960 and 2010, the definition of dressing appropriately and authentically has dramatically altered in just a mere 50 years. In 1960, the rule of authentic and appropriate dress was highly objective, with set rules and standards that guided individual choices so that everyone understood the social and individual expectations for their appearance. There was an etiquette to dressing appropriately that created a sense of comfort in social settings for participants. Moreover, the very objective standards set forth allowed for limited confusion when answering the question of what to wear. In fact, texts on clothing selection published in the 1950s typically referred to the idea of ‘good taste,’ as something women should cultivate in dress as in art (Goldstein, 1954; Morten, 1955). Furthermore, dressing with ‘good taste’ meant dressing authentically (appropriately) and was considered a means of obtaining social acceptance, self-respect, and a sense of security in everyday interactions (McJimsey, 1963).

On the other hand in 2010, authentic and appropriate dress evolved to place greater emphasis on expressing individual needs and concepts of self than of displaying ‘good taste’ in social settings. The individual then becomes more important in some instances than the group, leading to complete lack of rules or standards for dressing in many social situations. However, the subjective nature of aesthetic meaning in dressing authentically is a double edged sword with freedom on one side and ambiguity on the other. This ambiguity leaves room for perceived

mistakes that then reflect more deeply on an individual's sense of self-expression. As a result, in this era of (almost) anything goes there is potentially more anxiety behind the question of "What should I wear?"

To examine this phenomenon it was essential to understand the nature and detail of the fashion advice to which women in the years 1960 and 2010 were exposed; therefore fashion advice books and articles in popular fashion periodicals, such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* published in the decade preceding each year were examined. Additionally, the same fashion periodicals were examined for the years 1960 and 2010 to determine the level of prescription in advice related to dressing for specific occasions, such as work or evening events. The data related to each year were then compared to understand changes and differences in advice and how this is reflected in views of authenticity and appropriateness in dress for the years 1960 and 2010. Finally, Postrel's (2003) concepts of objective and subjective authenticity were applied to the data to discover if in fact subjective aesthetic meaning has become more important in dress than objective or if there is a place for both types in the modern etiquette of dress.

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