



Advocacy through Appearance:  
An Exploration of Professional Identity, Self-Sufficiency, and the Clothing-Related Non-Profit

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Non-profit organizations are often established to address economic and social disparities by providing resources to those in need with the goal of improving society. Individuals can support non-profits by volunteering or by providing monetary and/or in-kind donations, such as clothing. Indeed, some non-profits specifically seek to collect donations of used clothing, and according to the Council for Textile Recycling (2016), an average of 3.8 billion pounds of clothing, footwear, and accessories are donated annually in the US. However, little is known about the implications of such donations for making a positive impact within the lives of individuals and society at large (Ha-Brookshire & Hodges, 2009). Indeed, clothing-related non-profits tend to use clothing donations in a variety of ways depending on organizational mission. For instance, Career Gear and Dress for Success offer programs that use donated clothing to help clients dress appropriately for job interviews. Yet, beyond the short-term goal of getting a job, donated clothing can also be used to foster the skills necessary to build a more long-term career. Thus, the first objective of this qualitative study was to examine the role of the clothing-related non-profit in helping clients develop a professional identity through donated dress.

Dress can affect our evaluations of others regarding such characteristics as potency, dynamism, and quality of thought (Damhorst, 1990). According to the encloded cognition framework, dress helps to shape behavior; i.e., a white lab coat fosters attentiveness (Johnson, Lennon & Rudd, 2014). Likewise, individuals feel more competent and responsible if they wear clothing appropriate to the situation (Kwon, 1994), and this can assist them in making positive impressions on others, such as within the workplace (Damhorst, 1990). Thus, with the help of the clothing-related non-profit, it is possible that professional dress can be used as a conduit for achieving economic independence. To address this possibility, the second objective of this study was to explore how developing a professional identity through donated dress can help clients of clothing-related non-profits achieve broader goals of personal and professional self-sufficiency.

With IRB approval, participants were recruited from a clothing-related non-profit that offer women in particular support for economic independence through career development, including providing them with donated items of professional dress. A total of 36 clients comprised the sample, ranging in age from 25 to 59 years old. In-depth interviews were completed over a 3-month period. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours and was conducted on-site at the non-profit. Participants were asked to share their experiences as clients, their views on the non-profit, and the benefits and challenges of receiving assistance from the non-profit. Interviews were conducted until saturation was achieved. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Once complete, Spiggle's (1994) suggestions for interpretation and analysis of qualitative data were followed. Patterns in the data were identified

and labeled, and conceptual links between the patterns were defined. As a result, three main themes are used to structure the following interpretation: *More than a Basic Need*, *Wearing Confidence*, and *Communicating Change*. Names were changed to protect confidentiality.

For participants, donated clothing provides *More than a Basic Need*; it offers them a chance to feel better about themselves. “Encouragement” and “empowerment” were frequently mentioned by the participants, pointing to the psychological influence of situation-appropriate clothing. Jessica explained that the organization “...allows me to be able to have professional clothing items that I can't afford” while Desiree talked about how the clothing “helps with confidence and preparation and looking the part when on an interview.” The clothing they receive helps participants meet the basic need for interview-appropriate attire, but also to feel supported and encouraged. Correspondingly, *Wearing Confidence* further strengthened this idea. As Diane said, “I have already been able to lift up my confidence and feel ready to face my next interview with poise and professionalism.” Interpreted via the enclothed cognition framework, participants’ feel confident and therefore act confident, or as Julie put it, have “a chance to look and feel like I belong in the professional world, despite the barriers that scream otherwise.” In turn, participants talked about using the support provided by the non-profit not just to get a job, but as a means of *Communicating Change* to themselves and to others. As Janet explained, “You know you have a network of people advocating for your sake. It feels good to put on that power professional outfit and walk with your head held high. I am glad this organization reminds me of being somebody.” For participants, being encouraged to believe in themselves and their abilities offers the potential for making positive personal and professional changes in their lives.

As this study reveals, the clothing-related non-profit is about more than just providing individuals with interview suits. Such organizations can also be about empowerment, confidence, and ultimately independence. That is, to reach a point where the assistance provided by the non-profit is no longer required. Findings highlight the extent to which participants viewed the donated clothing as part of an overall program of personal and professional development designed not just to assist them in the employment search, but to craft a professional identity that will ultimately help them achieve self-sufficiency. Further research on the role of identity development and dress relative to clothing-related non-profits is needed, as it would offer valuable insight into the full impact of these organizations on individuals and society.

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