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Man in Black: Perceptions of Black Clothing

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PSYC 303: Research Methods

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During the second half of the 20th century, fashion took the music industry by storm. Artists became recognized for their flamboyant and glamorous outfits on top of their musical talent. Glam rock musicians, such as David Bowie and Prince, stirred controversy for their androgynous and flashy outfits. America swooned for Elvis, who was immortalized in pop culture wearing a white rhinestone jumpsuit. The public fell in love with musicians through their signature styles and over-the-top outfits. However, one artist had a different approach to their style. Country singer Johnny Cash distanced himself from other musicians of the time by dressing in all-black: black shirt, black pants, black shoes. Sometimes a black suit jacket for special occasions. Cash never strayed from his signature style, nor did he explain why he always wore black. Was Cash trying to tell us something through the clothes he wore? Or did he just really like wearing black?

The clothes we wear are part of the first impression others make of us. People can infer what kind of job we have, what part of the world we live in, and aspects of our personality based on the type of clothes we are wearing. A patient in a waiting room can figure out who the nurses are because of the scrubs they are wearing, or the doctors in white lab coats. Clothing color can also influence how we are perceived; someone wearing bright colors may come across as having a bright or bubbly personality, rather than an unpleasant one. People have ideas about what colors represent, which are then projected onto people who wear those colors. Research suggests that wearing the color black can affect people's perceived attitude toward the wearer. Black clothing can enhance some of the wearer's positive traits, such as perceived attractiveness or trust, or negative traits, such as perceived aggression.

Colors are often associated with emotion: blue is sad, yellow is happy, red is angry. What emotion do you think of when you hear black? Black is often associated with abstract emotions

or feelings: grief, uneasiness, loneliness. It can be hard to explain exactly how the color makes us feel. This feeling of ambiguity can manifest in black clothing; people who wear black may come across as alluring or attractive due to the ambiguous nature of the color. We become curious of people who wear black because they are considered harder to read, creating a sense of desirability or attraction.

A study published in 2012 tried to find out if black clothing had any effect on a person's attractiveness (Takahashi, 2012). The 41 participants of the study watched a conversation between two people, one wearing red and the other wearing black. The participants were then asked questions about how they perceived the personalities of the two people in conversation. The research concluded that black clothing "enhanced the social desirability of a discrete character (Takahashi, 2012)." While both people were viewed positively by the participants, the participants perceived the person in black as having a more lowkey, ambiguous personality than the person in red, who was perceived as having an "optimistic" personality. In this study, black clothing caused more ambiguity than red, which led to the participants rating the person as more socially desirable. Perhaps this is why people were so infatuated with Cash's style of dress. If he were to wear a different color consistently, such as red, people may have viewed Cash as more optimistic, aggressive, or fiery. His personality may have been more concrete or easily defined by the public. By wearing black, people could not use his clothing to assign him any strong personality traits; people relied on his music to learn about him, rather than his appearance.

Black is a color worn by many in positions of authority. For example, courtroom judges for the past few centuries have traditionally worn black robes, representing a common goal of upholding the Constitution among judges (O'Connor, 2013). If black is a color that does not stir up any immediate emotion, then it makes sense why it would be worn by judges in courtrooms.

Judges are meant to be unbiased and fair in their rulings, upholding the law with integrity and authority; if a judge were to wear red, for instance, their actions and words could come across as more aggressive or passionate than intended. The same goes for other public officers, such as the police.

While police officers in the United States traditionally wear dark blue uniforms, there is some research showing that people trust police officers more in black uniforms than uniforms of any other color. A study, titled “Good Guys Wear Black,” collected data from a sample of undergraduate students about their perceptions of police appearance (Nickels, 2008). They found that the participants trusted police officers in black uniforms more than any other color; dark blue followed, with trust levels dropping as uniform color became lighter. The study also relates black uniforms worn by police officers with uniforms worn by other public officials, like judges, suggesting that black clothing can be associated with a general sense of trust among some public officials. Like previous studies into the topic, this research publication suggests that perceptions of people who wear black clothing are context-based; clothing color is only one factor when making assumptions and other factors are important, such as the items being worn and the surrounding situation, as well.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, a certain uniform trend was sweeping the sports world. The phenomenon took over teams across different sports, levels of play, and areas of the country. One of the trend’s most noticeable examples occurred in 2003 with the Detroit Lions; after years of playing in light-colored jerseys, the team made the switch to black. This trend of sports teams wearing black jerseys, despite it not being one of the team colors, became known among some as “Black for Black’s Sake (Lukas, 2017).” Many sports fans wondered the reason for this; some thought it was to sell more jerseys and some teams switched because the

professional teams were. Others, however, wondered if the new jerseys had any effect on how the players were perceived during play.

While the color black has many connotations, there is research to suggest that black clothing influences perceived aggression. A 2013 study found that men in black clothing were generally perceived as more aggressive than men wearing lighter clothing; the study recommends that if a man wants to come off as less aggressive, he should wear less black (Linhartová et al, 2013). For women, black clothing can increase perceived aggressiveness when the wearer's context is known. Overall, people come across most threatening when wearing black in a threatening situation; there are several factors, such as age of the wearer, that influence perceived aggression when combined with black clothing.

There is also evidence to suggest that sports players who wear black jerseys are perceived by both fans and officials as more aggressive than players who wear other colors. A study aptly titled "Black Uniforms and Aggression" found that players with black jerseys were penalized more often than players with jerseys of other colors (Nickels, 2008). They tested this in a few different ways. The first way the researchers' collected data was by analyzing NFL team penalty records and checking to see which teams wore black jerseys. They found that the teams with the highest penalty records also wore black jerseys. While this correlation is interesting, there was not enough data showing a connection between the two variables. In their second test, they had participants watch two football plays involving the same teams. In one video, the defensive team wore white and in the other, they wore black. The participants were asked to "play referee" and found that the participants would penalize the team in black jerseys more than the team in white jerseys. The results are consistent with the data they collected on NFL teams, suggesting that players in black uniforms are perceived as more aggressive than other players.

While everybody has different reasons for wearing black, it is clear to see that when worn, the dramatic color can have different effects on people, depending on the situation. For example, two people could both be wearing black, but one could be perceived as more aggressive and the other as more mysterious and alluring. While clothing color can affect the way a person is perceived, other contextual factors can also affect how a person is perceived; a police officer in a black uniform is going to be perceived differently than someone in a black trench coat and hood. Many factors, including color, affect how we view people.

So... why did Johnny Cash wear black? Was it to appear more aggressive? Attractive? Probably not either of these. In 1971, Cash released his song "Man in Black," a response to the public regarding his all-black style. He sang about how his black clothes are a symbol of rebellion, representing the poor and downtrodden. He wanted to shed a light on the most vulnerable members of our society and advocate for them, especially given the widespread favor he held from the public and potential for change. He wore black to represent the imprisoned and impoverished; like the black worn by courtroom judges, Cash's black clothing could represent working towards fairness and justice. While Cash wore black to fight against the status quo, he also had another reason for wearing black, one that is likely to be shared by others who consistently wear dark-colored clothes: "I wore black because I liked it (Johnny Cash Trail, 2023)."

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