Prospectus:

How do costumes nonverbally communicate character?

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to pinpoint how elements of costumes nonverbally communicate character traits. While there is abundant research on how people perceive workplace uniforms and everyday attire, there is a lack of information about how costume design influences audiences. They define how we react to clothing, but do not examine how we can send nonverbal messages to evoke said reactions through clothing. Simply put, this knowledge of clothing symbolism needs to be implemented into the context of costumes. This research is important in performance and fashion fields, as it will help improve designers' intentionality and communication through their creations.

Some messages, such as emotion, will have to be measured by a scale in the study, as feelings are subjective. For example, using a meter ranging from happiness to sadness that the participants must mark their reactions to the costume on. To measure results, comparing the designer's intention alongside the answers the participants selected in the multiple-choice survey. This will give direct results to which messages were received through the communication method of costuming.

Enclothed cognition is defined by Adam and Galinsky (2012) as a piece of clothing that the wearer holds an associated behavior with. Once worn, it evokes the associated behavior within them. In terms of artist terms, silhouette is defined as an outline of a body, similar to the outline a shadow would cast (Merriam-Webster). Texture in fashion is defined as "the surface interest of fabric, created by the weave and by light touch – how something feels, or looks like it would feel when touched" (Elements and principles of fashion design). Line in costume refers to the direction of visual components on a garment. For example, a lapel collar on a suit jacket forms a diagonal line, leading the eye down the garment.

When discussing nonverbal communication through clothing, one must work alongside the symbolic interactionism theory. This theory states that people give meaning to objects, events, and behaviors (Interpersonal Communication, 2023). These meanings depend on the situation they are presented in and can nonverbally tell people something about the symbol itself and about who is using it. With costume design specifically, different elements such as silhouette, color, and texture are cultural symbols that communicate character traits to audiences. One cannot explore nonverbal communication, especially through clothing, without first analyzing cultural symbols.

Background

Much like an actor's facial expression, posture, and setting, costume is a widespread form of nonverbal communication (Pan, et al. 2024). Overall, physical appearance outweighs verbal and nonverbal behaviors in terms of influence (Maran, et al. 2021). In general, different kinds of clothing evoke specific emotions, regardless of the person's actions. Uniform in particular can make others excuse irrational behavior (Bhoj & Ayachit, 2024). Elements such as color, texture, line, (Al-Ged, Tawfiq, 2024) and silhouette (Walt Disney, 2020) are effective tools for communicating character in theatre, fashion design, film, etc. (Haroon, et al. 2023). General design principles such as contrast, balance, emphasis, harmony, variation, movement, proportion, scale, and repetition are also useful for creating a cohesiveness in costume (Durbin, 2023). Adam & Galinsky defined the term enclothed cognition in 2012, which is a basis for most modern costume analyses. This encapsulates two factors: the physical experience of wearing clothing and knowing the symbolic meaning behind them.

Clothing affecting the wearer

For the wearer, any attire could affect one's view of themselves and their experiences (Bhoj & Ayachit 2024). Significantly, formal clothing improved the wearer's cognitive processing. Objectification, whether intentional or not, affected men's behavior when perceiving the wearer. Someone's clothing items or non-fabric accessories, such as tattoos or perfume, can be used by the wearer to adjust the appearance of their body (Gilligan, 2023). Clothing, while a necessity, can still be psychological, as anxiety can create a dire need to hide or expose the body. Uniform for first responders can make the wearer feel stronger, more capable, and even invincible (Andrews, 2024). For doctors especially, wearing a white lab coat can influence the dynamics of the professional-patient relationship by announcing identity and ensuring cleanliness (Crutzen & Adam, 2022).

Similarly, wearing an item of clothing evokes the associated behaviors within the wearer (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). A lab coat influences someone to have increased selective attention. Similarly in the Stanford Prison Experiment (2017), police uniforms influence wearers, whether they are an officer or not, to display orderly and destructive behaviors. Opposingly, prison attire influences wearers to behave as delinquents even if they have no record of illegal behavior. Standard association of behavior with clothing is one phenomenon, such as expecting cleanliness or order from someone wearing a lab coat. Enclothed cognition, however, requires the clothing to be worn by someone who holds such association (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). Those who wear a lab coat without having the association of attentiveness will not exhibit those behaviors, and someone with the association that does not wear it will also not exhibit such behaviors.

Costumes and Atmosphere

While costumes can communicate character, they can also nonverbally inform audiences about the character's surroundings. Authors Sagheer, Khalid, and Sarwer (2024) analyzed the animated short film *Umbrella* and determined that the season and colors of clothing can communicate the atmosphere they exist in. A character's thick coat and brown scarf demonstrate they are experiencing winter weather, as that is a logical explanation for what they are wearing. The same can be said about an atmosphere influencing costumes. While police uniforms normally make officers feel invincible, during the pandemic behaviors shifted as uniformed individuals felt more vulnerable as people were rioting against officers (Andrews, 2024). The culture, location, and historical period in which the story takes place will also determine the standards for dress (Al-Ged & Tawfiq, 2024).

While the Qur'an in Islam demonstrates power in symmetry and straight scales, clothing with straight, non-tilted lines therefore reflected justice. Gender, however, is not inherently instilled in clothing but rather societies influence what clothing communicates masculinity and what communicates femininity (Maxey, 2022). For example, a dress may read as feminine in some societies, but men may wear long tunics without seeming feminine in others. Even clothing in stores are organized by gender, so if a woman finds clothing in a men's section that better suits their needs, they might feel unaffirmed and develop a disconnected sense of self as society's expectations for their gender does not match their needs.

Juxtaposition of Costumes

Although a costume can communicate something by itself, it can communicate a different message when placed next to another costume. For example, a pile of diamonds by themselves

can be seen as astounding, rare, and gorgeous, however; a pile of diamonds with one ruby in the center makes the diamonds seem common and plain by comparison of color. Uniforms make a group of people more identifiable, such as finding a police officer in a crowd (Andrews, 2024). They can create a sense of unity for the wearers but also establish a sense of hierarchy above those not in uniform.

For instances such as dress code, where everyone is meant to feel uniform, the meaning of clothing lies solely in how the wearer interprets a dress code, occupation uniform, and so-called appropriate attire for their career (Maran, et al., 2021). When fitting within a given dress code, uniformity reads as unintelligent, and style, uniqueness, or luxury reads as extroversion and competence. As costume can convey the weather conditions of a story, the supporting characters' dress puts the main character's outfit into perspective on whether it is reasonable or sensible for the environment they are in (Sagheer, et al. 2024). A young boy wearing a thick scarf and coat by himself may communicate that he is experiencing a harsh winter. When he is surrounded by people wearing tank tops and shorts, the audience may conclude he is ill and cannot control his body temperature.

Silhouette

When looking into character design specifically, The Walt Family Museum (2020) found that the shape of one's silhouette demonstrates certain attributes. A circular shape can read as an approachable, organic, and friendly character. Squares can make a character feel strong, supportive, reliable, and inflexible. Triangles can communicate sharpness, a strong dynamic, and unpredictability. When used in a less straightforward fashion, they can make for unpredictable villains or reveal secret motives of a character. Although they use these principles mainly in animation spaces, the principles communicate identically in costume. Silhouette also has

different attributes in different cultures (Al-Ged & Tawfiq, 2024). For Islamic dress, tubular

dress feels like a symbol of justice, as standard conforming dress is very loosely fitted. Overall, a

character's silhouette should be tested on an audience: the simpler the more effective (Welcome

to the Walt Disney Family Museum, 2020). Proportions of a character and their costume can help

make them appear unique, such as a gigantic headdress or fluffy crinoline skirt. Each garment in

the outfit, or section of the body, should be distinguishable by an audience. If an audience cannot

tell where a shirt ends and the pants start, it can distract them from what the character is doing.

Overall, existing literature defines the effect of a costume's silhouette, and juxtaposition

against other costumes. While there are defined symbols within the design community, it is not

discussed how to implement them, and which audiences they render most effective with. There is

also abundant research on how costumes can communicate a setting, as heavier clothing can

communicate cold weather. Clothing is also known to impact the wearer. If someone has a

behavioral association with a garment, such as attentive doctors wearing lab coats, they are more

likely to exhibit those traits. All this information broadly explores clothing, and there is a

literature gap connecting this information to the context of performance and costumes. Designers

need to understand what their tools are for designing costumes, and how to use these defined

tools to communicate the messages they want to communicate. Similar to language, the pre-

existing research equates to a translation of individual words from English to Spanish. The gap

exists in teaching Spanish grammar: how and when do we use which words to communicate our

thoughts?

Methodology

Framework

This study would contain three steps: (1) Identify the design elements and symbols associated with character, (2) Utilize color, silhouette, texture, and line to design a variation of costumes intended for princesses and villains respectively, and (3) Share the images through survey to understand if the characteristics were communicated clearly and received by audiences.

The first portion lies within the background of the prospectus, and the costumes will be designed with those principles in mind. I, as a researcher and dual major of communication and fashion, will be the designer. For the second portion, the designer must record their process and choices along with their intentions and experiences. For example, for the princess outfit, using soft textures/ruffles, light colors, and an upward-pointing triangular silhouette will reflect the character's innocence, delicate behaviors, and stable nature. The third portion will require American participants of all ages and educational backgrounds. Narrowing the cultural demographic will ensure the fashion symbols are most consistent. It is important to assess individuals of different ages and educational backgrounds to discover how the same message is received across varying individuals. Similarly, films and theatre productions can have audience members of any age and educational background, so it is important to mimic the standard costume-viewing audience in this study.

Utilizing both the designer and the audience members is integral to this study, as nonverbal communication always includes a sender and receiver. While analyzing the designer's work can provide effective interpretations of design principles, it is equally important to know if their intentions were similar to how their work is perceived. By influencing the sender, we can ensure

the design principles researched are truly being used and how they impact the design process. By surveying the receivers, we can understand what associations were effectively communicated, and if the design principles were productive.

Instruments

Examples of questions for the audience include: who do you picture wearing this outfit, and why? If you passed someone wearing this on the street, what would you think of them? What qualities do you think this person would have, and why? How do the colors make you feel about the character? How does the silhouette make you feel about the character? How does the fabrics/accessories/texture make you feel about the character? As emotions are inherently subjective, it is important to use multiple choice answers while we can, as well as a sliding scale. This ensures that an audience's happiness is measured equivalently across every survey taker. Following those questions, leaving a space for freeform written response will allow researchers to understand why these emotions were evoked within the viewer. The same scale and multiple choice questions would be given to the designer as well, to measure their intended message against their audience's received message.

As I would hypothetically be a designer, the following figures are examples of the work I created using costume design principles, intended to be read as princesses or villains. It is important that the costumes are worn by mannequins to ensure that the actors/wearers don't influence the viewer's perception. Sample images regarding the types of clothing are as follows.

Figure 1. Princess

Figure 2. The Princess Loses her Beauty

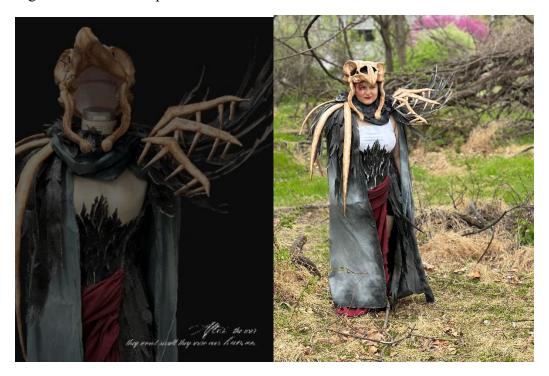*Figure 3. Withered and Broken*

Figure 4. The Curse Enacts

Figure 5. Body Rejecting Villainy

Figure 6. Being Consumed by a New Form

Figure 7. Villain Acceptance

Conclusion

This study on costumes nonverbally reflecting character will be organized through an interview, survey, and written discussion. The interview with the designer will gather data about how they utilize design principles to convey their chosen character. This is meant to either confirm past literature or discuss the gaps. The survey portion is intended to gather data about which nonverbal messages regarding character are received by audience members. Questioning both the designer and the audience will help researchers understand the full communication transaction through the medium of costuming: understanding what information is attainable through costuming and which messages were not received. The discussion portion of the report will provide an analysis comparing the interview and survey results. All sources are noted in the references.

The overall timeline of the report will range from June 2025 to July 2026. For the creation of costumes by the designer, they will have four months to cultivate four looks, finishing in October 2025. By November 2025, the designer will be interviewed about their intentions with each piece and what messages they intend to communicate. From December 2025 to March 2026, surveys will be conducted, including photos of the costumes and inquiring audience reactions. The results and findings will come out by April 2026. The discussion and conclusion will be done by May 2026. Editing and the completed report will be done by July 2026.

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Infographic

- Top
    o Title
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- Research question
- Theory
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- Proposed method
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    o Can be horizontal