Analysis of Historic and Contemporary Dress: An African Example¹

A method for analyzing dress was modeled after methods for analyzing languages. The primary data were 607 photographs of members of an extended family of Yoruba people in Nigeria. The photographs, taken between 1900 and 1974, were divided into three groups corresponding to political periods within the time span. Steps in analyzing the data were: (1) list all items worn; (2) calculate frequency of appearance of each item; (3) identify associations made with items worn most frequently, i.e., male/female, Western/indigenous; (4) within the three time periods, determine modes related to associations found in step 3; (5) identify items which appear as alternates or additions to modal items; (6) develop rules of dress relating social roles and statuses of individuals to use of particular forms of dress. Although the method was applied to studying dress of a non-Western population, the techniques have potential for comparative studies of the dress of any culture.

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Betty Wass and Joanne Eicher

Dress is a visible and nonverbal symbol in a network of both visible and invisible, verbal and nonverbal symbols created by human beings. Dress is the most intimate environment in an individual's repertoire of tangible, relatively permanent, and easily manipulated artifacts. These artifacts of dress are an integral part of the total communication process. The communicative properties of dress develop within social, ethnic, and temporal

contexts and become a stimulus for invoking associations, notions, and ideas. Although many scholars generally agree that dress is a nonverbal element in the communications systems of cultures, few have studied the particular messages that may be transmitted through dress. In the large body of material called history of costume, forms of dress rather than meanings of dress have been the general foci of research.

Certain styles commonly referred to as modes of dress may not be modal at all in the mathematical sense of representing the dress of a majority of a segment of the population. A style which has come to epitomize the dress of an era may have been worn by only a few persons such as elite rulers or sacrificial victims who because of special circumstances such as burial customs, royal portraits or photographs had their garments or representations of their garments preserved through the ages. Furthermore, the choice of garments included to represent a period in the annals of costume may be based on the subjective judg-

Authors' addresses: Betty Wass, School of Family Resources and Consumer Sciences, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 53706; Joanne Eicher, 364a McNeal Hall, 1985 Buford Avenue, University of Minnesota, St. Paul 55108.

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analyzing languages. The family of Yoruba people is divided into three groups corresponding to the data were: (1) list (3) identify associations indigenous; (4) within the step 3; (5) identify items of dress relating social although the method was have potential for com-

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a stimulus for invoking, and ideas. Although all agree that dress is a part of the communications, few have studied the part that may be transmitted. A large body of material on costume, forms of dress and of dress have been the stimulus. Commonly referred to as not be modal at all in the of representing the dress of the population. To epitomize the dress seen worn by only a few rulers or sacrificial vic- special circumstances, royal portraits or garments or representa- preserved through the choice of garments in- period in the annals of on the subjective judg-

ment of the historian. However perceptive the analyst may be of the fashions of a particular time, the choice lacks quantitative and qualitative precision.

Insufficient data may make it difficult to be accurate about past modes of dress and, therefore, some information, however biased, is better than none. Nevertheless, future documentation of history of costume should aim toward objectivity in reporting not only forms worn but meanings conveyed and, in addition, the extent to which particular styles were worn. The anomalous garment which is interesting for its uniqueness should not be confused with fashions used by the majority of a population.

The methods to be described offer an approach to increasing objectivity in the analysis of history of costume. These techniques which were adapted to analyze non-Western dress could be applied to analyze the dress of any culture as well as any time period.

The Study

This research used an objective method for analyzing dress. Five generations of a Yoruba family in Lagos, Nigeria, from 1900 to 1974 were studied. Emphasis on an actual family illustrates a reality that differs from generalized description. Thirty individuals comprised the five generations. Although the population was limited, the extended family served as a microcosm of a segment of Yoruba society observed over time. Furthermore, study of an extended family increased the population beyond that of a nuclear family and still retained a broad range of characteristics common to many individuals to supply homogeneity.

The primary data were 607 photographs from the family photograph collection. All photographs which clearly showed full images of individuals were used. One key informant, a family member, provided the majority of the photographs as well as personal information about the individuals pictured and the occasions. Elderly relatives confirmed and supplemented the information.

The particular period of time is important because Africa as a whole has been exten-

sively subjected to forces of change during the past 80 years. Historian Quentin Bell (1976, p. 17) in asserting that fashion in costume is for the student of social change what the fruit fly is to the geneticist, said

Here at a glance we can perceive phenomena so mobile in their response to varying stimuli, so rapid in their mutation, that the deceptive force of inertia, which overlays and obscures most other manifestations of human activity, is reduced to a minimum.

Political change can serve as an indicator for social change. A review of Nigerian historical literature confirms that both social and economic changes have been largely dependent upon the political climate. As a result of surveying the social and political context of Nigeria, we divide the time span covering the photographs, 1900 to 1974, into three periods corresponding to the political sentiments of the time. Low nationalistic sentiment characterizes the period from 1900 to 1939 because the power of the British colonial government was relatively unchallenged by Nigerians. Increasing nationalistic fervor characterizes the second period, 1940 through 1959. The last period, 1960 to 1974, begins when Nigeria became an independent nation (1960) and Nigerians identified themselves more freely as "Nigerians."

Apparently no chronological history of African dress has been written. The descriptions of African dress which do exist usually focus on the dress of diverse peoples at vaguely specified times with emphasis on unusual forms used for rituals and ceremonies. This research not only develops a structural method for analyzing dress, but also provides specific descriptive data. The family collection of photographs depicts individuals whose statuses and roles are identifiable at specified times and who wore both ritual and non-ritual forms of dress (primarily the latter) for different events in their lives.

Philosophical and Hypothetical Framework

A conceptual framework for the analysis of dress was adapted from components used in

linguistic analysis. A basic assumption in the analysis of languages is that a language is a set of internalized principles which enable speakers of a language to exchange ideas by means of speech sounds. Principles or rules are defined as regularities in the structure of a language. Throughout linguistic analysis, emphasis is placed on discovering "regularities that underlie linguistic data, on recognizing pattern and structure" (Langacker, 1972, pp. 1-3). Researchers of nonverbal communication share an identical objective. The search for patterns or regularities is basic to the general aims of scientific inquiry; therefore, it is a primary objective shared by researchers of both verbal and nonverbal communication.

In the search for patterns in language, theorists posit the structure of language in terms of three major components: a syntactic component, a phonological component, and a semantic component (Chomsky, 1965, p. 16). The syntactic component is viewed as the base of a language and is composed of a set of rules and a corpus of items called morphemes or formatives used as elements in phrases or sentences. Combinations of items arranged according to rules will produce well-informed sentences in the judgment of a native speaker. The phonological component concerns the sound of the sentences. The semantic component provides the meaningful interpretation of these sentences. All three components are interrelated, however, making it difficult to isolate one component from the others. Rules may be found to explain the relationships of elements of each component; they summarize the linguistic knowledge of a native speaker of a language.

Thus, linguistic literature establishes a base for analyzing dress. Barthes (1967a and 1967b), Bogatyrev (1937/1971); Faris (1972) see dress and adornment as elements subjected to social prescriptions within a systemic whole. In other words, dress is rule-governed within a socio-cultural and temporal context. Certain combinations of types of dress are invariably found worn under particular conditions.

The rule-governed nature of dress implies that modes exist in a quantitative sense and that the socially prescriptive nature of modes

of dress worn by individuals links them to specific groups. One can presume that dress may differentiate persons according to the social structural characteristics such as age, sex, religion, marital status, education, and occupation. Members of the groups differentiated by dress represent common social roles and communication of roles involves sets of signs or symbols which must be learned within a societal context. Thus modes which differentiate groups are understood by those who have learned how roles of a particular society are conveyed through dress. Meanings may be derived from recording facts such as frequency with which particular garments are worn, by whom, and for what types of occasions. Establishing modes and concomitant meanings are critical to analysis of dress.

The Method

The method utilized for analyzing dress borrows from linguistic concepts discussed above. Fundamental to a language is sound. Sound is divided into discrete units called phonemes. A string of one or more phonemes composes a morpheme, the building block of syntax. The concept, morpheme, is useful in denoting aspects of dress that are the concern of historical analysis. The morpheme is further defined as the smallest sound/meaning correspondence in the structure of a language. A morpheme, for the most part, cannot be divided without destroying sound/meaning correspondence. As a working hypothesis, it is assumed that single clothing items are the "morphemes" of clothing analysis. Rather than having minimal sound/meaning correspondence, clothing items have minimal visual/meaning correspondence. Language depends primarily on an acoustic channel whereas manifestations of clothing are received mainly through a visual channel. Like morphemes, single garments if disassembled are no longer interpretable in the same light as "clothing." Each clothing item can be divided into small units of manifestation such as a sleeve, collar, or hem but the units become details which, by themselves, are not clothing. Details may be meaningful in themselves when identified specifically as to style of sleeve, style of collar or even chemical com-

position of fiber. However, these details are elements rather than structures and are not the focus for analysis.

Developing a Lexicon

An inventory of modes is developed from information about how the modes are combined into more complex structures. The lexicon is a list of modes. Linguists aim to identify the basic items contained in a language. In reality, the available data is less comprehensive than the data the researcher works toward. Syntax, the study of rules or principles that govern the formation of phrases to form sentences, is violated (Langacker, 1967, p. 16). If the rules are violated, the language will recognize morphemes as ungrammatical.

The conceptual model of dress is modeled from the syntactic components in the clothing items of the data of the study of dress. Information relating to the use of dress is included. As an example, the garment and sex of the person found universally. The lexicon developed for the study is shown in Table 1.

Identifying Modes

Individual clothing items are combined together in combinations are normal. For example, shirt, tie, trousers, are associated with the use to the extent that the use is upon combining so many of the most frequently found combinations which are described. Female and male combinations. To determine the frequency of use of combinations of females within the study is tabulated. A section on identifying frequency of use of combinations of males is shown in Table 2.

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position of fiber. However, in this study, garments rather than stylistic details provide the focus for analysis.

Developing a Lexicon

An inventory of morphemes with information about how the morphemes may be combined into more complex structures is called a lexicon. The lexicon is part of syntactic structure. Linguists aim to list in a lexicon all lexical items contained in a language but, in reality, the available data are usually much less comprehensive. Nevertheless, a researcher works toward identifying rules within the data. Syntax, simply defined, is the body of rules or principles for combining morphemes to form grammatical utterances (Langacker, 1967, p. 10). When rules of syntax are violated, speakers of a particular language will recognize the combinations of morphemes as ungrammatical.

The conceptual framework for analysis of dress is modeled from syntactical and semantic components in language analysis. All of the clothing items or forms visibly apparent in the data of the study are listed in a lexicon of dress. Information concerning associations relating to the use of each item is also included. As an example, association between a garment and sex of its wearer is a distinction found universally. An excerpt from the lexicon developed for the study of Yoruba dress is shown in Table 1.

Identifying Modes

Individual clothing items are often used together in combinations. Particular combinations are normally expected such as jacket, shirt, tie, trousers, or skirt and blouse. The association of one item with another clarifies use to the extent that there may be limits upon combining some items. Items combined most frequently follow associational conventions which are depicted as modes of dress. Female and male modes are two types of combinations. To establish modes, the frequency of use of an item by males and by females within the three time periods is tabulated. A section from the table enumerating frequency of use of garments by Yoruba males is shown in Table 2.

A second association basic to the dress of

the Yoruba population is the identification of indigenous dress versus Western dress. Western and indigenous cultural associations are used as they were designated by the key informant. Garments that are worn most frequently, according to the tally from Table 2 may be placed in categories of association denoting whether they are male indigenous, female indigenous, male Western, or female Western garments.

The items which appear most frequently in ensembles constitute the items within a mode. The number of items included within one mode is determined by counting the total number of visible garments worn by each in-

TABLE 1
Some torso coverings worn by Yoruba population studied.

Items of dress	Sexual association ^a
<i>Agbada</i> : large, loose, flowing robe or gown worn as an outer garment	Male
<i>Caftan</i> : a long tunic-type shirt, long-sleeved, may extend to the ankles	Male
<i>Dress, gown</i> : garment worn usually by women, consisting of a skirt and waist, made either separately or together, ^b shaped to fit some part of the torso	Both male and female
<i>Gbariye</i> : a man's gown made of many strips of fabric which taper from hemline to shoulder; the circumference of the hemline is a full circle	Male

^aAssociations apply only to the population of this study.
^bSource: American College Dictionary, rev. ed. (1951).

TABLE 2
Frequency of appearance of Yoruba male garments.

Garment	Time period		
	1900-1939	1940-1959	1960-1974
<i>agbada</i>	2	25	16
<i>buba</i>	6	27	30
<i>caftan</i>	0	0	2
<i>dress, gown</i>	3	4	2
<i>fila</i>	4	20	21
<i>hat (western, other)</i>	8	10	6

TABLE 3
Female modes of indigenous dress

1940-1959 (Total number of subjects: 167)			1960-1974 (Total number of subjects: 142)		
Items in mode	%	N ^a	Items in mode	%	N ^a
<i>iro</i>	45	(76)	<i>iro</i>	47	(67)
<i>gele</i>	37	(62)	earrings	44	(63)
<i>buba</i>	33	(56)	<i>gele</i>	36	(51)
earrings	25	(44)	<i>buba</i>	35	(49)
bracelet	25	(42)	neck chain	29	(38)
<i>ipele</i>	24	(40)	bracelet	26	(37)
shoes or sandals	23	(39)(30)	slippers	25	(36)
choker	14	(23)	handbag	18	(25)

^aThe sum does not equal the number of subjects because individuals who wear modal items do not necessarily wear each item in the modal composition.

dividual in every photograph within a time period and calculating the average. For example, in the study the average number of garments worn by females in the first period was six, but increased to eight in the second and third periods. Those garments worn most frequently in ensembles during one time period are the mode for that era. Female modes of indigenous dress for the second period (1940-1959) and the third period (1960-1974) are shown in Table 3. Garments are listed in the order of descending frequency. The change in the composition of modes from one period to the next is apparent.

Identifying Alternatives and Additions to Modal Items

Modes indicate meanings in that the ensemble constituting a mode conveys sexual and cultural associations (male/female, indigenous/Western) to the person who has learned the "language of dress" of culture. A step toward increasing knowledge about meanings of dress is identification of alternatives to various items. Several questions direct this stage of the exercise: What are the items that are worn at a particular body location? What items are additive and what items are alternatives? Do additive or alternative items change the meaning communicated by a composition of dress or do they paraphrase?

To answer the preceding questions, forms are identified in relation to location where

worn on the body and diagrammed according to the divisions of cultural and sexual associations by historical period. Figure 1 is a diagram including garments occurring in one modal pattern as well as garments worn by subjects who do not follow the mode.² In cases where two or more garments are worn in approximately the same area of the body, they are diagrammed as additions to one another. The data reported in the figure are more comprehensive than those considered in the mode designated previously for the period. The figure includes data pertaining to dress of the population which is discounted in the central tendencies revealed in modal patterns. Therefore, the rule-governed behavior indicated in modes of dress is expanded as in Figure 1 which includes garments that are alternatives or additions to those listed in modal combinations. Such a figure illustrates descriptive rather than prescriptive rules and reveals customs, not laws in the strict sense, because deviants from the rule are not formally punished. The example in Figure 1 features modal garments, alternatives and additions to male indigenous dress for 1940-1959; Figures 2 and 3 illustrate modes of indigenous dress for Yoruba women and men.

²Only six percent (38) of the individuals pictured did not exemplify one of the modal combinations of male or female, indigenous or Western dress. Therefore, the data of this study were charted comprehensively in twelve charts, four for each time period. See dissertation, pp. 177-188.

In Figure 1, the most frequent garment is the *sokoto* (a type occupies the left side of the are listed in the order of frequency from left to right. Those who wore the *sokoto* also wore the *buba* and the *sokoto*

Male, indigenous

Subjects: 142	
%	N ^a
47	(67)
44	(63)
36	(51)
35	(49)
29	(38)
26	(37)
25	(36)
18	(25)

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In Figure 1, the most frequently occurring garment is the *sokoto* (a type of trousers), and occupies the left side of the figure. Garments are listed in the order of descending frequency from left to right. Twenty-seven men who wore the *sokoto* also wore the *buba* (a loose pull-over top). Twenty-four men who wore the *buba* and the *sokoto* wore an *agbada*

(large gown) as well. Thus the *agbada* is an additional garment worn over the *buba*. The incidence is expressed with the addition sign (+) and the name of the added garment is placed to the right of the base garment. One man wearing *sokoto*, *buba*, and *agbada* added an *ibora* (covering cloth) as an addition to the *agbada*. One man replaced the

(N = 29)

FIGURE 1

Male, indigenous dress, 1940-1959 modal garments, alternatives and additions.

FIGURE 2

Yoruba woman's indigenous dress.

agbada with *gbariye* (fitted gown with circular hemline) and two men had no garments in addition to the *buba*. Headgear and footwear complete the typical ensemble. The absence of an alternative garment is represented by the blank symbol ($\emptyset$). The arrow ($\rightarrow$) indicates that an item replaced the previous item for the number of persons stated in parentheses. The cases where garments may have been present but cannot be seen because of the quality of the photographs are indicated as not visible (n.v.).³

Establishing Rules of Dress

Modal items and their variations are forms comprising a component in the analysis of forms and meanings of dress. Forms must be

³A complete set of figures diagramming modal dress, alternatives and additions, for the population of the study appear in Wass, 1975, pp. 177-188.

FIGURE 3

Yoruba man's indigenous dress.

designated first since meanings can be approached only through forms (Southworth and Daswani, 1974, p. 173).

Numerous meanings of "meaning" have been advanced by theorists concerned with the study of semantics. For purposes of analysis of dress, reference is made to a classic statement from the philosopher, Wittgenstein, who said, "Let the use of words teach you their meaning" (1968, p. 220^c). "Use" of items of dress is represented herein by responses to an investigation of what was worn by whom, when, and where. The "who" component is established by identifying categorical placements of sex, age, religion, education and occupation, marital status, and relationship of the individual to an event. "What" is the item or combination of items of dress. "When" and "where" are spatio-temporal factors of decade and occasion.

Combinations of items of dress seen frequently are expected to represent composi-

tions which satisfy a group and moral conventions comparably to combinations of language elements as they reveal limitations in the environmental constraints just upon environmental conditions. A particular item of dress combined with certain other items will be seen only on certain

The next step in analyzing rules or conventions, is a transition between identifying forms and meanings, because as environments under which items are used meaningful associations between environment can be predicted. offer a shorthand method of data into sets. Some symbols

$\supset$ if, ... then
 $\sim$ "no," the item is
 $/$ in the environment
 $\vee$ either, or
 $()$ the item is optional

Using the symbols, a set of identifying conventional usage of females in the first time period shown below:

1. Iro $\supset \sim$ buba / be
2. Iro $\supset$ buba / af
3. Iro $\supset$ ipele / be
4. Iro $\supset$ (ipele) / a
5. Iro $\supset \sim$ ipele / un

In the above example, that if the *iro* (wrapper) is not worn in the photograph before 1910. Statement *iro* is worn, then the *buba* 1910 in Lagos. Two pictures of indigenous dress before collection. Both are without 1910 only one woman out of the *iro* without the *buba*

FIGURE 3
indigenous dress.

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tions which satisfy a group's social, aesthetic, and moral conventions more or less comparably to combinations of morphemes that are judged to be grammatical. Patterned regularities in dress are subject to environmental constraints just as rules of syntax reveal limitations in the occurrence of language elements as they are dependent upon environmental conditions. For example, a particular item of dress may never be combined with certain other items or other items will be seen only on certain occasions.

The next step in analyzing data, recording rules or conventions, is a transitional step between identifying forms and disclosing meanings, because as environmental conditions under which items are used are described, meaningful associations between item and environment can be predicted. Logical symbols offer a shorthand method of condensing the data into sets. Some symbols are:

- ⊃ if, . . . then
- ~ "no," the item is not present
- / in the environment of
- v either, or
- () the item is optional

Using the symbols, a set of examples portraying conventional usage of three garments by females in the first time period of the study is shown below:

1. Iro ⊃ ~ buba / before 1910
2. Iro ⊃ buba / after 1910
3. Iro ⊃ ipele / before 1910
4. Iro ⊃ (ipele) / after 1910
5. Iro ⊃ ~ ipele / under age ten

In the above example, statements indicate that if the *iro* (wrapper) is worn, the *buba* is not worn in the photographs of the population before 1910. Statement 2 reads that if the *iro* is worn, then the *buba* is also worn after 1910 in Lagos. Two pictures of women wearing indigenous dress before 1910 exist in the collection. Both are without the *buba*. After 1910 only one woman out of 164 is seen wearing the *iro* without the *buba*. She is not from

Lagos. Statements 3 and 4 concern the *ipele*, a second wrapper worn over the *iro*. The *ipele* was always worn with the *iro* before 1910 but became optional after 1910. Statement 5 says that the *ipele* is not worn with the *iro* by a child who is less than ten years old.

Statements about jewelry worn by females in the third period of time follow:

1. Indigenous v Western dress ⊃ 2 v 3 neck jewelry / special occasion
2. Indigenous dress ⊃ (bracelets) / at home v under age ten
3. Indigenous v Western dress ⊃ bracelets / over age 16 in public
4. Western dress ⊃ (bracelets) / under age 16
5. Western v indigenous dress ⊃ ~ bracelets / funeral.

Statement 1 says that wearing two or three pieces of neck jewelry with either indigenous or Western dress indicates a special occasion. Statement 2 indicates that bracelets are optional if indigenous dress is worn by persons who are at home or who are under age ten. In statement 3, if either indigenous or Western dress is worn, then bracelets are also worn by persons over age 16 appearing in public. Statement 4 says that bracelets are optional on girls under age 16 if Western dress is worn, whereas statement 5 indicates that bracelets are not worn with either Western or indigenous dress at a funeral. The primary data indicate that numerous conventions in addition to sexual and cultural associations were adhered to during the three time periods of the study. Certain combinations of items are invariably found worn under particular conditions.

Discussion

Recording rules as sets of "do's" and "don't's" related to the social structural characteristics of persons in various social roles forces the researcher to become aware of conventions that might otherwise be unno-

ticed. In the case of cross-cultural research, rules may be taken for granted and overlooked by an informant who is a member of the culture being studied. Rules provide a base for further discussion between researcher and informants about nuances pertaining to conventions in dress.

Summary

Methods for analysis of languages serve as inspiration for analysis of the forms and meanings of dress. Steps which are essential in the procedure may be executed by researchers with no linguistic training and were executed in our research. Steps are: (1) prepare a lexical listing of all items worn; (2) calculate frequency with which each item is worn; (3) identify particular conditions (i.e., male and female dress) in which items worn most frequently are used; (4) determine modes; (5) amplify acceptable modal combinations by identifying alternate items or additional items used with modal forms; (6) develop rules of dress relating social roles and statuses to use of particular forms of dress.

Implications for Further Research

This research focussed on the dress of one West African culture but the method can be applied to analyze dress in any culture. Instead of focussing on exotic differences between cultures, the analytical technique emphasizes critical similarities. When a series of such analyses is made, these data would provide a potential base for structural cross-cultural comparisons.

The method also provides an objective means of obtaining data for further discussion of a qualitative nature. While emphasis is on modal dress, *all* garments within a population are recorded and the anomalies of dress, the diversions from the mode, offer another direction for research because such deviations frequently convey messages about the person that further differentiate the wearer by characteristics other than his dress. "... [T]he less probable a particular element is, the more meaning it has in that context ... " (Lyons, 1971, p. 415). Consistencies in dress

found throughout a population may convey less information because of the absence of contrastive features.

The analysis does require a substantial body of data. However, this is the general criteria for reliable research. Large photographic collections are ideal. In many cultures, such as among the Yoruba, extensive family photograph collections are common and prized. Sources such as newspaper and magazine advertisements; mail order catalogues (especially records of garments actually ordered); manufacturers' orders from retailers; records of retail sales of department stores, specialty stores, and others; and surveys on the street or at public and private events are other possible sources of data.

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Information Opinion

A self-designating scale was used to measure the frequency, type, and variety of fashion awareness, comprehension, and study. The demographic characteristics of the leaders and followers were also studied.

Both the leaders and followers consulted a greater number of sources for fashion information. Leaders consulted a greater number of sources than followers. Leaders and followers both consulted a greater number of sources than the marketer-dominated sources.

(Home Economics)

Rosemary Polegato and

Introduction

Success of a new clothing line is determined by adoption by enough people to result in mass acceptance; that is, a collective phenomenon. While manufacturers are somewhat concerned with brand name competition, the clothing lines and types of retailing to result in factors such as styling of more importance to the consumer. Much money, time, and effort each season by manufacturers to present the public with creations of potential.

According to King (1963), a leader, a specific type of opinion leader appears to define and endorse standards. In effect, the leader plays a tant role as the instigator of new

Authors' addresses: Rosemary Polegato, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6G1H2 Canada; Rosemary Polegato, Department of Consumer Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.