

# **The Mirror Dilemma**

UROP Report

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## **Abstract**

Dress advice is a common component in magazines and clothing advice books. Using dress advice extracted from the book *Dress Your Best*, and ratings derived from that advice, this paper will analyze the results of a study comparing subjective opinions of a subject's appearance given anonymously, and the objective ratings derived from the extracted dress advice. In other words, does following conventional dress advice actually make a difference in how a stranger perceives and judges your appearance and person. It will also briefly examine the research already done on similar topics, and the potential applications for this study in the retail and research fields.

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This study owes its beginnings to the research of my professor and project mentor, Dr. Lucy Dunne. For some time, she has been researching and recording wardrobe use and collecting books of dress advice. The wardrobe use project involved participants photographing their outfits every day, as well as cataloguing their entire wardrobe in a computer program Dr. Dunne had designed. The findings, though the study has not been published yet, indicate that people use a very small component of the clothing they own. (L. Dunne, personal communication, May 2011.)

The potential reasons for this disuse are many, but I decided to focus in on those relating to clothing advice and body type. That is, people don't know how to dress their body type in a way that pleases them, so they buy clothing that doesn't flatter them, and then don't wear it.

The advice books Dr. Dunne had contained all sorts of advice, from ridiculous tips on how to attract a man of a certain profession, to time-tested books like Carole Jackson's *Color Me Beautiful*, which gives each person a color profile based on skin tone. (Jackson, 1980).

I chose the book *Dress Your Best*, written by the hosts of the TV show *What Not To Wear*. It is organized specifically by body type, and outlines the basic visual principles that will help the different body types appear professional, proportionate and attractive. (Kelly, London, 2005).

## **b. Evaluation System**

Distilling this into a form that could be used to evaluate outfits objectively required me to extract the basic principles that the authors were using to dress their subjects. I had to ignore some of the extraneous advice they were giving to people based on their unique characteristics, and use the advice that related solely to their proportions.

Kelly and London's system basically involved determining where their subject's body was disproportionate, i.e. excess weight around the middle, or very small hips, and dressing them so as to draw attention away from the middle, or make the hips appear larger. An example of the rating system I developed is below:

Evaluating the proportions of an outfit on a woman with a "Curvy" figure, or where the hips and the bust are roughly the same circumference, and the waist is at least 7/10ths the size of the hips would use this questionnaire:

1. Does the outfit have a snug fit on the waist, bust, or hips? Y: 1 N: -1
2. Are there design features on the waist area? Y: 1 N:-1
3. Does the top appear to be too large or too small? Y: -1 N:1
4. Does the bottom appear to be too large or too small? Y:-1 N:1
5. If there are prints, do they draw the eye vertically? Y: 1 N: -1

So, when applied to the following photos of the same person with the "Curvy" body type, the ratings are as follows:

Photo 1:



1. Does the outfit have a snug fit on the waist, bust, or hips? N: -1
2. Are there design features on the waist area? N:-1
3. Does the top appear to be too large or too small? Y: -1
4. Does the bottom appear to be too large

or too small? N:1

5. If there are prints, do they draw the eye vertically? Y: 1



Rating: -1

Photo 2:

- 1.Does the outfit have a snug fit on the waist, bust, or hips? Y: 1

2. Are there design features on the waist area? Y: 1
3. Does the top appear to be too large or too small? Y: -1 N:1
4. Does the bottom appear to be too large or too small? N:1
5. If there are prints, do they draw the eye vertically? N: -1

Rating: 3.

Using this system, an evaluator can get a rough idea of how well a person has followed the principles of Kelly and London's advice. A score of 0 or lower is neutral to negative, while a score of 1 or higher is positive. The photos illustrate this well: the fitted nature of the blouse by itself makes the person appear much more proportionate, even more polished.

To obtain a large pool of results, I used the photos taken by Dr. Dunne's wardrobe study participants, cropped before I saw them to remove any identifying features, and rated them. A high-rating photo and a low-rating photo from each participant were then used in a survey with a wide range of anonymous participants. The mechanics and results of this survey comprise the next section.

## **2. Results**

### **a. Survey Platform/Mechanics**

The three pairs of photos were compiled into a survey composed of two parts: a subjective first portion, containing these questions:

1. Does this person look attractive?
2. Does this person look professional?
3. Does this person look proportionate?
4. Any other comments on the person's appearance:

The second portion was the body-type specific objective rating system derived from the advice. There was also a "screening" question requiring the worker to demonstrate some familiarity with the terms used and the concepts being applied.

These surveys were then posted to Amazon's Mechanical Turk website, which allows requesters to pay workers a few cents for completing a task taking a few minutes. The workers can be anyone, but to avoid linguistic confusion, I limited the worker pool to North America. The results are analyzed in the next section.

### **b. Summary of Findings**

There were three pairs of surveys, each representing a different body type: curvy, bigger on top, and not curvy. There are two outfits in each survey, one called "N", which does not follow the advice, and another labeled "Y", which does follow the advice. On average, the outfits labeled "N" got a 36% positive rating, combining both objective and subjective ratings, and those labeled "Y" had an 83% positive rating. The combined objective ratings were 13% positive for the "N" outfits, and

63% positive for the “Y” outfits. The subjective ratings of the outfits were 41% positive for the “N” outfits and 76% positive for the “Y” outfits. Though the percentages vary, there is always a higher percentage of positive ratings for the outfits that follow the advice.

## **Discussion**

### **a. Previous Research**

I can find no studies encompassing both body type and folk advice. There has been research on the type of body men prefer (Burris, Munteanu 2012.), and on the type of women who follow dress advice and fashion, (Summers, 1970), but nothing that I can find combining both advice and its efficiency as it relates to body type. This may be due to the inconsistent nature of dress advice, and the difficulties inherent in proving it by research. The success of a particular advice system tends to rest more on client testimony and appearance than any sort of scientific evaluation. However, given that evaluating folk advice is a little-known idea in the world of academic research, it may be interesting to see how some of the methods used in this study might or might not work when applied to a different type of folk advice.

### **b. Possible Applications**

Retail is the field that comes most quickly to mind when considering the possible applications of this type of research. Going green is a very present trend in marketing and retail, and a reliable, tested system of advice could help customers increase their satisfaction with a brand and reduce wardrobe waste by guiding

people to buy flattering clothes they would actually use: conserving resources and improving customer experiences at the same time. While some people find great enjoyment in choosing an outfit and have a distinct sense of what does and does not flatter them, most would probably like a little reliable advice.

The other possibility is that of creating an “advice profile app” which would guide a consumer through an in-depth process of analyzing their body type, and create a profile listing the styles, lengths and cuts most likely to flatter. They could then keep this on their phone or laptop while shopping, and use it to help them select clothing in any retail setting. I have searched for this type of app, but none exist to my knowledge. Color profiling as laid out in books like *Color Me Beautiful* could provide an even more thorough guide: color is arguably just as important as cut in a garment. I did consider testing the advice in *Color Me Beautiful* alongside that of *Dress Your Best*, but it would have required posting photos of a person’s face wearing makeup. The process for clearing use of identifiable photos in research stretched beyond the timeframe available to me, and so I did not pursue it, though it would be a fascinating subject for future research.

In the field of academic research, this type of study could prove interesting with other types of folk advice, as already stated. Doing more studies based on other advice systems, and comparing the results of different systems against each other could also clarify the efficiency of different approaches in dress advice.

Realistically, I would like to implement the things I’ve found in this study of advice into making some sort of style profile system, and if I could find a software designer willing to take it on, converting it into an app.

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