

Clothing, Revealing



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Synonyms

Barely there clothes; Body-conscious clothes; Body-hugging clothes; Body-revealing clothing/dress/outfit; Fuck me dress; Fuck me shoes; Half naked look; High-slit dress; Low-cut clothing; Mini skirt; Provocative clothing/dress/outfit; Revealing clothing/dress/outfit; Risqué clothing; Scantily clad look; Scanty dress; See-through dress; Seminude look; Sexually suggestive clothing/dress/outfit; Sexy clothing/dress/outfit; Sheer attire; Skimpy attire; Slutty look/outfit; Suggestive clothing; Tight-fitting dress

Definition

Clothing is an umbrella term encompassing a range of items made from natural and synthetic materials (e.g., fur, wool, and polyester) designed to cover various parts of the human body. Clothing serves three main functions (cf. Gilligan, 2010):

- Protective functions: Clothing shields the nude, unfurred human body from cold, sun, insects, and injury (e.g., snow boots, raincoat).
- Social functions: Clothing indicates persistent social categories or situational social roles related to sex/gender, marital status, sexual orientation/identity, class, race/ethnicity, occupation, or religion through specific textile designs, colors, and materials (e.g., bridal gown, police uniform, and priest's robe).
- Psychological functions: Clothing emphasizes or conceals symbolically and emotionally charged body parts (e.g., genitals, female breasts) for the purposes of decoration and display (e.g., penis gourd, push-up bra) or modesty and shame (e.g., long undergarments).

Revealing clothing—as a subset of clothing—concerns the psychological and social functions and connects dress with sexuality (Lennon et al., 2017). Revealing clothing is designed and worn more to emphasize rather than conceal the nude body, typically with a sexually suggestive intent and/or effect. Key features include tightness and stretchiness to accentuate body contours, sheer materials for transparency, and strategic cuts to expose significant areas of skin. Such garments may incorporate elements of kink and fetish cultures, like black leather, latex, or very high heels.

The perception and effect of revealing clothing is closely tied to the characteristics of the revealed

body and its conformity to gendered standards of beauty in the Western world, such as thinness with prominent breasts and buttocks and an hourglass silhouette (waist-to-hip ratio) for women and height and muscularity for men (e.g., Talbot, 2023). Wearing revealing clothing on a non-normative body can be a means of publicly challenging traditional body ideals, making visible the diversity of body types and asserting their normalcy, beauty, and desirability (e.g., in the body positivity and fat acceptance movements).

It is important to note that the concept of revealing clothing is often associated with heterosexual women. Many synonyms and slang terms for revealing clothing refer specifically to women's clothing (e.g., "fuck me heels"; "slutty outfit") and imply men or the male gaze as the target. However, revealing and sexually provocative styles are also present in men's fashion (e.g., muscle shirt, mesh shirt) and in the dressing practices of nonbinary and queer people: Gay men's culture has traditionally embraced tight clothing, while lesbian women's culture has tended toward looser, more masculine clothing to distinguish itself from heteronormativity (e.g., Clarke & Turner, 2007). However, a variety of lesbian styles is now recognized, including feminine styles with revealing clothing.

Introduction

Revealing clothing is relevant to the field of sexual psychology and behavior because its use is associated with sexual expression, perceived sexual intent, and ultimately, sexual behaviors (Lennon et al., 2017). The complex practices of wearing and evaluating revealing clothing in different historical, cultural, and interpersonal contexts can be explained by evolutionary and sociocultural theories that complement each other.

Different empirical methods are used in this field: Interviews (e.g., Pilcher, 2009) and surveys (e.g., Keys & Bhogal, 2018; Moor, 2010) are conducted with wearers and observers of revealing clothing. Laboratory experiments (e.g., Bernard & Wollast, 2019) are used to test hypotheses on the effects of revealing clothing. Apart from empirical studies with human participants,

relevant insights can also be gained from content analyses of media and public culture documents such as news reports, advertisements, and social media content (e.g., Döring et al., 2016).

Previous research suggests that revealing clothing can be a tool for sexual self-promotion as well as multifaceted nonsexual self-expression, but is also associated with the justification of sexual violence and the collective sexual objectification of girls and women.

Revealing Clothing as a Tool of Sexual Self-Promotion

From an evolutionary perspective, human behavior is often driven by the search for mates with the goal of reproduction. The most common strategies to increase one's mate value relative to rivals are self-promotion and competitor derogation. Self-promotion is the practice of emphasizing those characteristics that are most attractive to potential mates. Appearance is one such factor. Appearance enhancement through revealing clothing (that reveals both a fit body and sexual intent) can be understood as a self-promotion strategy typically used by women to attract men in mixed-sex mating contexts (Davis & Arnocky, 2022). Consistent with this theory, revealing clothing is often present in the context of social mixing (e.g., clubs and parties, date nights, dating apps, and social media). In surveys, some women report intentionally dressing to sexually arouse or seduce men, be it new acquaintances (e.g., Moor, 2010) or their committed partners (e.g., Craig & Gray, 2020).

In addition to attracting the attention of actual or potential mates, women in revealing clothing may be identified as rivals by other women and become targets of aggression (e.g., negative gossip, social exclusion, and slut shaming) due to negative affect (e.g., jealousy, envy) and/or strategic competitor derogation (Keys & Bhogal, 2018). Such antagonism occurs through direct communication, as well as on social media.

From an evolutionary perspective, wearing revealing clothing may be an effective self-promotion strategy for women to attract men, at the cost of likely antagonism from outperformed

female rivals or rejected potential male mates. While most research in this area has focused on women in mixed-sex-mating, some studies suggest that sexual self-promotion through revealing clothing also plays a role in same-sex mating (Davis & Arnocky, 2022). In gay communities, for example, club wear is largely synonymous with revealing clothing. Among heterosexual men, wearing revealing clothing and showing off a toned body (e.g., through a muscle shirt or tight-fitting dress shirt) also serves as sexual self-promotion to outperform rivals and attract female partners because muscularity is a fitness indicator. Research shows that muscular men perceive themselves as sexier to women and report more female sexual partners than less muscular men (Frederick & Haselton, 2007).

Revealing Clothing as a Tool of Multifaceted Self-Expression

In contrast to the evolutionary explanation of sexual intent and reproductive success, many women explain their decision to wear revealing clothing with other motives unrelated to the search for a mate: Wearing slim-fitting clothes may be an expression of the desire to look good, hot, fit, healthy, and accomplished in a normative way. Wearing a crop top may be a seasonal fashion statement. Wearing a see-through dress can be a celebration of body confidence. Wearing tight yoga pants can be part of a personal health and fitness journey. Wearing a miniskirt in a conservative cultural context and/or at an older age can be a political statement against oppressive gender roles and ageism. Wearing flamboyant and provocative clothing can be an expression of personality and creativity and can sometimes signify gender and sexual diversity. Wearing a miniskirt can be an expression of conformity to the athletic dress code in tennis. Wearing a catsuit can be an expression of admiration for a movie or a celebrity. Revealing clothing can also be a strategic tool used by female influencers and celebrities to generate public attention and scandals that can then be monetized (e.g., infamous “scandalous dresses” and breast-revealing “wardrobe malfunctions”).

All of these and other motivations can, individually or in combination, lead people to wear, enjoy, and/or benefit from sexy clothing even when they are not seeking sexual encounters. Several surveys show that women predominantly report nonsexual reasons for wearing revealing clothing (Moor, 2010). Field observations and qualitative interviews have shown that prepubescent girls who dress up in see-through shirts or high heels at home (Pilcher, 2009), roller derby athletes who wear tight uniforms (Beaver, 2016), and women who engage in revealing cosplay (i.e., costume play; Lucas, 2018) emphasize the pleasures of feeling confident, sexy, strong, and empowered through the clothing.

Various sociocultural theories of fashion, body image, body politics, gender and sexual identity, fandom, or the attention economy apply to the wearing of revealing clothing (e.g., Lennon et al., 2017). In line with these theories are the many instances of women complimenting and celebrating other women who present themselves in revealing clothing because they see them not as sexual rivals, but as helpful fashion or fitness inspiration, role models of liberation, empowerment, confidence, and body positivity, or because they share the same cosplay fandom. Women also often defend female wearers of revealing clothing against hostility and call out both “body shaming” and “slut shaming.” However, research also shows that male observers in particular often overlook the nuanced and nonsexual motivations behind revealing clothing and mistakenly assume sexual intent (e.g., Moor, 2010). Furthermore, some experiments show that both men and women tend to perceive and evaluate a woman in revealing clothing as more sexual and less intellectually competent compared to a woman in conservative clothing (Smith et al., 2018).

From a sociocultural perspective, wearing revealing clothing can be seen as a multifaceted form of self-expression. In addition to sexual intent, several nonsexual motives can lead people to wear revealing clothing and can even create nonsexual social bonds between wearers. However, some observers seem to disregard the various motives and tend to sexualize the wearers of revealing clothing.

Revealing Clothing as an Issue of Justification of Sexual Violence

Misattributed sexual intent has often been used as an excuse or justification for sexual violence by men against women (Johnson et al., 2014; Lennon et al., 2017). In rape cases in particular, the clothing of the victim is regularly scrutinized both in the court of law and in the court of public opinion. If she wore revealing clothing, it is assumed that she deliberately invited sexual attention and advances from men. The perpetrator of sexual violence can then excuse the act of violence as a mere “misunderstanding” for which he cannot be held solely responsible, since he was essentially tricked into believing that the woman was “sexually available.” Research considers the belief that women in revealing clothing are basically “asking for it” to be one of several distinct rape myths (Rerick et al., 2019).

Just being visible as a woman in public places can attract unwanted male attention and harassment (e.g., catcalling, staring, non-consensual touching), which may increase with more feminine or revealing attire. In response, women report engaging in so-called safety work, including avoiding revealing or even feminine clothing in public (for example, intentionally wearing an oversized hoodie and wide pants on public transportation) to reduce the risk of harassment (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Against this background of pervasive public sexual harassment, clothing choices become a strategy of risk management, with many adolescent girls and women feeling obliged to dress in ways that make them less visible and less attractive in order to feel safer in public spaces.

As a result, research on public sexual harassment, rape myths, and victim blaming calls for better sexual consent education and the debunking of clothing-related misogynistic beliefs that feed into a so-called *rape culture*, in which rape and sexual harassment are normalized, minimized, or excused by factors unrelated to the perpetrators.

Revealing Clothing as an Issue of Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification theory asserts that in male-dominated societies, girls and women are often viewed and treated as sexual objects, at the expense of their personality, dignity, and humanity (Ward et al., 2023). Collective sexual objectification according to this theoretical framework can be observed in the media and popular culture (e.g. music, film, advertising, social media, and pornography), which predominantly promote girls and women who conform to increasingly sexualized standards of beauty. Against this background, the promotion and use of revealing clothing is often problematized as an affirmation of sexual objectification (for literature reviews see Johnson et al., 2014; Lennon et al., 2017). A content analysis of $N = 5666$ clothing items from webshops for children's clothes found that 29.4% of girls' clothes were fully or partially sexualized, including items such as push-up bras, leopard-print miniskirts, ultra-short shorts, and tiny string bikinis (Goodin et al., 2011). Content analyses of $N = 288$ mobile phone magazine advertisements and of $N = 500$ Instagram self-portraits (selfies) showed that the majority of depicted women (79.5% and 59.4%) were displayed in sparse clothing, whereas only a minority of men were depicted this way (20.5% and 40.6%; Döring et al., 2016, Table 4). According to the sexual objectification perspective, the wearing of revealing clothing is not so much a self-determined choice by girls and women, but rather a result of gendered norms and expectations in a hypersexualized or even “pornified” society that makes women internalize objectifying norms and engage in *self-sexualization*.

Public debates and academic research on revealing clothing are closely linked to gender issues, since it is primarily women who are perceived as wearing revealing clothing with the ambivalent consequence of praise for their sexiness and blame for their sluttishness. Feminist evaluations of the woman in revealing clothing are ambivalent (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013):

Is she brainwashed by patriarchy to willingly present herself as a mere sexual object for men? Or is she consciously transgressing repressive norms of female modesty and proudly presenting herself as a self-determined sexual subject? Beyond gender, evaluations of provocative clothing and its wearers are linked to other categories of social inequality such as race/ethnicity, class, and sexual minority status.

Research informed by intersectional feminism (e.g., Paasonen et al., 2020) challenges claims of universal sexual objectification and self-objectification that nullify any valuable agency when it comes to clothing choices and sexual expression. The following example from popular culture may illustrate this point: The music video for the song WAP (Wet-Ass Pussy, 2020) features rappers Cardi B. and Megan Thee Stallion and has gathered more than 500 million views on YouTube. The two voluptuous black women, in highly sexualized clothing and pose, are singing lines such as “Spit in my mouth, look at my eyes. This pussy is wet, come take a dive.” But contrary to assumptions of objectification, the video can be understood as symbolizing subjectification: The artists present themselves as confident and sexually demanding actors, telling their supposedly male objects of desire exactly what they want from them. The entire video is sexualized in an agentic and unapologetic way, focused on receiving pleasure and female allyship. Both female rappers do not primarily address men but have a strong fan base of young women. From an intersectional feminist perspective, it is more plausible to read the video featuring powerful artists in revealing clothing as an expression of female sexual agency rather than objectification (Paasonen et al., 2020).

Research rooted in radical feminism rejects sexual presentations and self-presentations of women in revealing clothing as genuinely harmful expressions of objectification and dehumanization by and for men (Ward et al., 2023). Research rooted in intersectional feminism rejects a simple gender binary, points to the diversity of subgroups among women including women who desire women, and emphasizes agency in dress choices and sexual

behavior even in societies that have not yet achieved gender equality (Paasonen et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Revealing clothing is a complex phenomenon. It can be a tool of sexual self-promotion and multifaceted nonsexual self-expression that may foster reproductive success as well as sexual and overall well-being. However, revealing clothing is also associated with the justification of sexual violence and sexual objectification including self-objectification. Literature reviews (Johnson et al., 2014; Lennon et al., 2017) show that previous research has focused more on the harmful rather than the beneficial aspects of revealing clothing and has predominantly examined women wearers in mixed-sex contexts. Future research could address the use of revealing clothing in more diverse populations, and provide a more balanced perspective on negative and positive experiences that recognizes girls and women’s agency despite conflicting norms regarding appropriate dress.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Bodily Attractiveness](#)
- ▶ [Body Image](#)
- ▶ [Breasts: Female Attractiveness](#)
- ▶ [Clothing and Sexual Restriction](#)
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- ▶ [Sexual Double Standards](#)
- ▶ [Veiling](#)

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