



Haoles in Hawai'i: Reducing Negative Distinctiveness through the Hawaiian Shirt  
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## Introduction

Kaiser and Green (2021) argue that studies of dress and identity need to move beyond the knots to the knots; that is, a deeper exploration of the complexity of identity rather than *X is not Y*. The use of Hawaiian shirts to construct and display identity in Hawai'i through the racial/ethnic categories of Hawaiian, local, and haole provides for this type of exploration. On the surface it appears that Hawaiian shirts worn by haoles are not what Hawaiians and locals wear, but upon closer inspection, one begins to understand the knots that tie together and unravel notions of identity among an archipelago in the Pacific Ocean.

## Literature

Hawai'i's fraught history from independent kingdom to colony of the United States of America has yielded an ethnically-diverse population. There is no dominant race and many people would be categorized as "mixed." However, race/ethnicity is experienced differently than on the mainland USA, as the population identifies themselves as Hawaiian (the indigenous population), local (descendants of mostly Asian contract workers), or haole (Hawaiian word meaning foreign, has come to mean white person) (Rohrer, 2010). Haoles are further separated into three categories: good haole (embraces Hawaiian and local values and customs), dumb haole (earnest, but not acclimated to Hawaiian and local values and customs), and f---ing haole (disrespectful to Hawaiian and local values and customs) (Rohrer, 2010).

The visually-impactful Hawaiian shirt originated with the tailor shops in Chinatown, Honolulu in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and quickly became a souvenir for visitors (Morgado, 2003). Arthur (2006) has noted how the Hawaiian shirt is an amalgamation of different ethnic textiles and shirt styles. Aesthetic preferences have been noted between tourists and residents (Arthur, 2006; Morgado & Reilly, 2012). A unique identifier between them is that residents wear reverse shirts, where the shirt is constructed with the "wrong" side of the fabric facing out, in order to give it a muted look. However, questions about how ethnic identity of residents of the Hawaiian Islands impact the perception and consumption of the Hawaiian shirt remain and how newly arrived residents navigate the cultural codes of the Hawaiian shirt linger.

## Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that identity is created by people when aligning with similar others or distancing themselves from different others. The process includes categorization based on a common characteristic; alignment with others based on the common characteristic; and social comparison, which results in positive or negative distinctiveness (Festinger, 1954). Minimizing differences can be used to lessen negative distinctiveness. Thus, in this study, it is assumed that when white men move to Hawai'i they learn about the ethnic categories of Hawaiian, local, and haole, and experience their whiteness differently from

elsewhere. To minimize the difference between the three groups, white men learn about Hawaiian shirt aesthetics and related codes that help facilitate the image of a good haole.

#### Method

This study used hermeneutical phenomenological approach which provides for the lived experiences of individuals gathered through interview data and interpreted to understand lived meaning (Heidegger, 1996; Husserl, 1970). Participants were recruited through posts on social media and word-of-mouth. Sixteen men (four Hawaiian, five local, and seven haole) were interviewed for this study. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom and lasted 15-90 minutes. The interviewer took notes during the interview, typed them after the interview commenced, and asked the interviewee to check for accuracy. Data saturation was achieved. Data were then analyzed by the interviewer and grouped by theme using an inductive method. This method was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's university.

#### Results

Hawaiian and local men generally preferred imagery, such as Polynesian and oceanic motifs, or shirts that told a mo'olelo or told a story that represented the culture of Hawai'i. Hawaiian and local brands were especially important to both groups as well. Both groups were also prone to muted colors and reverse shirts to express their respective identity. Hawaiian men, in particular, noted preference for Hawaiian-owned brands. Haole men began their residency in Hawai'i wearing prints more commonly preferred by visitors but came to change their preferences through learning about the shirt through friends, co-workers, or self-education. They came to appreciate and respect the muted aesthetics and reverse shirts to show they embrace customs and values of Hawai'i in an effort to "fit in."

#### Discussion & Conclusion

In line with Tajfel and Turner (1979), Hawaiian shirts were used as a marker of social identity. Hawaiian and local men were attuned to the history of the shirt and the customs by virtue of it being a "uniform" of sorts in the Hawaiian Islands and used it to show their ethnic identity. Haoles, however, had preconceived notions about aesthetics of the Hawaiian shirts based on television, film, and tourism media before moving to the islands. Upon moving to Hawai'i and realizing their assumptions were based on stereotypes and positioned them as outsiders, haoles changed their Hawaiian shirt aesthetics to minimize negative distinctiveness. This facilitated the perception of them as the good haole, as opposed to the dumb or f---ing haole. Haoles experience their whiteness differently than in other parts of the United States of America and undergo a rite of passage which aids in their acclimation to a new culture and social structure.

Although this participant size is small compared to qualitative research methods, it does provide value in un-knotting identity (Keiser & Green, 2021) through first-hand experiences. It demonstrates how white men construct social identity in a situation where they are not the dominant race. Further research is needed to explore other aspects of identity, such as Hawaiian men's attitudes towards the shirt that some Hawaiians view as from an oppressive culture, but which are worn as a marker of Hawaiian identity.

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