

Fashion countdown to Halloween:

A study of dress practices within Halloween consumer culture

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Halloween has become an important part of American popular culture (Amin, 2019; Rogers, 2002; Yousaf, 2021). In the United States, Halloween is the second-most celebrated holiday after Christmas and the second-most important for retailers (Rogers, 2002; Yousaf, 2021). A rise in enthusiasm for the holiday is evidenced in the growth of 1) increases in participation (69% of consumers planned to celebrate Halloween in 2022 as opposed to 65% in 2021; and 2) expected Halloween spending, estimated to be \$10.6 billion (an average of \$100 per consumer) in 2022, exceeding the \$10.1 billion in 2021; National Retail Federation (Watts, 2022, September 19). In recent years, consumers have started celebrating Halloween earlier by shopping for Halloween merchandise in September or before (Watts, 2022, September 19) and decorating their homes as early as September 1st (Poe, 2022, October 25). Also, some consumers started wearing Halloween fashion products earlier (Jade The Libra, 2021, October 23).

Halloween fashion products include clothing, accessories, and body modifications: nail treatments, hair color, and cosmetics containing Halloween symbols or colors. Regarding holiday fashion products (e.g., ugly Christmas sweaters), it may be an obvious social norm to reserve wearing for them for related occasions such as holiday work parties (Barclay, 2017). However, Halloween fashion intersects with the Goth subculture and Horror fan culture, whose members integrate Halloween symbols into their everyday dress (Newman, 2018). Thus, Halloween products may allow consumers to subtly express their enthusiasm through dress in the period leading up to Halloween (Jade The Libra, 2021, October 23). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate the timing at which consumers start wearing subtle and explicit Halloween products.

Studies exploring relationships between self-expression and social context include investigations of motivations for wearing subtle fan-themed apparel (closet cosplay) versus explicit forms (graphic t-shirts with recognizable logos and characters) within formal, casual/leisure, and occupational settings (Smith et al., 2020; 2021). However, timing is an overlooked area in research (Dutton & Diehl, 2019). More specifically, apart from wearing retro/revival dress styles (Potts & Reeves-DeArmond, 2014), timing has seldom been considered a factor driving dress practices. By considering timing as a motivating factor, we may understand the importance of timing as a contribution to the social context that influences dress practices. We may also gain insight into the growing Halloween consumer culture.

Methods and Procedure

In this exploratory study, concepts relating to Stone's (1962) theory of the appearance of the self, program (the respondents' response to their own appearance) and review (others' verbal or non-verbal reactions to the respondent's appearance), guided qualitative survey design to elicit responses that would indicate when it is socially-acceptable to wear Halloween products. To

gather perspectives from both Halloween enthusiasts (HE) and the general population (GP), participants were recruited online via Facebook through posts in public and private Halloween interest groups (HE) and via MTurk (GP). Sixty-two usable survey responses (40 from MTurk and 22 from Facebook) were collected via Qualtrics. All respondents resided in the United States and were 18 years of age or older with an average age of 33 years and were primarily Caucasian, female, married, college-educated with a discretionary income between \$500 and \$749.00. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis: all data were first examined to see which data fit within concepts of the coding frame (i.e., program, review, etc.); successive parts of the data were classified as instances of categories within the coding frame and then compared (Schreier, 2012). Two researchers coded the data in Microsoft Excel and then met and agreed on the meaning and interpretations of the data to increase reliability (Creswell, 2007).

Results and Discussion

HE and GP indicated they wanted to communicate their enthusiasm for the holiday (their program). Responses included “I like Halloween” and “I love the holiday and love to celebrate it.” However, some responses from HE differed, including, “It’s spooky season!” which indicated greater anticipation for a holiday. Most respondents indicated they begin wearing Halloween products around the beginning of October. However, one HE mentioned wearing Halloween-related items such as their “skeleton and hatchet earrings” year-round. Others mentioned they began wearing Halloween products as early as June or September, some of which indicated that they wore Halloween products not only to express enthusiasm for Halloween but to give off “Goth energy” or as part of their usual Goth aesthetic, confirming that Halloween fashion expresses related identities (Newman, 2018). In addition, HE more frequently reported negative reviews/feedback, and such comments included, “A bit early for Halloween, yeah?”

In contrast, most members of the GP reported that they were validated when receiving positive feedback, which included “compliments on Halloween clothing” and “[my] Halloween gear usually makes them [others] smile,” indicating that GP respondents were wearing Halloween products within an accepted timeline between October 1st and October 31st. However, one GP respondent stated, “A month to two weeks, they say it is too early to wear Halloween stuff already.” Thus, there is a lack of consensus regarding when it is appropriate to wear Halloween products, which may be explained by Dutton and Diehl’s (2019) findings: attitudes toward the timeliness of holiday promotions were more favorable when the consumer planned to celebrate the holiday. However, based on the current study’s findings, the perceived timeline for acceptability for wearing Halloween products depends on the individual’s enthusiasm for the holiday. Therefore, HE’s higher enthusiasm drives them to wear Halloween products earlier than members of the GP, who have less enthusiasm for the holiday.

The subtle versus explicit nature of Halloween products worn likely affected the reviews respondents received. Both HE and GP indicated that they begin celebrating Halloween by incorporating smaller, more subtle accessories such as hair, jewelry, and nail polish. As Halloween approached, respondents noted donning “shirts and clothing more identifiable as being related to Halloween” (GP) and other items “with more obvious nods to Halloween” (HE).

These findings mirror those of studies where more subtle forms of dress were worn in social settings where opportunities for self-expression were more restricted (Smith et al., 2020; 2021). However, in the context of this study, the timing restricted the level at which wearers could express their enthusiasm for Halloween earlier in the year but allowed for more freedom in expressing their enthusiasm by wearing clothing and accessories more explicitly related to Halloween as Halloween day approached.

Conclusions, Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

This research contributed an important theoretical implication regarding timing and social context. One limitation of this research was the difference in the quality of Facebook versus MTurk data; as a result, this study served as a pilot study in which lessons learned will inform future research and survey design. Future researchers may investigate economic factors driving purchases of Halloween products. It has been theorized that the increase in demand and sales of Halloween merchandise may be explained by the “lipstick index,” in which consumers “splurge” on small, inexpensive luxuries during economic hardship (Lebow, October 27, 2022, para 7).

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