

The Effect of Women's Suggestive Clothing on Men's Behavior and Judgment: a field study

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Summary.

Numerous studies have shown that men overestimate the sexual intent of women based on their clothing style; however, this hypothesis has not been assessed empirically in a natural setting. This small field study measured the time it took for men to approach two female confederates sitting in a tavern, one wearing suggestive clothes and one wearing more conservative clothes. The behavior of 108 men was observed over 54 periods on 16 different nights in two different taverns. The time it took for the men to approach after initial eye contact was significantly shorter in the suggestive clothing condition. The men were also asked by male confederates to rate the likelihood of having a date with the women, and having sex on the first date. The men rated their chances to have a date and to have sex significantly higher in the suggestive clothing condition. Results are discussed with respect to men's possible misinterpretation that women's clothing indicates sexual interest, and the risks associated with the misinterpretation.

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Several studies have suggested that women and men differ in their perceptions of sexual intent of the opposite sex. For example, men are more likely than women to perceive social interaction between two individuals of the opposite sex in sexual terms (Abbey, 1987; Shotland & Craig, 1988), and specifically, men tend to misinterpret the sexual interest of women based on their clothing. Abbey (1987) found that men were more likely than women to interpret a low-cut top, shorts, tight jeans, or no bra as indicator of sexual receptiveness. Abbey, Cozzarelli, McLaughlin, and Harnish (1987) reported that female targets who wore revealing clothing were rated by men as more sexy and seductive than women wearing nonrevealing clothing. Koukounas and Letch (2001) reported that an actress who wore more revealing clothing was perceived by male observers as having more sexual intent than did the female observers.

These latter studies seem to show that men misinterpret women's sexual intent according to their clothing appearance. However, these studies used photographs of women wearing or not wearing sexually evocative clothing, and men were instructed to rate the women's sexual intent with the help of a scale. Thus, the effect of women's suggestive clothing on men's behavior in more ecological conditions still remains in question.

The present experiment tested the above relationships in a field setting, with several female confederates wearing sexually evocative clothing seated in a bar. Men's spontaneous approach behavior toward them was measured and shortly afterwards the men were also asked to evaluate their chance to have a date with the female confederate and to have sex with her on the first date. It was expected that men would be significantly faster in approaching women with suggestive clothing, and would rate both the probability of having a date, and having sex on the first date, higher for women with suggestive clothing.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 108 Caucasian young men ($M = 21.4$ yr., $SD = 2.9$) seated in two bars located in the center of Vannes, a medium-sized resort town (70,000 inhabitants) on the Atlantic coast in France.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted between 8:30 p.m. and midnight for eight Wednesday and eight Saturday nights. Three 1-hr. sessions were conducted each night: 8:30–9:30 p.m., and 9:45–10:45 p.m., 11:00–12:00 p.m. The first session began in one bar, the second began in the second bar, and the third session was carried out again in the first bar. The choice of the first bar was made randomly each night. As a result, 54 observational periods were obtained (2 days per week \times 9 wk. \times 3 sessions daily).

Two male observers (20 yr. old) were seated in the bar during each session. Two women confederates (one 20 yr. old, the other 21) volunteered to participate. For the 16 nights during which the experiment was conducted, both of the women confederates wore suggestive clothing (very short skirt, off-the shoulder tight-fitting top, and plunging neckline) or nonsuggestive clothing (a long skirt and a blouse) and entered the bar together. The clothing conditions were randomized. With the exception of their clothing, the women confederates did not change their make-up and hairstyle, and wore the designated style of clothing for an entire evening. The women were instructed to try to sit at a free table near the bar at which single men usually stood. The two young male observers took their places in the bar at a table from which they could observe the bar and the tables. The female confederates were instructed to sit down and start talking without exhibiting interest toward anybody else present in the environment. When they were seated, one of the observers turned on a chronometer and stopped it when one of the two women confederates crossed her arms to signal that a man had made contact. The second male observer was instructed to carefully observe the men who were seated near the two women confederates and who glanced sideways at them but did not approach them. A man's behavior was considered to be a contact if he directed a verbal statement toward one of the two female-confederates (e.g., sentences such as, "Hello," "Hello, I've never seen you here before," "Hello, what are you two talking about?").

When verbal contact was made by a man, one of the women confederates was instructed to say, "Hello, we are waiting for someone who will probably arrive in one or two minutes. My friend and I have a lot to discuss ... Another time perhaps?" It was found that this stopped further interaction, and the man left the two women confederates alone. If there were no male contacts after 60 min., the female confederates left the bar. When the two women left the bar, one observer also went out, while the other approached each man who had previously gazed at the confederates. Each man was solicited to answer a short survey about the female confederates. The confederate refreshed the participant's memory by giving a brief description of the two women as well as pointing out where they had been sitting in the bar.

The participants were asked orally to evaluate the probability of having a date with one of the two female-confederates if such opportunity arose, and the probability that this woman would agree to have sex on the first date. Each evaluation was made on a semantic scale with nine steps. The first scale measured the probability of having a date with one of the two confederates: “I think that the probability of having a date with one of those two women would be” 1: No probability to 9: High probability. The second scale measured the probability that the woman confederate would agree to have sex: “I think that this woman would agree to have sex with me on the first date” 1: No probability to 9: High probability. After responding, the participant was asked for his age and debriefed.

RESULTS

The three dependent variables measured in this experiment are presented in Table 1 along with the analyses and effect sizes. An independent Student t test was performed to compare the means of the two experimental conditions for each dependent variable. A significant difference was found for each measure: the mean lapse of time before contact was significantly shorter for the suggestive clothing condition, and the mean ratings of the probability of having a date and of having sex on the first date were higher for that condition (See Table 1).

Table 1: Means, SD of latency (minutes) of men’s approach, probability of having a date with a female-confederate and probability of having sex on the first date with a female-confederate.

Measure	Suggestive clothing n = 27		Non suggestive clothing n = 27		Student independent test
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	
Male approach time latency, min	4.5	2.3	17.7	9.3	t(52) = 7.18, p =.00000001, d = 1.99, t 95%CI (5.2-10.8)
Probability of a date, rating 1-9	7.9	0.6	6.2	0.8	t(52) = 8.42, p =.000000004, d = 2.34, t 95%CI (6.4-10.4)
Probability of having sex on the first date, rating 1-9	7.3	0.7	5.2	0.9	t(52) = 9.80, p =.00000000006, d = 2.72, t 95%CI (7.8-11.8)

Correlations were calculated between the ratings of probability of a date and of having sex on the first date. The measures were highly and significantly correlated in the suggestive clothing condition ($r_{27} = .72, p < .001, 95\% CI .47, .87$) and in the nonsuggestive clothing condition ($r_{52} = .80, p < .001, 95\% CI .61, .91$).

DISCUSSION

Using a behavioral measure in a field setting, men approached the female confederates faster when the women wore suggestive clothing and the men rated the probability to have a date or to have sex with them at a higher level. These findings are similar to previous findings that showed target women who wore more revealing clothing were perceived by male observers as having more sexual interest (Koukounas & Letch, 2001). Men's misinterpretation of women's sexual interest according to their clothing could explain why men approached the female confederates in the suggestive clothing more rapidly in the present study. This behavioral effect is consistent with the finding that in the case of sexual assault men attribute more responsibility to a woman who wears sexually oriented clothes, and interpret the clothing as indicating she has sexual interest and is even responsible for eliciting sexual behavior (Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986).

The study has some obvious limitations. Only two women confederates were tested, the sample size was small, and it is difficult methodologically to obtain unobtrusive and uncontaminated ratings to additional questions in a bar situation. Thus, it is questionable whether the results can be generalized. However, this line of research can potentially elucidate men's sexual assumptions and behavior with respect to women's clothing styles, and perhaps aid in prevention of sexual coercion and violence.

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