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Wellbeing: Fashion expressed from the inside-out!

Introduction

Many sociological, psychological and religious reasons are discussed in fashion literature for the wearing of dress some are expressed as the need for 'Modesty.' Key explanations include J.C. Flugel (1930) who argued from a psychoanalytical perspective that 'Fashion is a self-renewing compromise between modesty and eroticism'. (Wilson; 2003, p94) This is based on Judaeo-Christian teachings, which concluded that 'woman' is associated with temptations, and immodest dress is one way of attracting men. From a sociological identity viewpoint Entwistle (2000; p112) and Finkelstein (1991, p128) discuss clothes as a symbolic expression of gender, status and morality. In the last decade there has been a growth of fundamentalist religious schisms, partly explained as a consequence of society's apparent deteriorating interest in moral values. These fundamentalist religious fashions are seen on the streets of London and other cities; they are also well represented by all the media. Hollander considers fundamentalist religion dramatically differentiates the dress styles between genders making women's appearance more modest and feminine. (1994, p79) This paper aims to evidence a new paradigm for 'Modesty' dress based on the Orthodox Jewish view of this style being an expression of

personal 'inner wellbeing' and not patriarchal or religious repression. Manolson writes on the notion of "internality" that clothes are a communication of the innermost self and in order to project your identity to the Jewish community and 'other' secular outsiders you need to draw attention to who you are on the inside – your inner-most being. (2008, pp1-5) Three research questions have emerged from the literature:

1. Can female Jewish-Orthodox Modesty dress be considered as an expression of 'inner wellbeing'?
2. Is the wearing of Modesty dress a personal choice or an imposed ritual compliance?
3. Can Modesty dress be considered as a counter-culture, anti-fashion statement to modernity?

This text commences with discourse analysis of 'Modesty' fashion and 'spiritual wellbeing', followed by methodological discussion. The study sample group is twenty 6th form school girls of mixed levels of religiosity and a *Rabetzin* (Rabbi's wife/religious educator). The 6th form girls completed questionnaires and the *Rabetzin* gave an in-depth interview. Some of the respondents adhere to 'Modesty' dress for reasons of compliance and others value their dress as an expression of their 'inner' spirituality. The qualitative data analysis is compared with the discourse analysis to ascertain if the Orthodox sector of society can be considered as having 'spiritual wellbeing' through their Jewish 'Modesty' identities.

Faith and fashion

The Jewish translation of 'Tseni'ut' (Modesty) is not just applied to clothing but includes an encompassing religious code of ideology, behaviour and attitudes in all

aspects of life which translates into English as 'Modesty' and is generally applied *just* to dress. (Manolson, 2008; p1 and Henkin; 2003; p 1). The Jewish view is that man and woman had perfect vision of both the 'outer' and 'inner self' as being inseparable but after the first time they sinned, they felt instinctively the need to put on clothes. Therefore 'Modesty' as a dress style is traced back to Judeo-Christian teachings about Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden and how after the original sin their nakedness filled them with shame. Many fashion writers discuss this as the key roots of 'Modesty' dress including Davis (1992, p 62) Entwistle (2000, pp 148-49) and Wilson (2003, p 9). Calefato (2004, p 19) considers this category of traditional dress as 'covering the body in "clothes of containment"', which infers an unpleasant form of imprisonment or suppression for Orthodox Jewish women. Barnard devotes a chapter to 'Modesty and Concealment' (1996; pp 51-68) and discusses not only the Judeo-Christian origins of fashion as a form of concealment for naked shame but also how it is 'used to introduce the idea that one of the functions of clothing...is to distinguish masculine from feminine:' (1996; p 51). The religious code of Jewish 'Modesty' dress affirms that there is a clear identification between the genders. Men and women should always dress differently and this is interpreted as women not wearing trousers or any apparel that could be intentionally designed for men (Ross, 2007). Apart from that differentiation, according to Green's general observations on Jewish styles 'There is no special dress for a woman as long as she remembers the requirements of Modesty. That means high necks, and always covering...knees and elbows – which entails long sleeves and skirts.' (2001; pp 139)

Modesty dress as anti-fashion

Entwistle discusses how dress and the body are used to articulate differences from mainstream society, especially 'Groups that are worried about threats to their cultural or national boundaries...' (2003; p 15) This is extended to the religious Hassidic community who dress in a way that references their 18th century ancestors in time and place with Russian/Polish noblemen-styled boots, hats and frock-coats. This dress is frozen in time, worn whatever season or geographic location to show separation. Davis writes 'Not only does dress serve as testimony to the group's solidarity and oneness with their religious beliefs, but it quite purposefully erects a barrier to interaction with others...keeping the group relatively isolated and safe...' (1992; p 181) Hassidic women use symbolic dress distinctions across national and religious boundaries to represent their personal female interpretative struggle of 'Tzniuth' (Modesty) within their community. (Goldman Carrel; 1999, pp 13) Here we return to Entwistle's discussion on alternative dress related to the 19th century Utopian movement but which I apply to religious Jewish groups 'Alternative dress is 'alternative' in relation to prevailing styles and also, in some cases, in relation to lifestyle....which 'marked their difference from outsiders, thus acting as a powerful indicator of shared values and community boundaries' (2003; p 48). Unfortunately much of society translates 'Modesty' literally as having negative connotations of less than excellence, or weakness as in "he had modest skills." (Safran, 2007, p23) Therefore the old world Judeo-Christian religious origins of 'Modesty' dress conflicts with the notion of modernity and the contemporary societal quest for excellence and success gained through a value system based on a gratuitous celebrity culture, spectacle and instant wealth. Debord theorised the 'society of the spectacle' as moving quickly 'for in 1967 it had barely forty years behind it' (2002, p3). In the 21st

century it has been normalised with all media promoting immodest dress as a way to be noticed and succeed.

This is the main reason that until recently 'Modesty' dress in fashion studies has been considered of little interest and judged as "old-fashioned" or "beyond fashion" (Tarlo; 2007 p144). However with the highly visible growth of fundamentalist religious groups in urban environments 'sartorial biographies' that don't categorise into conventional stereotypes are making an impact on fashion research. Tarlo comprehends the 'complexity and transformative potential' of Islamic women's 'personal experience in the creative and symbiotic relationship between people and their clothes' (2007 pp144-145). This is also relevant to Jewish-Orthodox 'Modesty' dress, with the accepted caveat that clothing and modesty is perceived as different in every society and that this study may identify 'that even within the same culture or society, different interpretations of modesty or decency will be found.' (Barnard; 1996, p52)

Wellbeing & Modesty

In order to evidence literature on religious spirituality and the consequential feeling of 'wellbeing' experienced through 'Modesty' dress a diverse range of texts were utilised, Fashion theory (Calefator; 2004), Jewish books (Rabbi Falk, 1998; Henkin; 2003; Manolson; 2008 and Safran; 2007), healthcare reports (Scheinberg Andrews; 2006) and psychological studies (Loewenthal et al ; 2000; Lowenthal & Brooke Rogers; 2008) Calefator implies a symbolic connection between dress and religion 'perhaps an even more profound aspect to clothing within a religious context,

connected to its symbolic and mythological significance as a means of crossing the boundary between the human and the divine.’ (2004, p19)

The Jewish texts explore this as having more than mythological significance. Safran (2007) author of ‘sometimes you are what you wear!’ suggests a distinct correlation between the ‘mental and spiritual qualities’ that is associated with how much of a female body is exposed or covered. This is affirmed by this statement: ‘Dressing means... showing oneself to others, and the more the construction of one’s self-image depends on the observance of religious dogma, the more it is concerned with how one exposes one’s body to the public gaze.’ (Calefato; 2004, pp19)

Manolson (2008) and Safran (2007) also promote the concept that what you wear affects your ‘self’ image in terms of respect and values. (Manolson, pp2-3) The Ultra-Orthodox view unsurprisingly presents ‘Tznius’ compliance as a badge of distinction that leads to ‘inner nobility’ here anything classed as *fashionable* is to be avoided and the reward appears to be inner spirituality. (Rabbi Falk; 1998) Contemporary Tzeni’ut has a more pragmatic approach to adopting dress in western society by describing minimum-to-maximum religious compliance acceptability. Here traditions (*Minhag*) are discussed as personal choice. No direct correlation is made between ‘Modesty’ dress and inner spirituality but connection’s between Tzeni’ut and religious goals is implicit ‘the one area in which a woman should strive to excel is that of tzeni’ut itself’ (Herzl Henkin; 2003 p37).

From a psychological perspective Lowenthal quotes anthropologist Kupferman (1979) who considered that ‘strictly-orthodox Jewish women might be more cheerful in their lifestyle full of boundaries and rules...’ She conducted empirical studies that

tested the Tseni'ut hypothesis through the investigation of spirituality and profound religious awareness as a correlation to good mental health. In these studies she acknowledges general positive relations between religion and better mental health, *but* they are complex and not all positive. (Loewenthal & Cinnirella, 1999; Loewenthal, Macleod et al, 2000) A 2000 comparative Protestant/Jewish study on aspects of coping with stress related to religiosity showed little difference between the religions, but 'religiously based cognitions may have important effects on outcome in terms of well-being, health and lower stress'. (Loewenthal et al; pp355) This reinforced previous studies that indicate links with religion and wellbeing, although it is stated that in terms of scientific rigour this is still in its early stages of development. (Levin, 1994; McIntosh, 1995; Pargament et al., 1988 quoted in Loewenthal et al, 2000 pp 355-6)

The most relevant text by Scheinberg Andrews (2006) defines 'Modesty' and divides it's meaning into four dimensions:

1. Religious practices,
2. Self-esteem,
3. Public behaviour, and
4. The environment

This became the framework for the questionnaires. This text explores how women in cultures who maintain strong levels of modesty are perceived by the rest of western society as subservient and controlled by men, who impose these rules. (p444) This includes Rabbi's, Schools, Husbands and family members. Scheinberg Andrews importantly identifies this as **not** true 'my research on Jewish women showed that for most of them, modesty is an attribute to be admired and attained.' She believed that

within Jewish culture modesty is imposed by the women themselves and helps 'to keep boundaries of privacy and respect.' (2006, p144) This affirms the fashion discourse of 'alternative' dress (Davis; 1992, p181; Goldman Carrel; 1999, pp 13 and Entwistle; 2003; p48). Other key statements that informed the questionnaires include "Jewish modesty described as "beneath the surface," (Scheinberg Andrews; 2006, p445) applied to both dress and behaviour. This notion of 'internality' is quoted by female respondents as a "deeper understanding" of life and "powerful insights" which can be connected to "spirituality" and "wellbeing". Alternative dress was a means of "differentiating oneself or separating oneself" from what was considered "mediocrity", thus enabling them to obtain a higher level of respect than the usual societal focus on external clothing. Within these parameters it was still considered that being "beautiful" was good and achievable while covering the body.

Methodological discussion

Phenomenological research takes the experiencing agent as the starting point and explores the world of lived experience. The researcher is considered an active part of the construction of the research rather than an impartial vessel that collects knowledge. (Hackley; 2003, pp112-113) Being of the same faith was important for reasons of 'ethical practice' (Payne & Payne; 2004 p130) and trust. The respondents and facilitators of the survey were the Head Mistress of a London Jewish School, her 6th form girls and a *Rabetzin* (Rabbi's wife) and outreach religious teacher on subjects such as 'Modesty' dress.

A case study approach was adopted as 'a single example of the many cases that make up the type of unit,' this serves to emphasise, dramatise and persuade us of any paradigm change in Jewish society (Payne & Payne; 2004 p32).

Best & Keller describe Kuhn's paradigm as a "constellation" of values, beliefs and methodological assumptions, whether tacit or explicit, inscribed in a larger worldview.' (2008 p3) Recently this has been applied to complex postmodern studies of an epistemological nature ranging from behavioural, organisational and social-cognitive scientific approaches to consumers and business. (Brown & Turley; 1997 p265 and Pine & Gilmore 1999) These paradigm definitions are relevant to this study as a diverse range of texts are utilised for discourse analysis and a thematic approach to the empirical research draws on four dimensions of 'Modesty' dress.

Sample sizes should be determined on the grounds of pragmatism, representativeness and quality of insights generated. (Hackley 2003 p112) Pragmatism dictated research should be carried out locally and completed for a set deadline. Representativeness and quality of insights were achieved by the mixed-religiosity levels of the 20 6th form school girls who are at an independent stage of personal dress choices. The school selected has a mandatory 'Modesty' dress code uniform until 6th form, then girls are encouraged to wear what they like within acceptable codes of 'Modesty' (Green, 2001; p139) This survey samples 1 class of 16-17 year olds. The cohort come from different religious backgrounds, although predominantly from a lower-middle-class, social-economic demographic. The survey's open-questions identifies students who comply through peer/school pressure and/or through a feeling of 'inner-wellbeing,' The study is 'concerned with exploring people's life histories or everyday behaviour' a method where qualitative data is favoured (Silverman; 2001, p25). Quantitative statistical analysis is appropriate to the structured section of the questionnaire. An in-depth discussion

was provided by the *Rabetzin* (Rabbi's wife) as a key informant who 'speak(s) from their own perspective' (Payne & Payne; 2004; p134). The respondent was recommended by a Jewish friend because she holds seminars with girls/women from religious/non-religious backgrounds on 'Modesty'. She agreed to an in-depth recorded interview at home (for private usage only) and talked openly on the subject for over an hour. Key quotes/words from the discourse analysis were read out and she discussed her perspective in relation to secular theory. The discussion was semi-structured and at times very open, key ideas were noted and the audio-recording analysed for similarities/differences to the discourse analysis.

The research design originated from the discourse analysis and questions were multiple-choice and semi-structured to allow respondents to expand their opinions. Presentation of analysis is in charts to show quantitative distribution of sample responses and 'content' analysis is used where similar statements/semantics parallel with discourse analysis/in-depth interview and open-ended questions. Silverman (2003, pp45-46) states 'content analysis' is a favoured method in which researchers establish a set of criteria or categories and then count the number of instances that fall into each designation. A thematic presentation of data is applied as Scheinberg Andrews (2006) definition of 'Modesty' divided into four dimensions.

1. Religious Practices

"It is not just about laws, I do not go down the Rabbi Falk way because I feel when a person is sensitive to the human body...then it (Modesty) just follows on..." but the most controversial aspect of 'Modesty' is the covering of the hair by a married woman and the *Rabetzin* interview described this eloquently in the following terms

“The covering of the hair is to remind herself of the intimacy and closeness she has with her husband...‘I am with someone...I am a married woman’” is communicated to others and to herself so she is *“Protected by it (hair being covered).”* The response to covering hair in the questionnaires was **10% (2 respondents) = ‘NO’**; **45% (9 respondents) = ‘YES’** and **45% (9 respondents) = ‘Have not decided yet’** which reflects personal and sensitive consideration to this issue. Some respondents that had ‘not decided yet’ were waiting to see if the man or his family *Minhag* (custom) required this, as there is some flexibility within Sephardi/Ashkenzi custom on the full covering of hair. A selection of positive explanations from the students included *“You can look glamorous”* and *“you can look stylish. Non-Jewish people also wear wigs.”* From a modern-orthodox perspective the response to the question: ‘is covering your hair outdated in a modern world?': *“NO: Commandments are for all generations and can be adapted within the parameters of the command to be fully fulfilled in a modern world”*.

2. Self-Esteem

Chart 1 shows numbers of respondents who selected a statement that was closest to what they consider ‘Modesty’ to be. **5% (1 respondent)** comply because of family/School; **10% (2 respondents)** as a sign of respect for men and another **5% (1 respondent)** when they were praying, making a total of **20% (4 respondents)** complying for reasons other than personal values. However statement **2)** received **35% (7 respondents)**, and statement **1)** **30%, (6 respondents)** combined this totals **65% (13)** respondents who stated ‘Modesty’ does reflect what is beneath the surface and not just superficial concerns with looks. Although this is based on the official religious teachings that the girls are exposed to on some level it still supports the

research question ‘Can female Jewish-Orthodox Modesty dress be considered as an expression of ‘inner wellbeing’? Combined with the selection of statement **3) 5% (1 respondent)** and statement **4) 10% (2 respondents)** which supports modesty as an expression of ‘inner-wellbeing’ but also highlights their personal choices; this makes a total of **80% (16 respondents)** affirming research question 2.

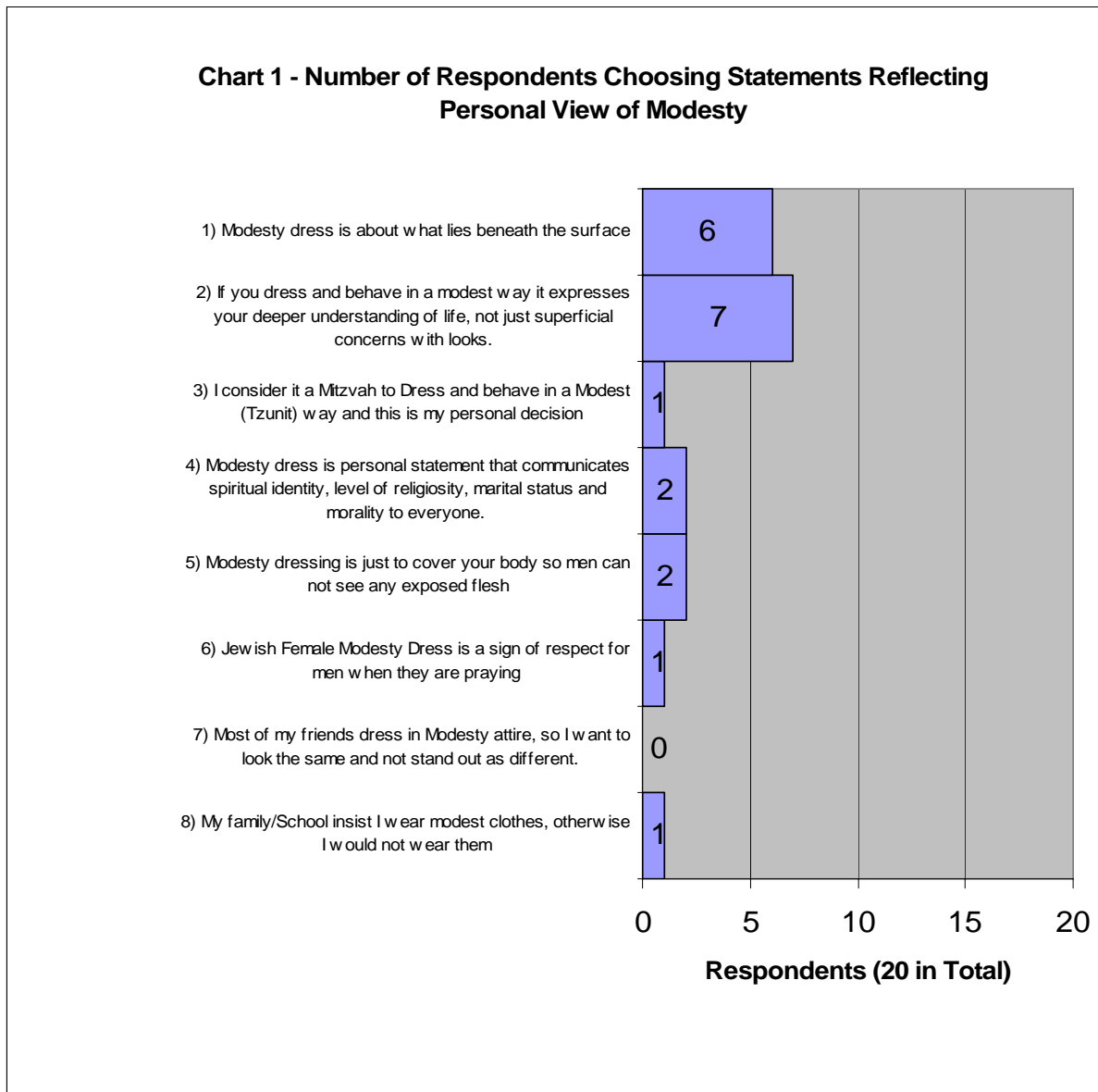
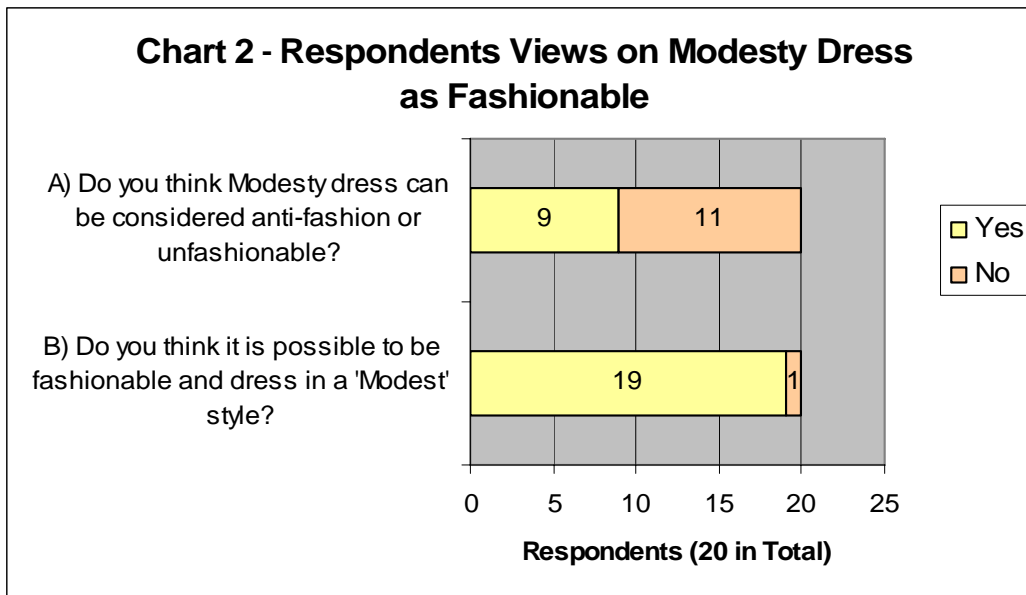


Chart 2 which relates directly to research question 3 shows **55% (11 respondents)** disagreed with Modesty dress being an anti-fashion/unfashionable statement, but

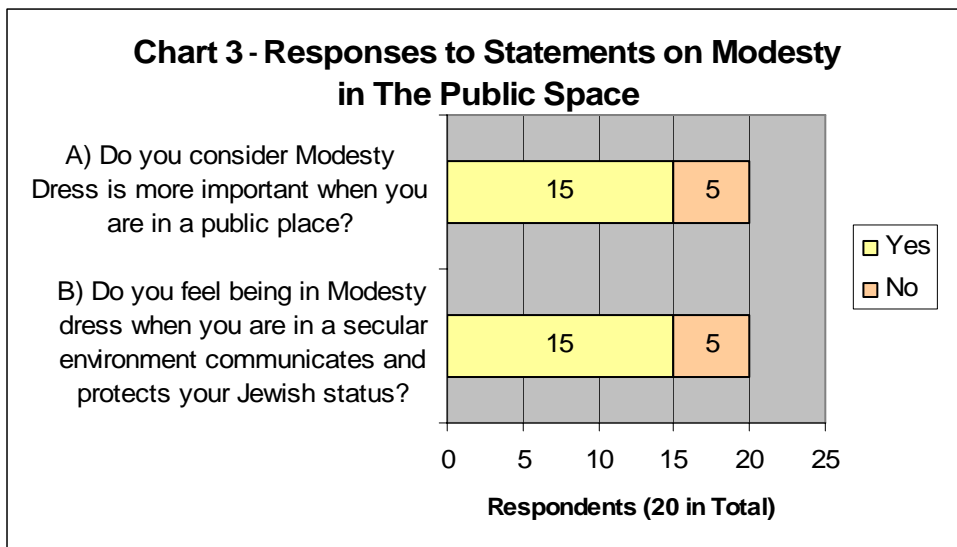
95% (19 respondents) considered it was definitely possible to be Modest and fashionable.



3. Public Behaviour

Chart 3 responses to both statement **A)** and **B)** were affirmed by **75%** of respondents (**15 out of 20**). Student's explanations to why 'Modesty' was more important in a public place and especially a secular environment that communicates your Jewish status include *"It protects you and covers you, stops unwanted attention"*; *"Because it is amazing to live in a society where people dress immodestly and some people don't (being the minority)"* and *"Shows strength to hold your own values."* This parallels directly with Alternative dress as a means of "differentiating oneself or separating oneself" from what the respondents considered "mediocrity", thus enabling them to obtain a higher level of respect than the usual societal focus on external clothing (Scheingberg Andrews; 2006, p 445). The *Rabetzin* expands on this theme *"If you walk into a room and your clothes walk in before you...the clothes have to enhance the person not be separate to what is inside"* and then gives an

example of a job interview with 3 equally qualified women but the woman who is dressed smartly giving the right impression.

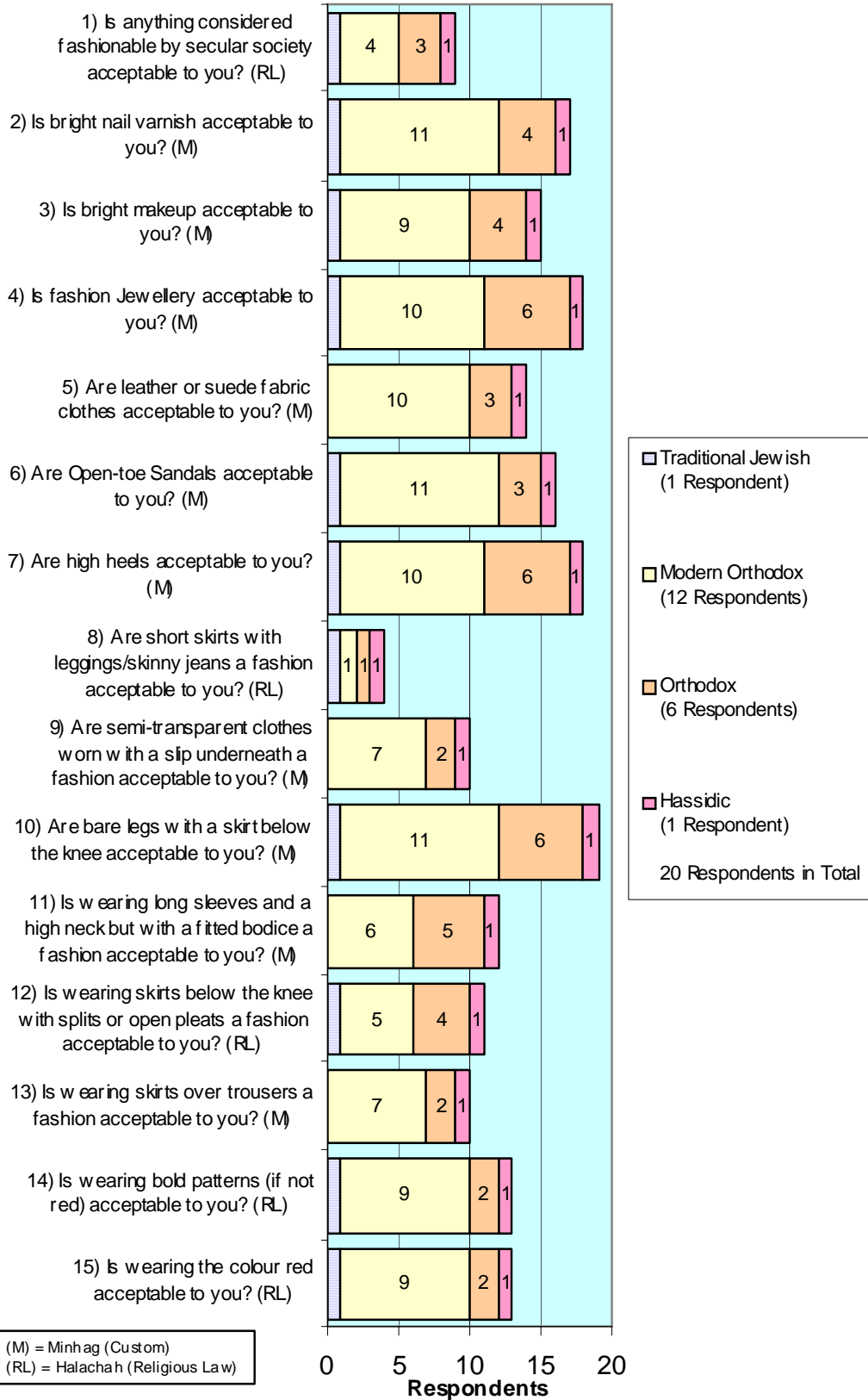


4. Environment

Chart 4 visualises the responses to fashion/styles that are considered ‘Modesty’ *Halachah* (religious law = RL) or personal *Minhag* (custom = M), charted against the respondents personal religiosity descriptor. For example **Chart 4; Statement 15** on the wearing of the colour red, which according to Rabbi Falk is *not permissible* and therefore Orthodox women generally avoid the colour. The questionnaire shows **45% (9 respondents)** from a Modern Orthodox background would wear red, this is less surprising that the **15% (3 respondents)** from more religious Orthodox/Hassidic backgrounds who *also* stated they *would* wear red. What is evident from **Chart 4;** fashion/style is *still* about personal choice within modesty limits and that ‘even within the same culture or society, different interpretations of modesty or decency will be found.’ (Barnard; 1996, p 52) The *Rabetzin* interview revealed that “*Modesty does not have to be dowdy*” and can be very fashionable within the given parameters and she cited the example “*that copies of top fashion houses are adjusted and sold for*

the Jewish Orthodox market” And one of the students commented on high-street fashion *“River Island’s autumn range is fab/fashionable & modest!”*

Chart 4 - Number of Respondents Selecting Fashion/Styles as Acceptable by Religiosity Level



Conclusion

The response to the three research questions is summarised in Table1:

Table 1 Research Questions	Yes/No	Responses
1. Can female Jewish-Orthodox 'Modesty' dress be considered as an expression of 'inner wellbeing'?	√	65% of respondents (13 out of 20) affirmed 'Modesty' dress as being a conclusive expression of their inner spirituality by choosing the positive statements 1) & 2) in Chart 1
2. Is the wearing of 'Modesty' dress a personal choice or Imposed ritual compliance?	√	80% of respondents (16 out of 20) affirmed this was a personal choice and not imposed religious compliance by choosing the positive/personal statements 1) 2) 3) & 4) in Chart 1 Further evidence of personal choice in fashion styles was illustrated by the diversity of dress acceptability by religiosity level in Chart 4
3. Can 'Modesty' dress be considered as a counter-culture, anti-fashion statement against modernity?	?	55% of respondents (11 out of 20) gave a negative response to this statement. With 95% (19 out of 20) considering Modesty dress can be fashionable in Chart 2 . A caveat is that 'Modesty' dress can be considered a way of differentiating and protecting oneself from mainstream societal values and 75% of respondents (15 out of 20) affirmed both statements A) & B) in Chart 3

The response to question 1 draws parallels with the discourse analysis that states there is a symbolic, spiritual (and religious) significance that compliance to 'Modesty' dress can provide a means of 'crossing the boundary between the human and the divine.' (Calefato; 2004, p19). Question 2 confirms that today even in Orthodox Jewish groups individuals (mainly) think and choose for themselves, which links with the discourse that 'Modesty' is imposed out of 'free will' by women themselves "to keep boundaries of privacy and respect" and not by other institutions (Scheinberg Andrews; 2006, p144). Question 3 endorses the notion that 'Modesty' is desirable and achievable and is not considered anti-fashion. This counters the fashion theory perspective (Entwistle; 2003 and Davis, 1992) and affirms the social-medical studies view (Loewenthal et al; 2000 and Scheinberg Andrews; 2006) of 'Modesty' being valued.

There is evidence emerging from this case-study of a paradigm shift by Jewish-Orthodox women that 'Modesty' dress is desirable; a reflection of inner-wellbeing, personal choice and custom that is valued. However, as Payne & Payne (2004; p32) suggest, although one case-study can be considered a means to emphasise, dramatise and persuade of signs of change, larger studies from different demographic groups and regions need to be completed before evidence of a sustained paradigm shift in society and fashion studies can be rigorously and scientifically concluded.

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