

# PSYCHOLOGIES

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MAGAZINE

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# Can what you wear **change** your identity?

Makeovers are usually straightforward – from ugly duckling to swan, from frumpy to fashionable. But what would happen if an extrovert were given an introvert's clothing? Or if a devotee of black were forced to wear colour? We asked a professional stylist to conduct an experiment with three brave *Psychologies* readers, with surprising results **BY ANITA CHAUDHURI**

PHOTOGRAPHY **NICOLE NODLAND** STYLING **JANE DE TELIGA**

**T**he link between what we wear and how we feel about ourselves has been celebrated by a plethora of makeover shows that echo archetypal stories of transformation from Cinderella to *Pretty Woman*. Strange, then, that the psychology of clothes, and the connection between fashion and personality should have been largely overlooked.

It was the American writer Alison Lurie, in *The Language Of Clothes* (Owl Books, 1981), who best summed it up. 'For thousands of years human beings have communicated with one another

first in the language of dress. Long before I am near enough to talk to you on the street, in a meeting, or at a party, you announce your sex, age and class to me through what you are wearing – and very possibly give me important information (or misinformation) as to your occupation, origin, personality, opinions, tastes, sexual desires and current mood.'

Jane de Teliga, the stylist who transformed our readers, believes this still holds true today, and that what we wear does influence social behaviour. 'Clothes have their own language,' she says. 'Whatever you choose to wear you are sending out a powerful message to the world, and people often make the mistake of underestimating this.'

Working with our three volunteers was an interesting, occasionally challenging, experiment because by taking them away from their carefully constructed personal style, each one had to re-examine her sense of identity.

It's easy to think in terms of style stereotypes – extroverts love red, wallflowers wear violet – but even this is more complex than it seems. 'Often I find that women have, over time, gravitated to



wards clothes that don't even resonate with their personality anymore,' says Jules Standish, image consultant and author of *How Not To Wear Black* (O Books). 'An extrovert may once have felt comfortable in red, but difficult life experiences might mean she now wears more sombre colours.'

She believes the key to matching your personality to your clothes comes down to balance. 'If you suddenly take someone who's used to wearing bright colours

and put them in black, that can cause a real upset because, in a way, it feels like they've been stripped of their personality,' she says. 'Likewise, if you take someone out of black and put them in colour, they may feel very uncomfortable, possibly because black connects them to a certain melancholy feeling that makes them feel safe. Small changes are best. Try changing the colour of your underwear as a starting point. You'll feel different even if no one else is going to see it.' >>>

*From left: Flossie Fairbairn, Momtaz Begum-Hossain and Lisa Sanfilippo*