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Perceptions Regarding the Impact of Workplace Attire on Workplace Outcomes

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Perceptions Regarding the Impact of Workplace Attire on Workplace Outcomes

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine employee perceptions regarding the impact of workplace attire on workplace outcomes and how one is viewed by others. Results from a sample of MBA students indicate that today's workers do see workplace attire as impacting workplace outcomes and how one is viewed by others. This is somewhat influenced by one's gender and the value one places on attire. These results and directions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate attire has traditionally been rather formal, consisting of suits for both men and women, but the internet business boom in the 1990s inspired a shift toward a more casual or dress-down style that remains popular in many organizations today (Parnes 2001). A recent poll of employers showed that about 60% have a "dress casual" day of the week and 50% allow employees to wear casual attire on a regular basis (Hunsberger 2005). In permitting such attire, many organizations argue that employees prefer casual dress and that it results in increased satisfaction and productivity. For example, a survey of human resource managers indicated that organizations' use of "business casual" and/or "casual dress" increased employee morale, was perceived by employees as an added benefit, and improved productivity (Alonzo 1996). Similarly, Walter (1996) cites examples of companies, such as Sandoz Pharmaceuticals Corporation and Kaiser Permanente Medical Care, which use such attire as a means of boosting employee morale.

There has also been an explosion of books in the popular press providing advice on how one should dress to be successful in the workplace. Pioneered by *John T. Molloy's New Dress for Success Book* (1996;1988), others have followed suit with such titles as *How to Gain the Professional Edge: Achieve the Personal and Professional Image You Want* (Morem 1997), *The New Professional Image: From Business Casual to the Ultimate Power Look* (Bixler 1997), *Your Executive Image: The Art of Self-Packaging for Men and Women* (Seitz 2000) and *Beyond Business Casual: What to Wear to Work to Get Ahead* (Sabath 2000). A common theme in these books is that clothing decisions can make a difference in how one is perceived by others and that one's image is critical to success in the workplace. While casual attire might be popular, these books warn of the risks associated with appearing unprofessional.

The result is that employees are receiving somewhat mixed signals. This is particularly problematic for women who, at the same time, are often trying to determine the appropriate amount of femininity in their dress so that they are taken seriously in their professional role (Ogle & Damhorst 1999). This situation raises questions as to how employees view the importance of clothing in the workplace today. Given the shift towards casual attire, do today's workers see value in workplace clothing? Do they believe that clothing has an impact on how one is perceived by others? Does workplace attire influence workplace outcomes such as promotions

and raises? Is this different for men and women? The purpose of this paper is to provide an empirical investigation of employee perceptions regarding the impact of workplace attire on workplace outcomes and how one is viewed by others, and whether this differs by gender.

Workplace Attire and Its Impact on Role Execution

According to the organizational dress framework proposed by Rafaeli and Pratt (1993), what employees wear to work can have a substantial impact on how they operate within their work defined role. These authors suggest that individuals hold many roles, (i.e., employee, parent, spouse, student), and situational cues such as one's workplace attire, help make an individual more aware of his or her current role. Thus, in wearing workplace attire or organizational dress, a person is reminded that he or she is now an employee. Evidence suggests that wearing "appropriate" workplace attire facilitates effective role execution. For example, Solomon and Schloper (1982) found that individuals' sense of clothing appropriateness for a particular role influenced their perceptions as to the quality of their performance in that role. This belief was significantly stronger for women than it was for men. Similarly, Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, and Mackie-Lewis (1997) found that, when wearing organizationally approved attire, female administrative employees were able to temporarily shed their non-organizational roles (e.g., parent, student) and adopt the role of employee.

More recent research has examined how specific styles of clothing influence employee behavior. For example, the results of a 1999 survey conducted by national employment law firm Jackson Lewis, showed that 44% of their respondents (over 1,000 human resource executives) reported an increase in tardiness and absenteeism, and 30% reported a rise in flirtatious behavior after the implementation of dress-down policies (c.f., Boehle, Dobbs, Goldwasser, Gordon, & Stamps 2000). These findings suggest that casual dress may lead to a casual work ethic. Says one popular press writer, "Once workers started thinking of the office as a place where they could dress in a frivolous, lighthearted fashion, they started thinking of their jobs in a frivolous, lighthearted way. Simply introducing Casual Fridays sends a message to the work force that it's all right to take off one day a week and clown around" (Queenan 1996, p. 15). A similar statement was made by Kaplan-Leiserson (2000, p. 39), "The way you look directly affects the way you think, feel, and act . . . When you dress down, you sit down—the couch potato trend. Manners break down, you begin to feel down, and you're not as effective."

Studies have also shown that there are individual differences in the value and importance placed on workplace clothing. For example, Rucker, Anderson, and Kangas (1999) found differences between members of ethnic minority groups in how they viewed the symbolic use of clothing for personal advancement and influencing others. Similarly, females have been found to show a stronger interest in clothing and placed greater importance on attire for accomplishing their roles when compared to males (Solomon & Scholper 1982). Thus, it would appear that those who place a high value on clothing (men or women) see clothing as important and would be more likely to believe that it impacts work-related outcomes and others' perceptions.

Impact of Attire on Other's Perceptions and Workplace Outcomes

Research has examined the extent to which individuals use their attire to accomplish certain objectives in their interactions with others. For example, Solomon and Scholper (1982) found that both males and females responded favorably when asked whether they believed that their attire influenced others' impressions of them. This belief was significantly stronger for women than it was for men. Other more recent studies have found that individuals have used specific styles of clothing to accomplish workplace objectives with "formal business attire" being used to enhance status and respect (Rucker, Anderson, & Kangas 1999) and more casual dress to develop connections with others (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis 1997).

For women, this presents a challenge. John T. Molloy (1996) claims that women are not taken seriously when dressed casually. Many professional women resist casual attire because they feel it lowers their credibility and “they can’t afford to be taken less seriously than a casually dressed man” (Busey (1997, p. 20). An early study of the impact of gender and dress style on performance evaluations supports this. Galin & Benoliel (1990) found that formally dressed women had a better chance of getting higher performance reviews than informally dressed women. Kwon (1998) argues that society expects a generally more formal appearance from a working woman than from a working man. This is particularly true in the United States where women are socialized more than men to dress appropriately. This suggests that women might be more likely than men to believe that workplace attire has an impact on work-related outcomes and others’ impressions.

Based on the literature reported above, we make the following predictions:

- H1: Respondents will report that workplace attire has a stronger impact on how a woman is perceived by others than how a man is perceived by others.
- H2: Respondents will report that workplace attire has a stronger impact on women’s workplace outcomes (e.g., raises, promotions) than men’s.
- H3: Female respondents will be more likely than male respondents to report that workplace attire has an impact on the perceptions of others.
- H4: Female respondents will be more likely than male respondents to report that workplace attire has an impact on workplace outcomes.
- H5: Those who value workplace attire will be more likely than those who do not to report that workplace attire has an impact on workplace outcomes and the perceptions of others.

METHOD

Sample

This study utilized a sample of graduate students enrolled in MBA programs at three medium-sized universities, two located in the Midwest and the other located in the southeastern part of the United States. Because we were primarily interested in the responses from current employees, we removed from the data analysis 12 respondents who were working less than 20 hours per week. Thus, 176 surveys were submitted for data analysis. About half of the respondents (49%) were female. Although respondents ranged in age from 22 to 58, the mean age was 29 years. The average hours worked per week was 41.8 (SD= 9.21). With regard to position, 32% of the sample consisted of management or executive personnel and the mean number of years of full-time work experience was 6.6 years (SD = 7.4). About 17% of the sample was currently working in banking or finance institutions, 16% in manufacturing, 24% in education, and the remaining portion in healthcare, government or non-profit organizations. In terms of organizational size, 56% worked in mid-to large sized organizations (with over 500 employees) and 24% worked in small businesses (100 employees or less).

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of two sections: (1) demographic information and (2) workplace attire. Demographic information was tapped through several single item questions, including gender, age, position level, years of full-time work experience, tenure in current department, size of organization, and hours worked per week. The workplace attire section consisted of two subsections: value of workplace attire, beliefs regarding workplace attire.

The *value of workplace attire* was measured with five items, assessing the extent to which one values others’ perceptions of one’s attire. Sample items include: “I value what others think

of my workplace attire”, and “I enjoy the comments or praise that I receive from others on my workplace attire”.

The *beliefs regarding workplace attire* consisted of two sections, one measuring respondent’s perceptions of the impact of workplace attire on men and the other, their perceptions of the impact of workplace attire on women. For example, in the first section, respondents were given the following stem “A man’s workplace attire can have an impact on. . .” In the second section, respondents were given the same stem except “woman’s workplace attire” was used instead of “man’s workplace attire”. Both stems were followed by nine items. Five items measured workplace outcomes: (1) his promotions, (2) his productivity, (3) his career success, (4) his pay/compensation, and (5) special perks or opportunities he receives at work. An additional four items measured the perceptions or views of others: (1) his ability to influence others, (2) the way co-workers view him, (3) the way customers view him, (4) the way supervisors view him. For the second section, “she” or “her” was substituted for the words “he” or “him”. For each item, respondents used the following 5-point rating scale (1=strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations among gender, value of workplace attire, and the perceived impact of workplace attire on workplace outcomes and others’ perceptions of men and women. These results show that respondents placed a moderate value on workplace attire (M=3.74, SD =.46) and generally agreed that workplace attire affected others’ perceptions of men (M=3.88, SD=.57) and women (M=3.93, SD=.50). Respondents were rather neutral in their beliefs regarding the impact of workplace attire on men’s outcomes (M=3.23, SD=.69) and women’s outcomes (M=3.33, SD=.69).

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF VARIABLES IN THE STUDY

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	1.49	.50	---					
2. Value of Attire	3.74	.46	.05	(.70)				
3. Impact of attire on men’s outcomes	3.23	.70	-.11	.15*	(.83)			
4. Impact of attire on others’ perceptions of men	3.88	.57	-.03	.08	.49 ***	(.88)		
5. Impact of attire on women’s outcomes	3.33	.69	-.05	.23**	.73 ***	.43***	(.82)	
6. Impact of attire on others’ perceptions of women	3.93	.46	.07	.14	.33 ***	.82***	.56***	(.86)

Note: Gender was coded 1 = male and 2 = female. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

To test the first four hypotheses, we conducted two ANOVAs with repeated measures. In the first analysis, the impact of workplace attire on others’ perceptions of men and women was entered as the within subjects variable and gender was entered as the between subjects variable. We found a significant main effect [F (1, 172) = 4.61, p<.05] such that workplace attire was believed to have a stronger impact on others’ perceptions of women (M=3.92, SD=.5) than their perceptions of men (M=3.88, SD .57). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported. The main effect for respondent’s gender was not significant [F (1, 172) = .05, p = n.s.]. However, we found a significant interaction [F (1, 172) = 4.13, p<.05] such that women were more likely than men to

believe that workplace attire had a stronger impact on others' perceptions of women than their perceptions of men (see Figure 1). Thus, hypothesis 3 was only partially supported.

INTERACTION **FIGURE 1** **RESULTS** **FOR**
GENDER



In the second analysis, the impact of workplace attire on outcomes for men and women was entered as the within subjects variable and gender was entered as the between subjects variable. Once again, we found a significant main effect [$F(1, 171) = 7.41, p < .01$] such that workplace attire was believed to have a greater impact on women's workplace outcomes ($M = 3.33, SD = .69$) than men's ($M = 3.22, SD = .69$). Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported. Neither the main effect for respondent's gender [$F(1, 171) = 1.18, p = n.s.$], nor the interaction between respondent's gender and outcomes was significant [$F(1, 171) = 1.53, p = n.s.$]. That is, both male and female respondents were equally likely to believe that workplace attire has a greater impact on women's workplace outcomes than men's. Thus, hypothesis 4 was not supported.

In hypothesis 5, we predicted that the value placed on workplace attire would be positively related to respondent's perceptions regarding the impact of workplace attire on others' perceptions and workplace outcomes. An examination of the correlations presented in Table 1 show that value of attire was significantly related to respondent's beliefs regarding the impact of workplace attire on outcomes for men and women, but not on others' perceptions of men or women. Thus, hypothesis 5 was only partially supported.

DISCUSSION

This study has provided empirical evidence that today's workers do see workplace attire as impacting workplace outcomes and how one is viewed by others. This is somewhat influenced by one's gender and the value one places on attire. In general, both men and women indicated that workplace attire has a greater impact on women's workplace outcomes (e.g., pay, promotions, perks, career success, productivity) than men's. This is consistent with previous

research and shows that both genders see women's clothing as playing a critical role in her workplace success. With regard to the impact of clothing on other's perceptions, it was only the women in our sample who indicated that workplace attire has a greater impact on others' perceptions of women than their perceptions of men. Given the heightened awareness that women have about their appearance and clothing in the workplace, it is not surprising that they would see this as having a greater impact on how women are perceived as opposed to men.

The value placed on workplace attire also had some influence on our results. We found that those who value their workplace attire are more likely to believe that attire can positively impact workplace outcomes for both men and women. These are individuals who place importance on wearing appropriate workplace attire and want to be seen by others as one who dresses appropriately at work. It is interesting, however, that the value or importance of workplace attire was not related to our respondents' beliefs regarding the impact of attire on how men and women are viewed by others. Perhaps this is because everyone believes that their attire can have an impact on the perceptions of others, but only those who value attire believe it actually affects workplace outcomes. It is also possible that the reason they value workplace attire is because they believe it will impact workplace outcomes.

While our research findings provide some interesting insights into individual beliefs regarding the impact of workplace attire on outcomes and others' perceptions, we are faced with just as many puzzling questions. Why do some individuals value workplace attire more than others? Is it because they feel it will have an impact on desired outcomes, or is it due to some other underlying personality trait such as self-monitoring or self-consciousness? Are there other factors, not measured in this study, that influence individual perceptions of the importance of one's workplace attire? For example, it is possible that individual beliefs regarding the importance of workplace attire might be influenced by the organization's culture. Organizational dress is often an artifact of organizational culture and given the variety of industries in our sample, it is likely that this may explain the variation in responses.

It is also possible that individual differences in attractiveness, height or obesity might influence the perceived importance of workplace attire. Recent literature suggests that there is a "beauty premium" and a "plainness penalty" whereby those with above-average looks earn more than those with below-average looks (Hamermesh & Biddle 1994). Likewise, obese women have been found to earn 17 percent lower wages on average than women within their recommended Body Mass Index (Averett & Korenman 1996). Another study showed that there was a height premium for white men in the United States (Persico, Postlewaite, & Silverman 2004). Thus, an interesting question is whether less attractive, overweight, or shorter (male) individuals perceive their workplace attire as being more or less important than attractive, physically fit, and taller (male) individuals. Similarly, it would be interesting to examine whether individuals perceive workplace attire as having a greater or lesser impact on workplace outcomes for less attractive, overweight, or shorter (male) individuals.

Finally, an additional avenue for future research would be to examine the relationship between employee preferences for various modes of workplace attire (i.e., formal, business casual, casual) and their perceptions regarding the impact of workplace attire on workplace outcomes. For example, are employees who prefer casual attire less likely than those who prefer formal attire to believe that it influences workplace outcomes? Or, do employees, regardless of their dress preferences, use their attire to impress others because they believe it will impact work-related outcomes?

While we believe that that this study has made a contribution to our understanding of how today's employees view the role of workplace attire in influencing outcomes and other's perceptions, we acknowledge that our study is not without limitations. In our effort to extend previous research by examining men and women in current business settings, we utilized a sample of MBA students. However, this was a convenience sample and therefore the beliefs of our respondents may not be representative of those in most workplaces. Future research needs to

broaden the scope, targeting a larger more experienced sample from a broad range of occupations and positions. Second, many of the measures we used were created specifically for this study. Additional studies are needed to ascertain the validity of these measures.

To conclude, we believe that this study has made an important contribution to the literature regarding attire in the workplace. Specifically, it has provided an empirical investigation of the beliefs of current employees regarding the impact of workplace attire. Our findings with regard to gender differences make a particularly unique contribution.

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