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Style Semiotics: The Influence of Levels of Professional Style of Dress on Perceived Competency

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ABSTRACT

Professional styles of dress in relation to perceptions of the public, have been assessed when comparing men and women, though little research exists to examine the spectrum of professional styles offered to women. This study involves the analysis of two different styles of dress, both on a spectrum of professional styles that are offered to women. A photo of a model in a sheath dress and a photo of a model in a pantsuit were used in separate experimental conditions, accompanied by the same job description for Senior Strategy Consultant, as well as the same resume. Participants were then asked to complete a rating scale of eight different traits (intelligent, friendly, determined, nice, competent, self-respecting, attractive, moral, and capable), along with completing the Self-Objectification Questionnaire. Although there was no significant differences among experimental conditions, men rated the model as less self-respecting than did women. Overall, those with higher scores on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire rated the model as more competent when in a sheath dress. These results may imply that professional, but femininely dressed women are perceived as more capable than a woman embodying a traditionally masculine silhouette.

Style Semiotics:

The Influence of Levels of Professional Style of Dress on Perceived Competency

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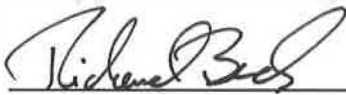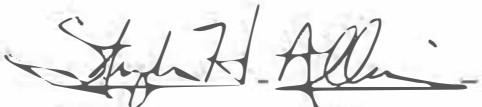Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In a consumerist world, where people are regularly bombarded with advertisements promoting products and lifestyles, the public is often convinced that they need to buy a certain product, wear specific clothes, and live a particular life in order to be happy and feel accepted by peers and strangers. The media convinces young girls and women that they need to show off and enhance their feminine features to be well-liked (Goodin, Van Demburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2001). More and more clothing stores for girls and teens, sell provocative clothing (Goodin, Van Demburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2001). Although some girls and women are convinced that dressing in sexier clothing will lead to acceptance, research suggests that quite the opposite is true (Goodin, Van Demburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2001). Girls and women who dress in provocative styles, are judged more harshly than those who dress in a neutral style (Graff, Murnen, and Smolack, 2012). There is a detachment between media portrayal of the ideal trendy woman, versus how the public actually perceives this style of dress. What happens when these impressionable girls grow up into women seeking professional careers? What is not yet known, is how well a femininely enhanced style of dress would translate into the professional world of corporate America in relation to perceptions of competency.

First Impressions

First impressions in social situations have long been studied as they relate to physical attractiveness, sexual cues, personality theory and cultural differences (Carpentier, Parrott, & Northup, 2014; Dumas, Nilson, & Lynch, 2001; Newman, 1980; Noguchi, Kamada, & Shrira, 2014; Nordstrom, Hall, & Bartels, 1998). People often draw inferences based on the appearances of others, which can be made in as little as 100 milliseconds of exposure to a stranger's face (Bar, Neta, and Linz, 2006; Willis & Todorov, 2006). First impressions can be formed very quickly, oftentimes leading to judgements on personality (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Noguchi, Kamada, & Shrira, 2014; Willis & Todorov, 2006). Willis & Todorov (2006) found that participants were able to make conclusions regarding a person's level of trustworthiness, attractiveness, aggressiveness, and competence, after having limited exposure to that person's face, with the highest correlation resulting in exposure and trustworthiness (Willis & Todorov, 2006). This means that a short-lived exposure to an unfamiliar person, leads to an impression based off of physical features, and perhaps, preconceived notions, ideals, or stereotypes held by the observer.

Clothing and First Impressions

First impressions can be formed based off of physical attractiveness, sexual cues, personality theory, cultural differences, and clothing choices (Carpentier, Parrott, & Northup 2014; Dumas, Nilson, & Lynch, 2001; Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Bransiter, 2005; Goodin, Van Demburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2001; Graff, Murnen, and Smolack, 2012; Newman, 1980; Noguchi, Kamada, & Shrira, 2014; Nordstrom, Hall, & Bartels, 1998; Reichart & Carpenter, 2004). Studies regarding first impressions and style of dress

compared men and women, and casual versus professional clothing (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014; Satrapa, Melhado, Coelho, Otta, Taubemblatt, & Siquiera, 1992; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). Professionalism can be defined by the "function of clinical skill, engagement and competence" (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014, p. 1838). According to Furnham and colleagues, professional dress codes in the work place serve two functions. The first is to provide guidelines about what constitutes appropriate clothing. The second is to provide a group identity within the workplace, separating the workers from other professions (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014).

Clothing has been shown to impact first impressions. Previous research has examined the impact of various styles of dress upon first impressions, including alternative clothing, casual clothing, sporty clothing, and professional clothing (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014; Satrapa et al. 1992; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). One study found that across gender groups, when professors were dressed in a socially formal manner, they were rated as more knowledgeable and more competent, however, they were also rated as less likeable (Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). However, results have yielded conflicting ideas surrounding gender differences between professional styles of dress.

Research has suggested that formally dressed professionals, including lawyers, doctors, and professors, are considered to be more competent (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014; Satrapa et al., 1992; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). However, the level of approachability of these same professionals seems to vary based on gender (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014; Satrapa et al., 1992; Sebastian & Bristow 2008). One study found that participants preferred male professionals over female professionals when both were wearing professional attire (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014). This may be due to long

held perceptions about women in the professional working world. Specifically, female professionals have historically been perceived to be less competent and more emotionally unstable, compared to male professionals, regardless of dress (Engleman, 1974). For example, a study found that style of dress had little effect of the perceptions of male professors, while female professors were favored when dressed in a more casual manner (Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). However, when males were assessed without a comparative female experimental group, formally dressed men were seen as less handsome, less extroverted, less charming, less sympathetic, and less attractive than men in other styles of dress (Satrapa et al., 1992).

Stereotypes may be related to the perceived lack of fit between the presumed responsibilities of the job at hand (Heilman, 2012). This may explain preferences for women dressing in a casual manner versus a preference for men dressed in a professional manner, when both are assumed to be of the same profession (Heilman, 1983; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). The models in the study conducted by Furnham and colleagues were both described as being professors, yet participants preferred when female professors were dressed more casually (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014). This may relate to preconceived notions on the level of professionalism that a woman is expected to obtain, based on the stereotypes associated with how a woman is expected to act, in relation to the qualities presumably required to be a professor.

Clothing, Objectification, and Self-Objectification

The act of objectification can be described as "seeing and/or treating a person as an object…in such a way that denies this person's humanity. A person's humanity is denied when it is ignored/not properly acknowledged and/or when it is in some way

harmed" (Papadaki, 2010, p. 32). This phenomenon can be further explained through the theory of objectification. Objectification theory postulates that women objectify themselves after "internalizing an observer's perspective on their physical selves" (Tiggeran & Andrew, 2012a, p. 409). According to Frederickson and Roberts (1997), women and girls are thought to adopt a view of themselves as objects to be evaluated, oftentimes based on appearance. It has been speculated that there is a specific neurobiological reason for interpreting appearance in such a way. Researchers from the Catholic University of Milan, Italy suggested that memories formed during emotionally-charged situations are stored in an allocentric manner, or in an observer mode, as opposed to an egocentric manner (Gaudio & Riva, 2013; Riva & Gaudio, 2012; Riva, Gaudio, & Dakanalis, 2014). This kind of experience is reminiscent of an out of body experience (Blanke, Landis, Spinelli, and Seeck, 2004). Memories may be stored based on an outsider's perspective, leading a woman to self-objectify (Riva, Gaudio, & Dakanalis, 2014).

Objectification tendencies and self-objectification are linked (Beebe, Homeck, Schober, & Lane, 1996; Strelan & Hargeaves, 2005). Women who place a high level of importance on certain dimensions, such as weight, tend to objectify others on those same dimensions (Beebe, Homeck, Schober, & Lane, 1996). For example, one study found that women were more likely to self-objectify than men (Strelan & Hargeaves, 2005). It was also found that women were more likely to objectify other women than themselves, however, higher ratings of self-objectification were related to increased objectification of other women (Strelan & Hargeaves, 2005).

Objectification theory has been associated with objectification of self and others, weight, body image, various cultures, and clothing (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007; Johnson & Gurung, 2011; Tiggerman & Andrew 2012a; Tiggerman & Andrew, 2012b; Tolaymat & Moradi, 2011). Clothing choice has been suggested to relate to appearance-management behavior (Tiggerman & Andrew, 2012a; Tiggerman & Andrew, 2012b). Research supports the idea that women use clothing as a way to camouflage their bodies (Kwon & Parham, 1994; Tiggerman & Andrew, 2012a; Tiggerman & Andrew, 2012b), perhaps as a way to control the degree of objectification by others as well as self-objectification (Tiggerman & Andrew, 2012b.)

Clothing and Sexual Objectification

In American culture, there has been an increasing trend of portraying women as sex objects (Reichert & Carpenter 2004; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Hypersexualization in the media lends to the notion that sex sells. As described by Vaes and colleagues, sexual objectification is "the instrumental use of another person as a product of consumption…sexual objectification implies that a one-sided focus on the body and on its sexual functions makes a person instrumental" (Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011, p. 775). Previous research has suggested that sexualized women are often perceived as less competent and less likely to succeed in masculine-stereotyped domains (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Bransiter, 2005). A sexualized style of dress has also been shown to influence the degree of objectification by others, also playing a role in perceptions of competency, and the degree of dehumanization by others (Graff, Murnen, & Smolack, 2012; Gurung and Chrouser, 2007; Johnson & Gurung, 2011; Puvia & Vaes, 2013; Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011).

Limitations of Research on First Impressions and Professional Style of Dress

The sexualization of children's and women's clothing has been researched numerous times (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Bransiter, 2005; Goodin, Van Demburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2001; Graff, Murnen, and Smolack, 2012; Reichart & Carpenter, 2004). However, sexually charged women's clothing within the professional sphere has not been as thoroughly explored. Previous research has focused on professional dress when comparing men and women (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014). It has also looked at professionally dressed women compared with provocatively dressed women (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Bransiter, 2005). What has yet to be explored thoroughly, are the nuances of style that allow certain types of clothing to be deemed professional, or appropriate for the workplace. It was the goal of the current study to focus solely on the potential varying degrees of professionalism that may exist within profession styles offered for women. The primary purpose of the current research was to identify whether there is a continuum of professional styles of clothing that are available for women.

The History of the Power Suit

Historically, clothing has been used to identify and separate social classes and power structures. In modern times, the pantsuit, in particular, has been associated with power and the one who embodies traditionally masculine qualities (Owyong, 2009). The one who "wears the pants in the relationship" refers to the dominant member of the relationship. For women, the pantsuit evolved as a female counterpart to the male business suit. The pantsuit can also be referred to as a "power suit" a style often worn in the business world. For both men and women, the pantsuit is the quintessential uniform in the corporate world (Tan & See, 2007). Within politics however, there has existed a

debate as to whether a woman should act or dress in a traditionally feminine way or in a traditionally masculine way in order to gain power and respect. No matter the topic at hand, female candidates are often scrutinized not only for the content of their campaigns, but for their clothing, hair, and makeup choices. Women have three different avenues to take when approaching a visual representation of their style, they can dress in a traditionally feminine way, a traditionally masculine way, or choose to dress in a more androgynous style (Pappas & Foster, 2011). Similarly, female politicians have the opportunity to represent traditionally masculine affairs such as war, or cater to traditionally female concerns including women's health rights. Standing for female rights, or running "as a woman" has led to an increased number of female politicians within America (Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003).

In contrast to the pantsuit, skirts and dresses are considered to be more traditional feminine attire. Women have a greater variety of corporate apparel, including dresses, skirts, and a wider range of colored blouses. This variety allows for the potential to convey individuality and personality (Tan & See, 2007). It has been speculated that the ability for women to wear a non-traditional suit stems from traditional roles men and women played in the public and private sphere (Luck, 1996). Historically, American men wore pants or trousers, as the garment was functional for men's work. The skirt was a symbolism of femininity, but it also was a more restricting garment and prevented movement in the way that trousers allowed. Fighting against sexism and female subordination, feminists of the 19th century, wore trousers as a way to blur the distinct boundaries that existed between men and women (Luck, 1996). It is predicted that a woman styled in a sheath dress will be perceived as less competent compared to a woman

dressed in a pantsuit, likely due to preconceived notions regarding traditionally masculine traits associated with the style.

Hypotheses

Given the cultural and historical associations, where traditional masculine dress is associated with perceptions of power, giving rise to the female pantsuit to signal competence and power in the workplace, it can be assumed that perceptions of female professionalism may be affected by attire. However, to date little research has examined the variability of the different styles of clothing that are considered to women as being professional, and how it relates to perceptions of competency. Consequently, it was the goal of the current study to investigate these perceptions. Specifically, participants were asked to evaluate a female model wearing either a pantsuit or a skirt. Participants rated the model on perceptions of professionalism and competence. Overall, it was predicted that the model styled in a dress would be perceived as less competent compared to the same model dressed in a pantsuit, presumably due to preconceived notions regarding traditionally masculine traits associated with suits.

Beyond assessing the associations of female workplace attire, a secondary purpose of this research was to assess self-objectification in relation to style of dress, professionalism, and competency as mediators for objectifying professionally-dressed women. Research has indicated that those who judge themselves harshly on specific domains judge others on those same domains (Beebe, Homeck, Schober, & Lane, 1996; Strelan & Hargeaves, 2005). Consequently, it was expected that female participants would judge the models in light of the same criterion for which they judge themselves. Consequently, it was predicted that participants who scored higher on the Self-

Objectification Questionnaire, would interpret the model in a sheath dress as being less moral and less self-respecting. Furthermore, it was expected that female participants would rate the model more harshly than male participants.

CHAPER II

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were recruited from a private Christian university. Participants

consisted of undergraduate students recruited from psychology courses. A total of 48

students participated in the study, three of whom did not complete the informed consent,

and two of which did not complete the Self-Objectification Questionnaire properly,

yielding a total of 43 participants. Of those 43 participants, 23 were exposed to the

pantsuit condition. 16% of subjects were men and 71% were women. 26% of students

were sophomores, 28.6% were juniors, and 32.7% were seniors. 63% of participants

ranged in age between 18 and 21, 18.4% were between the ages of 21 and 24, and 6.1%

were 25 and older. Approximately 59% of subjects were Caucasian, 14.3% were Black or

African American, 2% were Asian, 2% were Latino, and 10.2% were of two or more

races. All participants recorded their marriage status as "single". Students were

compensated for their participation with extra credit points for the class from which they

were recruited.

Procedures

Participants were asked to complete an informed consent before survey materials

were distributed. Upon this measure, the students were handed a manila folder containing

a photo of young woman either wearing the sheath dress or a pantsuit. Each condition

contained the same resume, as described in Appendix E, outlining the woman's

achievements and accomplishments. After reviewing the photo and resume, participants

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were asked to rate the model's characteristics. Finally, participants were asked to complete the Self-Objectification Questionnaire.

Experimental Conditions: Business Attire Stimuli and Resumes

Participants were exposed to a photo of a model, Julia Holmes, wearing either a sheath dress (a structured dress advertised to women as a professional, yet feminine option for the professional working environment) or a photo of the same model wearing a pantsuit. In both photos the model was similarly posed, with the main difference being style of dress. The model had the same hair style, shoes, and facial expression in both photos. These photos can be found in Appendix C.

Each condition was accompanied by the same resume, outlining Julia's work history, education history, and qualifications (see Appendix E). Contents of the resume, including work history, job title, and position description were retrieved from local postings on Indeed.com (Indeed.com). The resume stated that Julia graduated with her Master's in Business Administration from a local university. Julia's resume covered her duties at her three most recent positions since 2009. These positions included an entry level sales position as a Marketing Specialist, a mid-level position working with client relations, and a managerial position as a Sales Executive.

Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were given a vignette regarding the job that the model is applying for, Senior Strategy Consultant with Southwest Airlines (see Appendix D). The job description was retrieved from the Corporate Careers page of Southwest Airlines, and outlined the skills required for the position, including communication and influence, problem solving and analytics, strategic thinking, and leadership and trust (corporatecareers-southwest.icims.com).

Assessment Instruments

Trait Rating Scale

To assess perceptions regarding the competency of the model, participant's judgments were assessed using a scale borrowed from Graff and colleagues (2012). Perceptions of the model were rated on nine traits. Four of the traits were stereotypically masculine: *Intelligent*, *competent*, *capable*, and *determined*. Two traits were stereotypically feminine: *Nice* and *friendly*. The final three traits relate to the figure-enhancing style of dress: *moral*, *self-respecting* and *attractive*. Based on previous studies, it was anticipated that Chronbach's alpha would range between .72 and .91 (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Bransiter, 2005; Graff, Murnen, & Smolack, 2012; Gurung & Chrouser, 2007). Feminine traits were reverse coded. A higher score signified the embodiment of masculinity, high morality, and competency in the professional sphere.

Self-Objectification Scale

The Self-Objectification Questionnaire was developed by Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, & Twenge, (1998). The questionnaire assessed concern with appearance. Scores are obtained by separately summing the ranks to appearance-based items (3, 5, 8, and 10) and competence-based items (1, 2, 4, 7, and 9), and then subtracting the sum of competence ranks from the sum of appearance ranks. Scores may range from -35 to 25, the higher scores indicating a greater emphasis on appearance, interpreted as higher traits of self-objectification.

The Self-Objectification Questionnaire has satisfactory construct validity (Noll, 1996). The questionnaire was shown to correlate positively with scores on the Appearance Anxiety Questionnaire (Dion, Dion, and Keelan, 1990), which assesses

preoccupation with physical attributes of the self (r =.52, p < .01). The Self-Objection

questionnaire is also positively correlated with the Body Image Assessment (Williamson,

Davis, Bennett, Goreczny, and Gleaves, 1985). The Body Image Assessment measures an

individual's body-size dissatisfaction (r = .46, p <. 01) (Noll, 1996).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Relationship between Experimental Condition and Ratings of Julia

The primary goal of this research was to examine the impact of style of

professional dress, sheath dress or pantsuit, on ratings of masculine (intelligent,

competent, capable, and determined), feminine (nice and friendly), and neutral traits

(moral, self-respecting, and attractive). It was predicted that participants who viewed

Julia dressed in a sheath dress would rate Julia as less competent as compared to those

who viewed Julia dressed in a pantsuit. Independent-samples t-tests were used to

compare the influence of style of dress on ratings of the nine different traits. These t-tests

can be found in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, there was not a significant influence

of style of dress on perceptions of competency, or any other traits upon which Julia was

rated.

Relationship between Gender and Ratings of Julia

A secondary goal of the study, was to assess the degree to which males and

females differentiated in their interpretation of the skill-level of the model. It was

expected that female participants would rate Julia in a less favorable way as compared to

males. Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare the perceptions of males and

females regarding the eight traits. These statistics can be found in Table 2. As can be seen

in Table 2, there were no significant differences among the way males and females rated

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Julia, except for one trait. Males rated Julia as significantly less self-respecting as did females. This finding was contrary to the expected prediction.

Relationship between Gender and the Self-Objectification Questionnaire

Although not a direct hypothesis, the differences between males and females, and the degree to which they self-objectified was assessed. Overall it was anticipated that women would score higher on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire, as women were also expected to rate Julia less favorably than men. An independent-samples t-test was used to compare the difference in Self-Objection Questionnaire scores between men and women. These results can be found in Table 3. As can be seen in Table 3, there was not a significant difference among the Self-Objectification Questionnaire results.

Correlations between the Self-Objectification Questionnaire, Experimental Conditions, and Ratings of Julia

The final goal of the research was to assess the overall influence that scores on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire had on ratings of Julia. It was expected that those who scored higher on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire would also rate Julia as less favorably in the sheath dress condition. Correlations were used to see the relationship between scores of the Self-Objectification Questionnaire and ratings of Julia in each experimental condition. Findings can be found in Table 4; self-objectification was positively correlated with ratings of competency in the sheath dress condition. This finding was unexpected, suggesting that participants high in self-objectification had more positive opinions of Julia in the sheath dress, rather than pantsuit, condition.

Table 1

Trait Ratings of Julia in Experimental Condition

Ratings of	Sheath Dress		Pantsuit		
Julia:	M	SD	M	SD	t-value
Intelligent	4.45	.60	4.43	.59	.83
Friendly	3.25	.85	3.57	.90	1.17
Determined	4.70	.57	4.48	.67	1.16
Nice	3.10	.79	3.39	.66	1.32
Competent	4.25	.79	4.48	.79	.94
Self-respecting	4.35	.75	4.17	.72	.78
Attractive	4.30	.73	4.00	.80	1.27
Moral	3.20	.62	3.39	.66	-9.81
Capable	4.40	.50	4.52	.67	-.66

Table 2

Trait Ratings of Julia by Gender

	Male		Female		
Ratings of Julia:	M	SD	M	SD	t-value
Intelligent	4.25	.46	4.49	.61	1.02
Friendly	3.88	.83	3.31	.87	1.66
Determined	4.50	.76	4.60	.60	4.03
Nice	3.38	.52	3.23	.77	.51
Competent	4.38	.74	4.37	.81	.01
Self-respecting	3.38	.52	4.46	.61	4.63*
Attractive	4.13	.99	4.14	.73	.05
Moral	3.13	.35	3.34	.68	.69
Capable	4.38	.52	4.49	.61	.47

*p < .05

Table 3

Self-Objectification Questionnaire and Gender

	Self-Objectification Questionnaire		
Gender:	M	SD	t-value
Male	-7.50	7.41	.84
Female	-11.63	13.36	

Table 4

Self-Objectification Questionnaire, Experimental Condition, and Trait Rating Scale

Ratings of Julia:	Self-Objectification Questionnaire		
	Total Sample	Sheath Dress	Pantsuit
Intelligent	.15	.10	.22
Friendly	-.06	-.02	-.05
Determined	.23	.11	.32
Nice	-.18	-.20	-.09
Competent	.31*	.45*	.21
Self-respecting	.06	.13	-.06
Attractive	.25	.18	.29
Moral	.09	.13	.10
Capable	.17	.26	.14

*p < .05

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

Overview of Findings

Historically, women held the responsibility of taking care of domestic duties, childcare and household chores. This role began to change during the Industrial Revolutions, World War I, and, in particular, World War II. As men left for the war, women filled the roles that were left behind, leading to a drastic increase of women entering the workforce (History of Women in the Workforce, 2015). Six million female workers entered the workplace during this time (History of Women in the Workforce, 2015). Resources such as laundry services, child care, and meal preparation, were provided to help women maintain their households while working outside of the home (Farmer, 2014). These services were discontinued at the end of World War II, when women were expected to leave their jobs and return to household duties (Farmer, 2014). During this transitionary period of women venturing outside of the home, fashion trends were used as a means to rebel against structural forms of stereotyped rigidity. Historically, clothing was used to separate social classes, the separation and identity of men and women, and working roles (Owyong, 2007).

In American culture, the skirt has long been held as a symbolism of femininity. The physical structure of a skirt is often restrictive, leaving limited mobility as compared to pants, which allow movement free from most fashion blunders. Feminists of the 19th century wore trousers to blur the distinct boundaries that existed between men and

women (Luck, 1996). Later in time, the pantsuit evolved as the female counterpart to the male business suit. To "wear the pants in the relationship" means to hold the power within the relationship, signifying that the wearer of a historically masculine garment, denotes more power than a traditionally feminine garment (Owyong, 2007). The pantsuit is the standard uniform within the corporate world, oftentimes dominated by men. This uniform conveys a standard level of professionalism. According to Furnham and collegues, professional dress codes in the work place serve two functions, the first is to establish guidelines about what constitutes appropriate clothing, and the second is to provide a group identity within the workplace, separating workers from other professions (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014).

Stereotypes surrounding garments of clothing that have been historically associated with one gender over another, may be playing a role in the way in which women are perceived within the professional sphere. Stereotypes are defined as generalizations about individuals simply because they belong to a group (Heilman, 2012). Previous research has looked at the differences between casually dressed people and professionally dressed people (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014; Satrapa, et al, 1992; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). Researchers have also studied preferences among professionally dressed men and women (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014; Satrapa, et al., 1992; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). Research has intended to better understand sexually-charged clothing that is offered to young girls, and the implication that the styles can have on the public's perception of their persona (Graff, Murnen, & Smolak 2012; Goodin, Van Demburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2011). Little research exists analyzing the

variety of professional styles, and whether one style is considered to be more professional than other (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005).

The goal of this study was to seek clarification as to whether there exists a range of professional clothing created for women, or if all styles, including dresses and pantsuits, are deemed equally as professional. It was expected that participants would rate the model less favorably when wearing a sheath dress as compared to a pantsuit. It was also expected that women would rate the model as less competent. Finally, it was anticipated that those who earned higher scores on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire would rate the model as being less favorable. Participants were presented with a photo of a fictional woman named Julia Holmes. Julia was either dressed in a sheath dress or a pantsuit. Both conditions were accompanied by the same job description and resume. After reviewing the photo, job description, and resume, participants were asked to complete a rating scale of eight different traits (intelligent, friendly, determined, nice, competent, self-respecting, attractive, moral, and capable).

There was no significant difference between the sheath dress condition and the pantsuit condition. This may be because both styles of dress are considered to be professional options for women. Unlike men, women have professional style options that range from dresses, to skirts, to pantsuits, and suit separates. Although the sheath dress emphasized the model's feminine structure, the style was marketed as a professional option, as was the pantsuit.

It was discovered that contrary to expectations, women did not rate Julia more harshly than did men. Men rated Julia as significantly less self-respecting than did the female participants. This may illuminate that men have a different perspective on what

constitutes professional attire for women. A dress that a woman may deem as professional, may emphasize the feminine figure to the point of triggering stereotypes about female performance in the workplace. Since the dress emphasized the natural structure of the female body, male participants may have believed that there was too much emphasis on her figure, distracting from notions of how a woman in an interview should dress.

Although it was expected that higher scores on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire would correlate with poorer ratings of the model, the opposite was supported. Overall higher scores on the Self-Objectification Questionnaire was correlated with higher perceptions of competency. It may be that those who focus on physical appearance, seek the same preferences in others. Participants who judge themselves on their appearance, are likely to judge others on those same factors, demonstrating preference to the model who embodies the physical manifestation of those traits, including symmetrical body proportions, weight, physical attractiveness, and potentially, sexual appeal.

Limitations and Future Directions

None of the original hypotheses were supported, in fact, results were contrary to those anticipated. A potential reason why no significant difference was found between experimental conditions, may have been due to the sample size. There were 43 participants in the study, only eight of those being comprised of men. A larger sample would have yielded a larger power, and potentially the ability to pick up on the differences between experimental groups. Future studies should encompass a larger sample size.

Participants were drawn from a sample of convenience, made up of undergraduate college students. It is possible that undergraduate students have yet to thoroughly develop their understanding of professionalism, and do not know what is considered to be a professional style of dress. It is likely that the participants had minimal work experience and were still developing their own vision and standard of professional style and presentation. Future research could assess the degree of the participants' professional experience by adding a measure within the demographic questionnaire. It may also be noteworthy to collect responses from those who have been working full-time. A sample selected from an older generation may have held different perceptions regarding the appropriateness of wearing a dress in the professional sphere. They may possess stereotypes and preconceived notions about women in the workplace that may have been triggered by the more feminine style of dress.

To better understand the degree to which participants considered Julia to be professional and a strong candidate for the position, further items should be added. The study may have benefited from adding items to better understand whether participants considered Julia to be professional. Furthermore, it may have been beneficial to add an item assessing whether participants would have hired Julia for the role at Southwest Airlines. Although Julia was rated just as competently in both conditions, it is possible that subjects may show preference for one style of dress over another, as expressed through the decision to ultimately hire Julia.

Implications

Dissimilar to the expected results, there was not a significant difference between experimental conditions. Overall, Julia was rated equally as competent when dressed in a

sheath dress as well as a pantsuit. Those with higher scores on the Self-Objectification

Questionnaire rated Julia as more competent, contrary to the anticipated findings. Men

judged Julia in a less favorable way as opposed to women, in opposition to the proposed

hypothesis. It is possible that younger generations have a less stigmatized perception of

women seeking roles of power while dressed in a feminine way. It is likely that a

feminine style of dress is no longer synonymous with negative stereotypes of women.

This may mean that contrary to current research, younger women are comfortable with

admitting to seeing other women in a favorable light (Beebe, Homeck, Schober, & Lane,

1996; Strelan & Hargeaves, 2005). The future of women in the workplace, embodying

and expressing both masculine and feminine traits through their personalities and style of

dress, is becoming more accepted. This would suggest that young women entering the

workplace will be appreciated for their talents and abilities, and not whether they can

conform to the norm of a stereotypical way of acting like a man to fit into male-

dominated spheres.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-634-2885

1/4/2017

Brianna Esparza
Department of Psychology
ACU Box 28011
Abilene Christian University

Dear Ms. Esparza:

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled The Influence of Levels of Professional Style of Dress on Perceived Competency

was approved by expedited review (46.110(b)(1) category 7) on 1/4/2017   for a period of **one year**   (IRB # 16-109). The expiration date for this study is 1/4/2018   . If you intend to continue the study beyond this date, please submit the Continuing Review Form at least 30 days, but no more than 45 days, prior to the expiration date. Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make **any** changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Our Promise: ACU is a vibrant, innovative, Christ-centered community that engages students in authentic spiritual and intellectual growth, equipping them to make a real difference in the world.

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Informed Consent Form

Style Semiotics: The Influence of Levels of Professional Style of Dress on Perceived Competency

You may be eligible to take part in a research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you, the potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have regarding the procedures, your involvement, and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as your family doctor or a family member.

Also, please note that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please contact the Principal Investigator if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or if at any time you wish to withdraw. This contact information may be found at the end of this form.

Purpose and Procedures

Purpose of the Research—This study hope to better understand the way style of dress relates to impressions of professionalism. It is expected that the research will add to the body of knowledge surrounding factors that may influence first impressions.

Expected Duration of participation-- If selected for participation, you will be asked to attend one visit with the study staff over the course of one day. This visit is expected to take thirty minutes.

Description of the procedures-- Once you consent to participation in the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

> Study Procedures—Participants will be presented with a manila folder containing a demographic questionnaire, vignette of a career woman named Julia, along with the job she is wishing to apply to, Julia's resume, and her photo. Finally, participants will then be asked to complete an Impressions Rating Scale and Self-Objectification Questionnaire.

Risks and Discomforts

There are risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur:

Although rare and not serious, some foreseeable risks may include social and psychological repercussions. There is also the potential risk for a breach of confidentiality, though unlikely.

The researchers have taken steps to minimize the risks associated with this study. However, if you experience any problems, you may contact the primary investigator Brianna Esparza at bce15b@acu.edu.

The researchers and ACU do not have any plan to pay for any injuries or problems you may experience as a result of your participation in this research.

Potential Benefits

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include increased insight or awareness. Your participation will be compensated with extra credit for the course in which you volunteered to participate in the study. The researchers cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study, except for the extra course credit. The researchers hope that the information learned from this study will help others in similar situations in the future.

Provisions for Confidentiality

Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by assuring that documentation remains anonymous. Your identification will not be traceable in any way, as neither your name nor student identification number will be requested on any form, except for the sign-in sheet which will be provided to your professor in order to receive course credit. This information will not be associated with any of your responses to the survey.

Contacts

You may ask any questions that you have at this time. However, if you have additional questions, concerns, or complaints in the future, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study. The Principal Investigator is Brianna Esparza and may be contacted at bce15b@acu.edu.

If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact Richard Beck, PhD, Chair of the Department of Psychology at beckr@acu.edu.

If you have concerns about this study or general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885
megan.roth@acu.edu
320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

_____   _____
_____

Printed Name of Participant   Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
_____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining   Signature of Person Obtaining   Date
Consent   Consent

APPENDIX C

Style of Dress Conditions

Southwest Airlines Job Posting

SENIOR STRATEGY CONSULTANT

WORK ACTIVITIES/CONTEXT:

- Works alongside business partners from all airline functions to develop and execute strategies and plans in support of Southwest's vision "To be the World's Most Flown, Most Loved, and Most Profitable Airline".
- Develops meaningful insights and recommendations through date driven analysis to help solve our business partner's most complex and challenging problems.

EDUCATION:

- Bachelor's Degree required
- Master's of Business Administration or other graduate degree preferred

WORK EXPERIENCE:

- Minimum 2 years of experience at top tier consulting firm or 2 years of corporate strategy experience preferred
- Minimum 5 years of post-undergrad degree work preferred

SKILLS/ABILITIES/KNOWLEDGE/WORK STYLE:

- Communication and Influence
  - Must have strong ability 'to think on their feet'
  - Must have the ability to communicate complex issues in a structured and concise manner
- Problem Solving and Analytics
  - Must have a strong knowledge of strategic and financial analysis techniques
  - Must have strong comfort with ambiguity and imperfect information
- Strategic Thinking
  - Must have the ability to think across multiple time horizons, connecting the "big picture" and the "now"
  - Must have the ability to identify and resolve issues quickly
- Leadership and Trust
  - Must have the ability to assume a high level of responsibility and, at times, independence
  - Must have the ability to be a strong partner
  - Must have the ability to properly manage highly sensitive and confidential information

OTHER QUALIFICATIONS: Must maintain a well-groomed appearance per Company appearance standards as described in established guidelines.

Resume

JULIA HOLMES

julia.holmes@qmail.com | 555.485.4428 | 111 Vineyard Ave. Abilene, TX

EDUCATION

Master of Business Administration   May 2012
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, TX

Bachelor of Arts   May 2009
Management
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, TX

WORK HISTORY

Marketing Specialist   January 2014 – December 2016
Mortenson Dental Partners
Abilene, TX

Professional representative of the company with the community, clients, prospects, partners, and the media. Ensured brand clarity and consistency with the mission and vision in the company in external and internal communications and initiatives. Developed overall strategy to support marketing events and execute event marketing programs to increase awareness and drive engagement within the community.

AVP Client Relations   June 2012 – December 2013
AIM Your Way
Allen, TX

Assisted in developing and executing a programs of business development, client retention, and new product development in support of executive management's philosophies, policies, and goals. In conjunction with business unit management, provide leadership within the customer service department to develop and motivate personnel.

Sales Executive   June 2009 – September 2010
Hearst Digital Marketing Services
Abilene, TX

Provided valuable feedback to management to improve on sales and marketing strategies. Valuable asset in the business community by boosting clients' business through their digital marketing campaigns. Achieved and exceeded quotas.

SKILLS

- Management and leadership
- Conflict resolution
  coordinating

- Negotiation
- Event

APPENDIX F

Trait Rating Scale

Please rate Julia using the scale below. Circle the item that most aligns with your opinions of her.

SD: Strongly Disagree
D: Disagree
N: Neutral
A: Agree
SA: Strongly Agree

1.	This person is intelligent.	SD	D	N	A	SA
2.	This person is friendly.	SD	D	N	A	SA
3.	This person is determined.	SD	D	N	A	SA
4.	This person is nice.	SD	D	N	A	SA
5.	This person is competent.	SD	D	N	A	SA
6.	This person is self-respecting.	SD	D	N	A	SA
7.	This person is attractive.	SD	D	N	A	SA
8.	This person is moral.	SD	D	N	A	SA
9.	This person is capable.	SD	D	N	A	SA

Self-Objectification Questionnaire

We are interested in how people think about their bodies. The questions below identify 10 different body attributes. We would like you to *rank order* these body attributes from that which has the *greatest impact* on your physical self-concept (rank this a "9"), to that which has the *least impact* on your physical self-concept (rank this a "0").

Note: It does not matter *how* you describe yourself in terms of each attribute. For example, fitness level can have a great impact on your physical self-concept regardless of whether you consider yourself to be physically fit, not physically fit, or any level in between.

Please first consider all attributes simultaneously, and record your rank ordering by writing the rank in the rightmost column.

IMPORTANT: *Do Not Assign The Same Rank To More Than One Attribute!*

9 = greatest impact

8 = next greatest impact

:

1 = next to least important

0 = least impact

When considering your physical self-concept . . .

1… what rank do you assign to physical *coordination?* ____

2… what rank do you assign to *health?* ____

3… what rank do you assign to *weight?* ____

4… what rank do you assign to *strength?* ____

5… what rank do you assign to *sex appeal?* ____

6… what rank do you assign to *physical attractiveness?* ____

7… what rank do you assign to *energy level (e.g. stamina)?* ____

8… what rank do you assign to *firm/sculpted muscles?* ____

9… what rank do you assign to *physical fitness level?* ____

10… what rank do you assign to *measurements (e.g., chest, waist, hips)?* _____

In administering the measure, the title is not included. Scores are obtained by separately summing the ranks to appearance-based items (3, 5, 8, and 10) and competence-based items (1, 2, 4, 7, and 9), and then subtracting the sum of competence ranks from the sum of appearance ranks. Scores may range from -25 to 25, the higher scores indicating a greater emphasis on appearance, interpreted as higher traits of self-objectification. Copyright 1998 by Barbara L. Fredrickson. Individuals who wish to reprint all or part of the Self-Objectification Questionnaire should contact Barbara L. Fredrickson.