Role of Attire at Workplace: Women Managers

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Abstract

There is a lot of published literature supporting the argument that individuals on a day to day basis use attire to manage their image. Role of attire for employees is also based on their position in the hierarchy of the organization. According to Rafaeli and Dutton (1997), in organizations a clear distinction exists in terms of what is considered to be appropriate for those in management positions as opposed to non-management positions. Thus the present paper investigates the role of attire in perception formation for women managers. For this study the data was collected with the help of structured questionnaire followed by interviews of women managers. The paper focuses on two aspects; influence of attire on women managers' self-perception and influence of attire on perceptions made by others about them. The results of the study revealed that many employees make perceptions about a manager's intelligence, capability and competence based on the manager's attire. The study also found that managers when wearing formal clothes feel more confident and professional.

Keywords

Women Managers, Perception, Attire, Self-Perception.

Introduction

In the current business scenario, the factors contributing to the formation of an employee's identity are not only confined to his/her performance and skills but also to the decisions about attire at work. There is a lot of published literature supporting the argument that individuals on a day to day basis use attire to manage their image. In this paper an attempt is made to understand role of attire in perception formation about women managers at work.

As compared to males, females are found to display stronger interest in clothes and place more importance on attire (Solomon and Scholper, 1982). Role of attire for employees is also based on their position in the hierarchy of the organization. According to Rafaeli and Dutton (1997), in organizations a clear distinction exists in terms of what is considered to be appropriate for those in management positions as opposed to non-management positions. The present paper investigates the role of attire in identity formation of managers in their organization.

Though there is increase in diversity at workplace, women still experience gender bias and are represented less at managerial level. Despite of change in gender roles are, women in leadership positions still face various hindrances. The higher the position a woman holds in an organization, harsher are the judgments made if her clothing is perceived as inappropriate (Pine, 2014). A study conducted by Peluchette et al. (2006) on postgraduate students revealed that women consider dress to be an important component for managing their appearance; they make more efforts while choosing their attire for work than men, predominantly when they are occupying managerial or executive positions. Thus our study mainly sheds light on how women managers on a day to day basis use attire to manage their perceptions.

A study by Kwon (1994) reveals that there is a direct correlation between an individual's dressing and people's perceptions about them. People who are properly dressed are perceived as more responsible, honest, knowledgeable, professional, competent, reliable, trustworthy, intelligent, efficient and hardworking than those who are not. Kanter (1977) observed that dress and appearance are more crucial for women as compared to men as women in male dominated organizational setups have greater need for rightfulness, acceptance and standing. In a study, Thornton (1943) tried to understand the relationship between appearance and perception formed by people; he focused on specific symbols, a pair of glasses. It was observed that people with glasses were perceived to be more intelligent.

In a research undertaken by Landry and Sigall (1974) on female college students, it was found that physical attractiveness also influences the perception of performance specially when the performance of a woman is poor and she is physically attractive. In an attempt made by Howlett et al., (2015) to understand the relationship between female work attire and occupational status, the researchers observed that employees give unfavorable ratings to women executives who dress provocatively and favorable ratings to women executives who dress conservatively. It was seen that even minor change to dressing style has an impact on the impression of competence of women occupying managerial positions, while this was not the case with women not holding managerial positions.

Several studies have been conducted on attire and how it impacts various aspects of women image across different settings. This study is divided into two parts: 1) In the first part an attempt is made to study the impact of attire on self-perception of Women Managers and 2) In the second part, we determine the impact of attire on the perceptions made by others about the Women Managers. Along with literature survey, a pilot study was conducted with the help of interviews to explore whether Indian women managers give importance to their attire in creating their image. Our study focuses on women who are occupying managerial positions in different organizations. For this study attire includes clothing, artifacts, perfumes, shoes and ensemble that women managers wear at work.

Literature Review

Literature review primarily focuses on how attire influences employee's self-perceptions and perception made by others about them.

1) The influence of attire on employee self-perceptions:

The attire that you wear has an influence on how you feel about yourself. The clothes that you choose to wear have an impact on your health, mood and confidence. This phenomenon is termed by scientist as "enclothed cognition". Two professors of Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University published in one of their work that "enclothed cognition" encompasses the concomitance of two factors physical appearance of wearing clothes and symbolic significance of the clothes. In a study undertaken by Peluchette and Karl (2006) an attempt was made to find out how employees' choice of workplace attire affect self-perception. They found that research participants feel friendly when dress in casual clothes whereas in formal business attire they feel authoritative, competent and trustworthy. Thus it can be said that there is a relationship between the type of dress worn and self-perception of trustworthiness, intelligence, productivity and friendliness. It was also observed that people with high self-monitors or at executive positions are more likely to use attire to create image. Hannover and Bettina (2002) conducted an experiment to understand the relationship between attire and self-description. Participants of the experiment were asked to dress in either casual or formal attire. Once they reached for the experiment they were asked to describe themselves by choosing from the trait adjectives floated by the researcher. It was seen that formally dressed participants picked more formal adjectives to describe themselves and casually dressed participants chose more casual adjectives (easy going, tolerant). Thus it can be said that attire has an impact on how an individual feels about oneself. How an individual looks like also has an impact on its self-esteem. Joung and Miller (2006) in one of their study on 389 females (age 55 years and above) found that appearance management has a direct impact on social participation and self-esteem. Thus old aged females can be encouraged to participate in appearance management to improve their self-esteem. On the similar lines a study was carried out by Kwon (1994) on 132 males and 190 females to find out, if self-perception of occupational characteristics can be affected by the type of clothing. It was observed that both male and female participants feel that the appropriate dressing aids to their self-perception of occupational characteristics like intelligence, reliability, competence and honesty.

2) The influence of attire on perceptions made by others:

Clothes that we wear not only influence us but also influence how others will perceive us. A research conducted at the National Research Council of Canada (NRCC) highlighted that a person's appearance creates an impression of financial growth, loyalty, power, expertise or even the decision of hiring or promoting on others. The researchers found that communication skills when merged with an individual's look create a difference in the way others look at you and their behavior towards you. Subsequently, as what we perceive becomes the reality, in addition to professional growth attire highlights personality in others' mind. In an attempt to study the relationship between occupational attire, dress and perception of competence, Howlett et al., (2015) witnessed that when women on a senior position in an enterprise dresses conservatively, she is rated favorably on competence whereas when she dresses provocatively, she is rated as less competent. Thus it can be said that how you dress at work impacts people's perception of your competence. Individual makes perceptions about people on the basis of how they look and what they wear. In schools and colleges, a lot of time perceptions about intelligence and scholastic achievements of a student are formulated on the basis of how they look. On the similar lines, a research was undertaken by Behling and Williams (2010) in which stimulus photographs of male and female wearing different clothing styles were shown to high school students and it was found that the student's perception of academic achievement and intelligence are highly influenced by the dress and gender

Material and Methods

This study is undertaken to understand how attire influences self-perception of women managers and perception made by others about them. For this purpose, a pilot study was conducted with the help of in-depth interviews of

five women managers belonging to different organizations, to validate the research objective. And with help of pilot study and literature variables for the questionnaire were identified. Data for the study was collected with the help of structured questionnaire. One questionnaire was used to collect the data from women managers to study the impact of attire on self-perception. The variables used to design this questionnaire are formal dress, casual dress, fancy dress, and confidence, and comfort, professional, competence. Another questionnaire was used to collect data from employees working in different organizations to study the influence of attire on perceptions made by others. The variables used to design this questionnaire are Intelligence, Competence, Reliability, Professionalism, Capability, and Character.

Participants of the study were women managers and employees working in different organizations. Snow ball sampling technique & convenience sampling was used to identify sample. The data for study was collected from 10 women managers and 50 employees working in different organizations. Out of the ten women, two were in public sector, one in fashion industry, two in higher education, and remaining were employed in private organizations. The total number of participants was 60.

Results and Discussion

- 1) With the help of purposive sampling technique, women managers were identified and the data was collected with help of questionnaire and interview. Women managers were asked to fill a questionnaire of 12 items and were asked to answer in **Yes or No**

Questions	Response Yes (%)	Response No (%)
When dressed formally at work, you feel more confident	.7	.3
When dressed formally at work, you feel more comfortable	.4	.6
When dressed formally at work, you feel more professional	.6	.4
When dressed formally at work, you feel more competent	.3	.7
When dressed casually at work, you feel more confident	.2	.8
When dressed casually at work, you feel more comfortable	.8	.2
When dressed casually at work, you feel more professional	.1	.9
When dressed casually at work, you feel more competent	.4	.6
When dressed in a fancy attire at work, you feel more confident	.2	.8
When dressed in a fancy attire at work, you feel more comfortable	.4	.6
When dressed in a fancy attire at work, you feel more professional	.2	.8
When dressed in a fancy attire at work, you feel more competent	.3	.7

Table 1: Self-Perception Made by Women Managers

Findings reveal that women when dressed formally feel more confident and professional. Many women suggest that to feel competent it is not essential to wear a particular attire. It is also found that women when wearing casual attire feel more comfortable.

Thus it can be said that the attire we wear has an impact on our self-perception to some extent.

- 2) To understand the influence of attire on perceptions made by others about women managers a questionnaire was designed and was given to employees working in different organizations. Out of the 50 respondents, 29 were female and remaining were 21 were male.

The respondents were asked the following questions and were expected to answer in either Yes, No, May be

Do you tend to make perceptions about the below mentioned variables for a women manager based on the attire (formal, casual, fancy, conservative, provocative, appropriate or inappropriate) they wear.			
Variables	Response Yes (%)	Response No (%)	Response May be (%)
Intelligence	.54	.3	.16
Competence	.6	.31	.9
Reliability	.32	.48	.2
Professionalism	.40	.32	.28
Capability	.56	.24	.2
Character	.38	.32	.30

Table 2: Perceptions Made by Employees about the Women Managers

It can be interpreted that many employees make perceptions about a women manager's intelligence, competence and capability. To some extent even the professionalism of a women manager is judged based on the attire they wear. It can be said that people do make perceptions about women managers based on the attire they wear.

Conclusion

The study reveals that women feel more confident and professional when wearing formal attire, feel more comfortable when wearing casual attire. Thus it can be said that attire plays a role in influencing the self-perception of women managers at work. While considering the aspect of perceptions by made others, it could be seen that many employees make perceptions about their women manager's Competence, Intelligence and Capability based on the attire of women manager. Thus it can be interpreted that attire do influence the perceptions formed by others about women at leadership positions.

Future Research and Limitations

The study is confined to a specific region. Results may vary with different set of samples hence the findings cannot be generalized. Future research can include comparative study between different age groups, genders, professions, and geographic locations. An in-depth study can also be conducted with respect to the impact of different types of attire that women use to strengthen their identity.

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