Evaluations of Women's Suits By Male and Female Personnei Lnterviewers

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We conducted the study to identify aesthetic components of women's apparel that are appropriate in the business employment interview context for managerial applicants in the midwest U.S. Responses of male and female employment interviewers were compared for similarity and differences. The findings are used to develop a model of the semiotic process by which perceivers make sense of complex and novel combinations of aesthetic appearance cues. Gender differences were explored to add to understanding of the contribution of perceiver characteristics to interpretation of apparel signs. The exploratory nature of the method allowed generation of a number of hypotheses for future theory testing.

METHOD

The respondents included 37 female and 24 male personnel interviewers at 61 businesses randomly selected from the Des Moines, Iowa, Chamber of Commerce business directory. Ages ranged from 26 to 62 years. Size of firms varied from 14 to 4,200 employees.

The stimuli were 100 color photographs of women's skirted suits and a few dresses selected from current mail order catalogs to include a wide variety of style characteristics. Posture of model could not be controlled in these naturalistic stimuli, but each photo included a full length, frontal body view of a standing model. Hair and facial features as well as background were cut away to eliminate contribution of those clues. Pictures were mounted on separate sheets of neutral grey paper and encased in clear film folders.

Data collection was conducted at the respondents' convenience at their business offices. Following a technique adopted by Buckley (1984-1985), the respondents sorted the randomly ordered pictures into piles distinguishing level of appropriateness of ensembles for a middle management employment interview with their firm. Number of levels of appropriateness was selected by each respondent (from 2 to 8 piles). Pictures were scored as "1" if placed in the most appropriate pile and up to "8" for least appropriate. Finally, the respondents described their reasons for distinguishing piles. Responses were recorded on audio tape and later transcribed.

Initial sorting scores were converted to two similarity matrices -- one for male and one for female respondents. For any two suits, similarity was the percentage of same-gender respondents who sorted the two suits into the same pile.

Hierarchical cluster analyses were conducted on the matrices using the BMDP P1M cluster analysis of variables program (Dixon, 1983). The complete, single, and average linkage cluster solutions were compared for similarities and differences between male and female respondents. All linkage solutions were similar, but average linkage solution is discussed here.

To ascertain whether clusters formed in accordance with rankings of appropriateness, pooled mean scores of appropriateness for all garments in a cluster were computed and compared via t-tests. Since respondents differed in number of piles discriminated, sorting scores were transformed to midranks scores (Lehmann, 1975). The midranks procedure theoretically assumes that 100 piles or ranks could have been made and converts raw sorting scores to a consistent scale of 1 to 100, indicating relative degree of appropriateness rankings across subjects.

In cluster solutions for both male and female responses, one cluster consistently contained highest ranked suits and another cluster contained lowest ranked suits (p < .0001 for t-tests of cluster means). Two to three additional clusters emerged...
in each analysis; the additional clusters contained suits with middle range rankings of appropriateness.

A visual analysis system was developed for coding a wide variety of characteristics of the suits and dresses. Concepts from DeLong (1987) and findings from a previous pilot study using this method (Damhorst, Eckman, and Stout, 1986) and from qualitative responses by the interviewers were incorporated into 54 scale and nominal ratings of visual characteristics. Features of the jacket or bodice, blouse, skirt, hose, shoes, accessories, and overall appearance were measured by three trained judges who applied the system to each of the 100 pictures. Inter-coder reliability of items in the measure ranged from 0.61 to 1.00. Mean scores of garments in clusters were compared on the visual characteristics to define differences between clusters and similarities and varieties within each cluster.

RESULTS

In general, male and female interviewers exhibited a high degree of similarity in rankings of most appropriate and least appropriate suits. Skirts above the knee were consistently ranked as low in appropriateness, regardless of other garment characteristics. Most appropriate designs were also fairly symmetrically balanced.

Other characteristics of designs in the most appropriate cluster were commonly found in best ranked suits but could be violated as long as the remainder of the ensemble contained appropriate features. For example, necklines were usually not cut to reveal much bare skin; sleeves were usually full length, set-in, and tailored; jacket length extended from just below the waistline to mid-hip area; low contrast plaids and prints could be worn in the upper body area or throughout the suit, but rarely in the skirt alone; hosiery was varied in color but tended to be sheer rather than opaque; and accessories were limited in number. A wide variety of jacket collar styles and garment colors and fabrics were acceptable.

Male and female interviewers’ perceptual organization of garments different in a few ways. Women, for instance, had a higher tolerance for narrower skirt silhouettes that emphasized body shape. But overall, extreme tightness or fullness was not acceptable in appropriate garments. The most appropriate cluster of suits for men included less variety in color than did the women’s most appropriate cluster. Women also included a few tailored dresses as highly appropriate apparel for job interviews, whereas men’s top ranked cluster included only suits. Men perceived fewer suits as highly appropriate and as least appropriate than did women. The cluster solutions for men included more garments in middle-ranking clusters. Overall, women accepted more aesthetic variety in top ranked and lowest ranked suits.

CONCLUSIONS

A skirted version of the traditional men’s business suit seems to serve as a basic reference framework to which women’s business dress is compared and interpreted. However, the notable variety in colors and design details among appropriate suits and dresses indicated that both male and female perceivers used rules for interpretation of dress cues flexibly and complexity. Relative degree of variation from the standard classic business suit seemed to determine appropriateness. Only skirt length and degree of asymmetry were rules from which certain deviations were not allowed among more appropriate suits. The high degree of similarity in male and female personnel interviewer rankings of suits indicates societal, or at least business community, consensus on meaning of aesthetic symbols in women’s business dress.

The findings give evidence of women’s changing fit into business roles. Greater variety in color and design detail was acceptable in the 1991 interview dress than was recommended early in the 1980s by popular “dress for success” writers. As a significant proportion of women move into management positions in industry, women may gain more power and confidence to adjust appearance to coincide somewhat with female gender traditions that emphasize play with aesthetic elements in dress. Or is the greater acceptance of aesthetic play actually a “plot,” encouraged by the male power structure, to keep women in business “below the glass ceiling” in the hierarchical power structure because of less professional, more feminine appearances (Wolf, 1991)? Hypotheses can be generated from the findings that relate to role change theories (e.g.,
Warren, 1949), symbolic self completion theory (Solomon, 1983), and various feminist theories.

REFERENCES


