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Margaret Rucker, University of California, Davis
Linda Boynton Arthur, University of Hawaii
Tamara Williams, University of California, Davis

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Studies of women's images in the media and observers' perceptions of women's images in everyday life situations, including the work environment, continue to expand our understanding of socially constructed constraints and role conflicts. Somewhat less attention has been devoted to conflicts and constraints, at least as reflected in career clothing problems, from the point of view of the working woman herself. Notable exceptions include the work of Erickson and Sirgy (1992), Gorden, Tengler and Infante (1982), Rabolt and Drake (1985) and Solomon and Douglas (1987). Even these studies, however, deal primarily with the effects of variables such as career anchorage, attitudes toward clothing and sources of information about clothing on clothing selection. There have been fewer observations regarding role-related problems in the selection and use of career apparel.

Examination of traditional gender roles and occupational roles suggests a number of possible courses of conflict. Perhaps the most obvious conflict for women is between dressing to enhance physical attractiveness and dressing to be perceived as competent. Several studies have indicated that female physical attractiveness can be a detriment with respect to job success (Cash, Gillen and Burns, 1977; Cash and Trimer, 1984; Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979). A related source of conflict, observed as early as Veblen's work in 1899, is that dependent social roles, such as the traditional female role, are often associated with uncomfortable, hobbling apparel. Such clothing attributes would obviously limit effective functioning in the workplace.

The present study was designed to collect data on career apparel problems from the perspective of the job holders and explore the possibilities of linkages with gendered identities. Respondents were selected from two telecommunications firms on the West Coast. Sixty-four female employees and thirty-one male employees responded to a questionnaire with open-ended items on designers/manufacturers' garments that worked well in a career setting and problems encountered in acquiring career clothing. Content analysis was used to determine frequency of various themes in the responses.

The data provided some support for a reflection of role conflicts in career clothing problems. Overall, women were more apt to report being dissatisfied with career apparel. There were comments from women about difficulties in finding clothing that was both feminine and businesslike; men did not mention comparable problems. There were also complaints of confining, hobbling apparel from women but generally not from men, although one male did complain that he did not like "play dressup." In addition, women were more likely to seek out a particular designer/manufacturer who produced comfortable clothing. The most consistent problem among women, however, was finding a satisfactory fit. The fit problems largely reflected differences in industry sizing systems (tailored men's clothing has a more complex sizing system that tends to provide the wearer with a better fit) and still all-too-common neglect of style preferences among consumers wearing larger sizes.

Implications for the consumers of career apparel and the industry will be discussed.

REFERENCES


