Gender and the Consumption of Career Clothing: the Fantasy and the Reality

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The possessions we acquire and use are important elements in defining and communicating identity (cf Belk, 1988). This is especially true for clothing, due to its ubiquity and high degree of social visibility. Since the 1970s, writers have emphasized the importance of choosing career clothing to create an image that will be viewed positively by hiring agents and job supervisors (Bergen, 1977; Harragan, 1977; Kelly, Jones, Hatch and Nelson, 1976; Korda, 1975; Molloy, 1975, 1977). However, much of the early advice was based on personal opinion and recommendations often conflicted, especially with respect to women's apparel. For example, Molloy recommended that women conceal body contours whereas Korda suggested that accentuating sexuality was an important source of power for women at work outside the home. Images of women in the media have not provided much additional help with respect to appropriate career apparel. Advertisements have generally portrayed women as decorative and/or engaged in activities in the home. Even as more scholarly attention has been directed toward career apparel, definitive conclusions remain elusive.

The following three abstracts cover the topic of consumption of career apparel from three quite different perspectives. Following the suggestion of O'guinn, Shrum and Semenik (1991), Lennon focused on "the program between the ads" in her study of clothing consumption and social roles in the media. Damhorst and Fiore collected data from hiring agents to assess how clothing norms might be shifting with changes in balance of power in the workplace. Rucker, Boynton and Williams surveyed the employees themselves to compare the problems and preferences of men and women who are the actual consumers of the career clothing.

REFERENCE


Molloy, J.T. (1975), Dress for Success, New York: David McKay Co.
