

Influence of Applicant's Dress on Interviewer's Selection Decisions

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Hiring recommendations from 77 personnel administrators were used to determine the effect of female applicants' dress on interviewers' selection decisions for management positions. Personnel administrators viewed videotaped interviews of four applicants in different costumes and made hiring recommendations for each applicant. Three-way analysis of variance was used to determine the effect of costume on hiring decisions independent of the effects of person, sequence of showing, and Costume \times Person interaction. The results confirmed that masculinity of the female applicant's dress had a significant effect on interviewers' selection decisions. There was a positive relationship between masculinity of the applicant's costume and favorability of hiring recommendations received by the applicants. The influence of person on selection decisions also was significant. It was concluded that female applicants' clothing is an avenue for influencing the selection decision for management positions.

Despite a dramatic increase in the number of working women in recent years, the proportion of women who occupy managerial and executive positions has remained small. Some authors (Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977; Rosen & Jerdee, 1973, 1974; Schein, 1973) have suggested that the lack of women managers and executives stems from the traditional perception of women as less qualified than men for management positions. Several researchers have concluded that sex role stereotypes may limit employment opportunities for women (Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wilback, 1975; Rosen & Jerdee, 1973, 1974).

For improved employment opportunity, female candidates for management positions need to understand any influence of dress on hiring decisions and how they may dress to enhance their professional image. The purpose

of this research was to provide some empirical basis for the influence of dress on hiring recommendations received by women interviewing for middle management positions.

The role of clothing as a significant variable in person perception has been well established (Conner, Nagasawa, & Peters, 1975; Douty, 1963; Rosencranz, 1962). Other researchers have found that the initial perception of an individual affects subsequent ratings of the individual's performance within a task-oriented situation (Lapitsky & Smith, 1981; Smith, 1976; Vielhaber & Gottheil, 1965). Nonverbal cues, including the appearance of a candidate, have been found to influence the interviewer's perception of the candidate as well as subsequent hiring decisions (Hatfield & Gatewood, 1978). Findings of Littrell and Holm-Peterson (1980) support the inclusion of dress as a factor in hiring decisions.

Clothing cues, which become the basis for inferences about the wearer, increase in salience when information about the wearer is minimal or ambiguous (Secord & Backman, 1964). Thus, during an employment interview, appearance is an important source of information because information about an applicant is limited.

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Whereas the male executive's attire is governed by formal or informal dress codes, female candidates for management positions face special difficulties in determining prospective employers' dress expectations. Appropriate business dress for female executives is not well defined, and there is little empirical basis for establishing clothing criteria that would enhance the employment opportunities of female candidates for management positions. Consequently, to improve the marketability of prospective female managers, it is important to define appropriate business dress for this group.

Method

Subjects

Seventy seven personnel administrators attending a state industrial personnel conference in 1981 evaluated videotapes of women interviewing for management positions. Most of the subjects evaluated applicants for management positions in manufacturing as part of their jobs.

Development of the Instrument

Because of the complexity of the perception process, a study of the effect of costume on hiring recommendations needs to be done indirectly. Miller, Feinberg, Davis, and Rowold (1982) found that a direct question about the extent to which subjects take appearance into account in making judgments did not provide an index of sensitivity to appearance. This corroborates more general evidence indicating that subjects are frequently unaware of the extent to which stimuli affect their responses (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) and reinforces the idea that clothing is symbolic; it is the message of a clothing symbol that is often perceived, not the clothing itself. In the present study, color videotapes of simulated interviews were used to assess interviewers' evaluations of female candidates applying for management positions.

Four women were videotaped in each of the four experimental costumes for a total of 16 videotapes—one videotape of each applicant in each of the costumes. Each applicant was videotaped in each costume to balance the effect of person over costume, thus allowing the researchers to determine the effect of costume independent of person effects. The videotapes were recorded without sound so the effect of verbal communication would not be confounded with the effects of costume and person. Each subject viewed four color videotapes—one videotape of each of the four applicants in a different costume—in a systematically selected sequence and made hiring recommendations for each applicant.

Four costumes, representing four different levels of masculinity, were selected on the basis of the design components necessary to convey each level. The design components that collaborate to give a masculine effect

are vertical lines, straight silhouettes, strong angular lines, large-scale details, heavy textures, and dark colors. The most masculine costume incorporated these design elements. A feminine effect is achieved by horizontal movement of lines, rounded silhouettes, curved lines, small-scale details, soft, delicate textures, and light colors. These design elements were most pronounced in the least masculine costume. The two intermediate costumes incorporated combinations of masculine and feminine design components; however, one was more masculine than the other.

A panel of judges independently viewed color videotapes of a control applicant in each of the four costumes and rated the masculinity of each costume on a 4-point scale from 1 (*not at all masculine*) to 4 (*very masculine*). All panel members agreed on the relative masculinity of each costume.

The four experimental costumes were as follows:

Costume 1. A light beige dress in a soft fabric, with a small round collar, gathered skirt, and long sleeves (least masculine costume).

Costume 2. A bright aqua suit with a short belted jacket and a white blouse with a large, softly draped bow at the neck.

Costume 3. A beige, tailored suit with a blazer jacket and a rust blouse with a narrow bow at the neck.

Costume 4. A dark navy, tailored suit and a white blouse with an angular collar (most masculine costume). (See Figure 1.)

Procedure

To achieve unbiased estimates of the effects of costume independently of any effects associated with applicants per se and sequence of showing, a set of orthogonal, Latin squares was used as the experimental design. Following this design, each subject viewed four videotapes—one videotape of each applicant in a different costume—and ranked each applicant from 1 (*least likely to be hired*) to 4 (*most likely to be hired*). A different sequence of showing was used with each set of subjects to eliminate sequential effects.

Although respondents were ranking the applicants, the usual three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed in order to gain insight as to what the effect of costume might be. (See Table 1). The effects of costume, person, showing sequence, and Person \times Costume interaction on interviewers' hiring recommendations were examined. The person wearing the costume was used as one of the two blocking variables in order to control the variation associated with the applicants. Sequence of showing, the other blocking variable, was used to control for any variation caused by the order in which persons and costumes were viewed by the subjects. The possible influence of any Person \times Costume interaction on hiring recommendations was investigated, because a Person \times Costume interaction would indicate that a particular costume was judged differently on different applicants. Neither sequence of showing nor Person \times Costume interaction was significant; therefore, they were deleted from the model. Because there were no significant Person \times Costume effects, estimates of person effects were not confounded with Person \times Costume interaction effects.

Results and Discussion

The influence of costume on hiring recommendations was both positive and significant at the .05 level, with an F value of 3.30. A positive relationship between masculinity of costume and favorable hiring recommendations existed for the first three costumes. That is, applicants received more favorable hiring recommendations as costume masculinity increased. However, applicants received less favorable hiring recommendations when wearing Costume 4 (the most masculine costume) than when wearing Costume 3. Hiring recommendations associated with costumes can be seen graphically in Figure 2.

Both the person and costume effects were

significant, the former at the .01 level and the latter at .05. That the personal effect should be greater than the costume effect is not surprising based on the findings of Cash et al. (1977).

There are some limitations regarding the generalizability of these findings. First, videotapes of simulated interviews are not equivalent to actual interviews. Nevertheless, the use of videotapes did allow the researchers to control some of the extraneous variables while presenting more cues about the applicant than could be obtained through photographs, line drawings, or slides. Second, the absence of audio may further limit generalizability of the findings because verbal communication does influence perception. How-

Costume 1—Least Masculine



Costume 2—Somewhat Masculine



Costume 3—Moderately Masculine



Costume 4—Most Masculine



Figure 1. Costumes used in the study.

Table 1
Analysis of Variance for Hiring Recommendations

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Model	6	33.73	5.67	4.79**
Costume	3	11.60	3.86	3.30*
Person	3	22.13	7.34	6.29**
Error	299	350.76	1.17	

Note. The percentage of total variance accounted for by person is 5.8% and by costume 3.0%. The percentage of variance accounted for by the statistical model is consequently 8.8%.

* $p = .05$ level.
** $p = .01$ level.

ever, in a laboratory study comparing interviewers' judgments based on "paper cues" versus actual interviews, Gorman, Clover, and Doherty (1978) found that interviews contributed little incremental validity over the use of paper cues alone. Thus, although there are differences in the judgmental outcomes of the two procedures, it is not clear what accounts for the differences. Gorman et al. (1978) noted that videotaping interviews reduces the number of cues available and prevents any face-to-face interaction.

Examination of the design elements present in Costume 4 may help to explain why the applicants received less favorable hiring recommendations when wearing Costume 4 than when wearing Costume 3. The stark color contrast between the dark navy suit and the white blouse and the emphasis on strong angular lines—typically masculine design elements—may have been perceived as too masculine to be appropriate for women.

An observer's perception of the appropriateness of another's dress is learned from the observer's past experiences. Therefore, interviewers may have perceived the applicants to be less appropriately dressed when wearing Costume 4 if they were not accustomed to associating with women who wear very masculine clothing.

These findings raise some questions which merit further research. A cursory examination of lay literature (Solomon & Douglas, 1983; Molloy, 1977) reveals that a "too masculine" image is counterproductive for women. However, no one has determined precisely what constitutes a "too masculine" image and

whether this image is the same for different groups of subjects. For example, would a very masculine costume be more productive for a conservative field such as banking than for a less conservative field such as advertising? Similar studies using costumes that represent more levels of costume masculinity could provide additional information regarding the most favorable range of costume masculinity for women applying for managerial positions. Replication with subjects from various business and industries could reveal whether an "optimum level of masculinity" was most productive for interviews in a wide range of business and industry.

The present research builds upon the findings of several authors, which have shown that clothing cues do influence selection decisions (Hatfield & Gatewood, 1978; Jones, 1974). These findings seem especially pertinent to women applying for managerial jobs because it is the *impression* of the applicant's

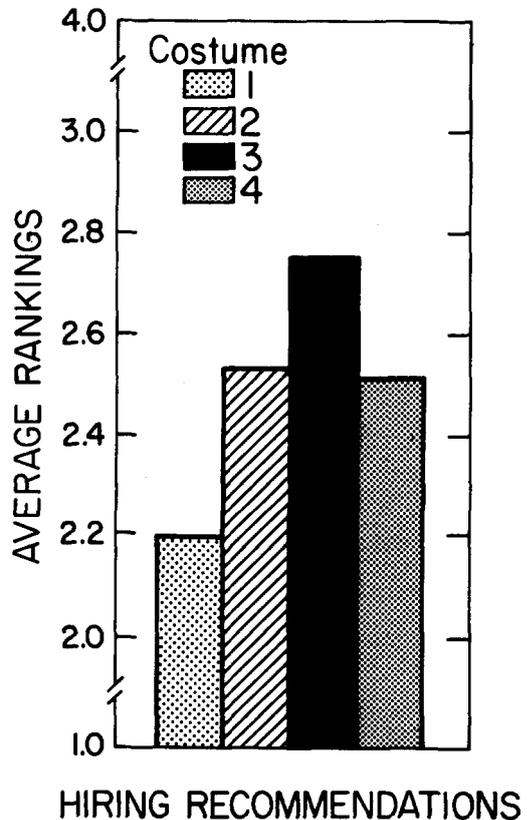


Figure 2. Hiring recommendations by costume.

expertise, rather than her expertise per se, that is most salient in the selection decision.

Conclusions

A comparison of the hiring recommendations associated with each costume led to the conclusion that within an acceptable range, the more masculine the costume, the more favorable the hiring recommendations associated with it. The findings show that it is possible for a woman to dress in a manner that will improve the favorability of the hiring recommendation she receives. This supports a finding of Lapitsky and Smith, (1981) that in a task-oriented situation, an observer's reaction to an individual's clothing may be reflected in his or her evaluation of that individual's performance of the task. Although these findings may not apply to every individual, they do indicate it would be better for a woman to risk appearing too masculine rather than too feminine when applying for a management position.

This study, although limited in its design (i.e., there was no real interview context) has shown that masculinity of female applicants' dress is an important factor influencing the selection decision for management positions. Although dress is only one of many variables influencing hiring decisions, it is a variable that an applicant can manipulate easily to further her best interest.

The findings of this study have important implications for women in managerial and professional positions, women aspiring to those positions, and to marketers of apparel products for working women.

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