

The Influence of Fashion Creep on Dress Etiquette: Is Your Organization Marked Safe?

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As consumers navigate a world increasingly influenced by digital media, globalization, and progressive social norms, their fashion choices often serve as a form of personal expression and identity. Though individuals are encouraged to exercise freedom of expression, certain espoused fashion statements in public settings challenge socially acceptable societal norms and business etiquette. Thus, business etiquette and historical trends are marked “unsafe” from the ever-changing fashion industry trends. Evolutions in fashion and variations in cultural trends continue to challenge traditional dress norms in the workplace, formal public establishments, and classrooms across America. If inconsistent with organizational norms, these changes influence unfavorable perceptions of constituents and the respective organizations. Managing these impressions becomes critical for decision-makers desiring to protect an organization’s reputation and brand image. This paper explores the underlying dynamics shaping dressing norms, the paradigm shift, influences on professional attire, and outcomes associated with style selections. To embrace the changes and protect company images, we recommend continuous evaluation and reinforcement of dress code policies. We examine External Conformity Theory and Impression.

Keywords: dress codes, external conformity theory, impression management, signaling theory, business etiquette attire

INTRODUCTION

The influence of fashion on dress code policies emerged in the 1950s. Since then, fashion creeps have become an integral part of organizational norms. Fashion creep is the gradual change of fashion trends over time without one realizing such. Though change is expected, evolutionary trends have not always aligned with organizational norms. Moreover, some organizations have been oblivious to improperly aligned trends. In some organizations, dress codes are unmonitored, improperly enforced, or nonexistent. These organizations are breeding grounds for fashion creep and its catastrophic damaging effects. The strong nature of group conformity, increasing social media influence, and rapidly evolving trends can wreak havoc on a company’s dress policy. Once the unwanted ramifications become normalized, altering newly established norms becomes challenging. Yet, the reasons for sustaining proper dress code policies are unwavering. Brand image, consumer perceptions, symbolism and impression management are paramount.

The fashion industry's influence (for better or worse) permeates many organizations and rattle established customs and norms including self-presentation styles. Both professional and social settings are subject to rapid changes in the external business environment that influence the behavior of constituents. Professional attire is marked “unsafe” from the ever-changing fashion industry trends. These ever-changing trends have redefined what is considered acceptable office wear (Woolf, 2015) and social attire.

THE HISTORY

Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren and Doris Day were among the many actresses who defined the Hollywood's style in the early 1950s. Actors and actresses in Hollywood films and television sitcoms strikingly dressed to impress. Their glamour and adornment for fashion was mutually shared among homemakers and those employed outside the home. Women were to be impeccably dressed and groomed especially in public. Dresses were the daytime norm of the dutiful homemaker, who was expected to wear proper clothing and maintain a polished look. Upon leaving the home, many housewives wore the housedress with added accessories to sustain a polished look. Appearances, both inside and outside of the home, mattered.

In the workplace, businesswomen displayed professionalism through their attire and this phenomenon set the standard for fashion. Fashion choices focused on elegance and formality, which most women celebrated with apparel that extenuated their figure and drew attention to unique silhouettes. Full skirted, tea length dresses and form fitted sheath dresses (pencil dresses) were two classic dress shapes of the 1950s. The classic pencil skirts hugged their figures and ended just below the knee. Tailored suits, blouses, sweater sets, and classic accessories represented a conservative fashion approach that exuded how women presented themselves professionally in the workplace.

During the 50's era, men were often the sole bread winners, and their business attire reflected this role. Men also paid much attention to appearances (i.e., grooming) and showcased a well-put-together look. Dark suits, crisps white shirts and dark ties were dominant professional workplace attire and was practically a requirement.

While the 1950s fashion remains a legacy and has influenced modern men and women styles today, the business world has observed a paradigm shift in the way people dress professionally and socially. In fact, the ever-changing nature of the fashion industry has been attributed to countless redefinitions of what is considered appropriate office wear (Woolf, 2015). As such, the world of business and professionalism has experienced a shift in becoming less conservative and formal since the 1950s (Cain, 2018). This change is also due to multiple cultural and generational factors. For example, as more women have entered the workforce, their fashion standards have progressed alongside the feminist movement. Women no longer need attire to consist of stockings, straight seemed dresses, high heel shoes and pearl accessories. In some industries, workplace fashion has shifted to an “every day” look. As such, the term business professional is evolutionary and will continue to change with culture and time.

THE PROBLEM

Different generations adopt various interpretations of professional clothing, and such differences often present a challenge in managing a diverse workforce (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). The issue of socially acceptable dressing among Generation Z and Millennials is multifaceted, reflecting an interplay of cultural, social, and individual factors in contemporary society. As these cohorts navigate a world increasingly influenced by digital media, globalization, and progressive social norms, their fashion choices serve as a form of personal expression and identity. Though individuals are encouraged to exercise freedom of expression, certain espoused fashion statements challenge historical business attire and social dress etiquette.

Younger generations have modified traditional norms for publicly appropriate attire. Controversial fashion trends include athleisure and casual wear in formal settings, revealing and provocative clothing, graphic and political statements t-shirts, visible tattoos and atypical body piercings. Such choices represent

the ongoing evolution of personal expression through fashion. The controversies stem from tension between embracing contemporary ideas and maintaining traditional standards in public settings including classrooms and work environments. Younger cohorts aspire to create dress codes that balance fashion trends with professional attire. Hence, managers should expect Millennials and younger cohorts to challenge traditional norms while normalizing casual dress styles and creative fashion expressions (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, pressure to conform to evolving standards of social acceptability can create tensions between individuality, societal expectations, and business dress codes.

Additionally, socially acceptable attire variations are challenged in organizations with established dress codes. Restaurant dress codes include casual, business casual, formal, casual elegant, or jacket required. Some establishments also indicate that sneakers are not allowed; yet, pairing sneakers with formal attire is a contemporary trend among men and women. In some instances, potential customers are turned away from luxury spaces if their attire does not match the restaurant dress code. These decisions often lead to discriminatory claims, especially for certain protected groups. However, high end restaurant owners contend that maintaining standards creates an environment where everyone feels special, and the attire should complement the ambiance and decor of the business. Owners who have invested substantively in their businesses do not believe asking customers to dress appropriately is discriminatory if the restaurant promises a luxury experience for all patrons.

The same premise holds true for social events that typically require individuals to dress up, such as weddings, gala dinners, corporate events such as conferences or business dinners, award ceremonies, holiday parties, theater performances, dinner parties, religious ceremonies, memorial services and graduations. Dress codes are provided on invitations to alleviate confusion and ensure guests arrive in appropriate attire. For non-invitation events, general knowledge of appropriate dress is implied and individuals defying dress codes are considered noncompliant with social etiquette. Deviations in dress code guidelines may result in social stigmas or feelings of self-consciousness. Conversely, individuals who dress according to established norms experience a sense of belonging and conformity to social expectations. Understanding socially acceptable dress code norms is essential, but not all individuals possess dress code literacy. Below, we explore the underlying dynamics shaping dress norms, the paradigm shift, influences on professional attire, and outcomes associated with style selections.

Impression Management and Self-Presentation

Appearance based research reveals that people draw quick inferences and make judgements from visually assessments of others. These inferences affect perceptions and choices (Willis & Todorov, 2006). In fact, most appearance-based inferences focus on a target's competence (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009 & Ballew & Todorov, 2007). The evaluations occur through non-verbal cues (O' Hair, Rubenstien & Stewart, 2001). In an earlier study, Zagaski (2001) acknowledged that over 85% of the impressions are based on visible cues, including clothing, hair style, body type, and ethnicity. The impressions one derives from external cues affect how individuals are perceived and influence decision making in the workplace and social settings.

As such, non-verbal cues become an integral tool for impression management. Impression management refers to the process by which individuals attempt to control impressions others form of them. Ervin Goffman, framed impression management with his social interaction model with references to Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: All the World's a Stage, and the men and women are merely players. Goffman viewed individuals as actors who perform in various settings before audiences. The actors create identities, and the impression created among audience members becomes part of the identity. The character's presentation, voice tone, word choice, and dress are important.

Recall the importance of costumes in stage performances. The selection of attire is critical in portraying the character's role and contributes significantly to the audience's perception of the character. Similarly, fashion is an important tool for managing impressions and individual motives for such selections will vary. For example, businesses may require employees to wear uniforms to create identity among their customers and represent a brand. In the workplace, individuals utilizing impression management tactics may seek to maximize rewards and minimize punishments. An employee seeking a promotion may dress more formally

than a retirement candidate. In social settings, impression management tactics are utilized to create a public self that is consistent with the ideal self. If an individual embodies a sophisticated ideal image, their dress style will mimic this image. Impression tactics are also useful to signal affiliation with certain groups. A young law school graduate may choose to wear business attire typical of a professional in his or her field and this choice will influence perception from others.

Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory (Connelly, 2011 & Spence, 1973) explains how information is communicated in the absence of critical information or when two parties have access to different information. For example, individuals often send signals to convey information about themselves. Clothing is a prominent signaling tool and a significant factor in both first impressions and initial assessments of individuals (Lower, 2018). This means an employee's casual or inappropriate clothing selections can negatively evaluate the employee and their entire company. Attire style signals information that others use to judge when all other information is uncertain. In a retail establishment, employees may not be taken seriously or perceived as having the product knowledge necessary to advise consumers if their attire is inappropriate for the job. An Apple Support Advisor in the Apple Store may successfully promote the brand in a red t-shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers as they advise a consumer on the mechanics of operating an iPhone. However, the same attire worn by customer representatives in Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Bloomingdale's, may signal the wrong message and diminish the brand's image and reputation. In this regard, employees are agents of organizations and their presentation to consumers form impressions that will influence judgements. The brand image is important because it aids in communicating the organization's culture. One must not underestimate the impactful nature of signaling and its influence on impression management, especially among consumers.

Formal work clothing fosters respect by signaling work ethic characteristics such as norm compliance and professionalism (Slepian, 2015 & Lukavsky, 1995). Researchers contend that positive attributes associated with attire have similar effects on perceptions of workplace ethics (Servan, Friedman, & Palanski, 2021). Within the same study, individuals who wore apparel appropriate for their job role were rated more ethical. Hence, professional is a signal that shapes positive workplace perceptions (Ruetzler, 2012). Those who choose to wear formal attire in the workplace are ranked higher in credibility, taken more seriously, and have a higher likelihood of being regarded as "upper management material" by top executives", Wood and Benitez (2003). In formal social settings where traditional dress code standards are upheld, relaxing dress code norms may insult stakeholders whose attire signals respect for individuals and/or establishments. In some establishments, traditional dress code norms are an inherent part of the ambiance and relaxing such norms may impact the overall experience. As such, dress code is a signal that communicates the nature of the establishment and should be upheld to preserve consumer experiences.

Contemporary Dress Down Trends

Compared to traditional dress etiquette, today's acceptable office wear attempts to balance professionalism with comfortable and relaxed versatile pieces. While the specific dress code will vary from company to company, a few of the modern business casual standards include business casual, smart casual, and casual Fridays. Business casual attire consists of blouses, button-down tops, trousers and skirts (including straight leg and ankle pants), dresses (shirt, wrap and sheath), and comfortable shoes. Smart Casual styles include blazers, stylish denim, tailored jumpsuits, and modest accessories. Casual Fridays balance street clothes and office attire that support a polished look. Typically, upper management sets this day aside for employees to dress in casual and leisure clothes that are less formal than traditional office wear.

While Casual Fridays are usually a fun way to wrap up the workweek and improve morale, it was never intended to compromise the integrity of the work environment or company image. We acknowledge that trends and change in workplace attire will alter over time (Shinn, 2011). Constituents, especially consumers of social media, may emulate the trends they are exposed to, and such trends may slowly become a part of the organization's dress norm. Unfortunately, not all emerging fashion trends will comply with company

dress codes. Examples of inappropriate attire might include pajamas, short crop tops, extremely oversized clothing, overly revealing clothes, ripped jeans, graphic tees with sensitive content, ripped or severely distressed jeans, or sweatpants. Although trendy, street wear clothing is abusive to tradition's established norms. Similarly, this style of clothing would also challenge the ambiance of a business establishment that takes pride in fostering an exclusive or high-end customer service experience.

Theory of External Conformity

The Theory of External Conformity contends that individuals are influenced by choices and the actions of those around them (Price & Feick, 1984). The term interpersonal sources refer to people within an individual's social network or workplace inter-circle. Interpersonal sources are relevant when consumers are making both purchase decisions and choices involving clothing attire (Price & Feick, 1984). One's perception of workplace or socially appropriate attire will be partially based on how one predicts others will respond to a selected style or trend (Reutzler, 2012). In general, one's susceptibility to conform to outside pressure will vary, but the premise is common in both social atmospheres and workplace environments.

Bearden (1989) defined the theory as follows: *the need to identify with or enhance one's image in the opinion of significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others (p. 474).*

In social settings or workplace environments, expectations of reference group members serve as a focal point for decision making. As young generational cohorts aspire to blend professional attire with contemporary trends, they will influence new norms that others aspire to replicate. As such, the trend of more relaxed dress codes may persist and cultivate changes in company dress code norms. We concede that such a change may be appropriate in some organizational settings (i.e the IT industry), but such a change could be detrimental depending upon the nature of the environment.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Trends toward a more casual workplace are steadfast and companies can take measures to ensure the trends are appropriate for each respective organization. Upper-level management, business owners, and academic administrators should ensure that dress codes are current and indicate the environment the organization wants to portray. The ability to sustain an occasional relaxed dress code has its perks. Still, managers must remain diligent in surveilling dress code policies and norms to ensure that trends are conducive to an organization's culture.

Balancing the needs and wants of employees and/or students to those of the organization is critical. Organizations prone to changes are encouraged to create a task force or committee equipped with diverse representation from various age cohorts, ethnic backgrounds, and experience levels to review dress code standards on a regular basis. Modifications to dress code standards and expectations should be communicated to staff members and procedures for ensuring compliance should be disclosed.

All in all, the issue of an individual's attire in either the workplace or social environments warrants greater attention. Managing these impressions becomes critical for decision makers desiring to protect an organization's reputation and brand image. We recommend continuous evaluation, communication, and reinforcement of dress code policies to embrace the changes and protect brand images.

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