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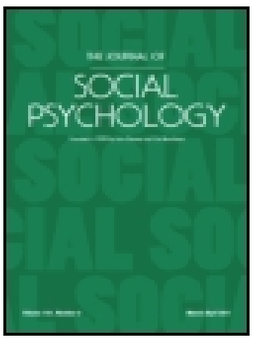

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Dressing "in code": Clothing rules, propriety, and perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Does dressing in line with societal clothing rules make a woman appear more professional and competent? We used a within-subjects design and tested if participants rated women dressed in compliance with school and workplace clothing rules more positively than women not dressed in compliance with rules. Participants ($N = 89$) at a mid-sized mid-western university rated 10 pictures of women captured from the internet on 11 attributes. Participants rated the five women dressed following clothing rules higher on a composite measure of positive attributes (intelligent, competent, powerful, organized, efficient, and professional), $F(1, 86) = 68.92$, $p < .001$ $\eta_p^2 = .45$. Participant's ratings did not correlate with their own self-reported levels of sexism. Participants' gender was not a significant correlate. Our findings indicate that how students perceive women significantly relates to dressing in code. Participants rated women in less revealing and less tight clothing more positively.

KEYWORDS

Clothing rules; dressing in code; sexism

Whether in schools or businesses, clothing rules abound. In schools, rules apparently safeguard against a number of issues such as curbing disruption, peer pressure, indecency, gang violence, and thefts (Anderson, 2002; DeMitchell, Fossey, & Cobb, 2000; Holloman, 1995; Siner, 2017). School principals in particular believe indecent clothing contributes to sexual harassment (DeMitchell et al., 2000). Rules, especially in schools, seem designed to prevent students from wearing clothing that viewers could consider provocative. Provocative images of women in the media create a stereotypical idea that women are highly sexualized objects (Brinkman, Khan, Jedinak, & Vetere, 2015; Ward & Friedman, 2006). People rate provocatively dressed women as inappropriately attired for work (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005). Even little changes, such as having a button undone, are associated with negatives perceptions (Gurung, Punke, Brickner, & Badalamenti, 2017; Howlett, Pine, Cahill, Orakçıoğlu, & Fletcher, 2015). Whereas dress codes are common, survey research on the effectiveness of dress codes is inconclusive and mixed (Johnston, 2009). Furthermore, we found no empirical work testing if dressing according to the rules or "in code" influence perceptions. Given that many dress codes can perpetuate discrimination against women (Zhou, 2015), it is important to examine if people rate women dressed according to clothing rules differently than women dressing in violation of the rules.

Clothing and perceptions are clearly related (Smolak, Murnen, & Myers, 2014). People use clothing to make judgments about others (Hannover & Kühnen, 2002; Howlett et al., 2015; Kwon & Farber, 1992). Studies show people judge competence, confidence, and credibility in the first 12 seconds of an interaction, influenced by the clothes worn (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2013). For example, students dressed formally for presentations received higher ratings from fellow students (Gurung, Kempen, Klemm, Senn, & Wysocki, 2014). People rate women who appear "sexy" as less competent, intelligent, and less moral than those who dress appropriately (Graff, Murnen, & Smolak, 2012; Murnen & Smolak, 2013). Similarly, teachers who are dressed more casually are perceived as being more approachable by students but are viewed as being less knowledgeable than formally dressed teachers (Hannover & Kühnen, 2002). It is worse for higher status women who people judge more harshly when in provocative clothing and rate less

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favorably if they are managers (Howlett et al., 2015). Specifically, people rate female mangers that dress proactively as being less intelligent, while female receptionists' clothing choices have no effect (Glick et al., 2005). In general, people prefer formally attired professional women and do not view informally dressed professional men negatively (Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998).

Schools and companies implement a dress code because the appearance of employees is a significant factor contributing to the company's image and evaluation of the company's service (Easterling, Leslie, & Jones, 1992; Hay & Middlemiss, 2002). Schools implement dress codes to prevent distracting clothing; however, these dress codes tend to be biased and only implemented for girls (Raby, 2010). Studies do show that customer's perception of a business is affected by how employees dress, a reason many companies have a dress code (Lennon, Schulz, & Johnson, 1999). In society, individuals learn how to dress from social media, literature, and television, adjusting to norms of what is acceptable in different contexts (Workman & Freeburg, 2000).

We found no research testing whether dressing in compliance with rules designed by professional establishments link to perceptions. We operationalized 'dressing in code' as following the rules provided by companies and schools regarding individuals' clothing when present on the premises. We tested if participants would rate rule compliant dressed women more positively than rule noncompliant dressed women.

Method[1]

Participants

Students at a midsized Midwestern university taking introduction to psychology and introduction to human development courses participated in this study ($N = 89$). Participants received credit for class for participating in the study. The sample consisted of 62 women and 27 men, 75.5% identified as White, 6.1% as Hispanic or Latino, 6.1% Asian or Asian American, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% African American, 1% other, and 9% did not answer. Of the sample, 62.2% were freshman, 15.3% were sophomores, 6.1% were juniors, 5.1% were seniors, and 9.2% did not answer.

Materials

Visual stimuli

We pulled five pictures of women dressed following common dress code and five women dressed breaking the rules from the Internet. The models were similar in body size, height, stance, and attractiveness as rated by two research assistants. We operationalized not following the rules for work as wearing form-fitting leggings and varying tops, from a sheer blouse to casual flannel. We operationalized following the rules for work as wearing dress pants and some type of a sweater for a top. We based these definitions on rules provided by companies and schools regarding dress codes (Professional Program in Education at UW-Green Bay, n.d.) (e.g., https://www.uwgb.edu/education/files/pdf/StudTeachHandbook2009.pdf).

Dependent variables

We used 11 descriptions for participants to rate the pictures on, adapted from previous research (e.g. Johnson & Gurung, 2011): professional, efficient, intelligent, powerful, competent, organized, attractive, dressed appropriate, revealing too much, wearing too tight of clothes, and is dressed too casually. We focused on attributes relating to strong job performance (e.g., Glick et al., 2005) and created a composite measure of the first 6 descriptors. This composite reflected positive attributes. We used the remaining five descriptors to confirm our models were similar in look (e.g., attractive) and as a manipulation check (e.g., dressed appropriate). Participants rated each picture on the varying attributes using a 7-point scale (*strongly disagree*) to (*strongly agree*). We averaged scores across all five models in each condition (following rules and not following rules). Average scores across models within category showed high internal consistency suggesting participants perceived our models to be similar to each other. For ratings used in creating our

main dependent variable composite, Cronbach α for the models following rules = .88 (Professional), .92 (Efficient), .92 (Intelligent), .89 (Powerful), .95 (Competent), and .92 (Organized). For the models not-following rules, Cronbach α = .80 (Professional), .86 (Efficient), .87 (Intelligent), .83 (Powerful), .90 (Competent), and .85 (Organized.

Participants also completed the *Ambivalent Sexism Scale* (ASI, Glick & Fiske, 1996) to measure sexism. The ASI consists of two subscales, the hostile sexism scale (HS) and the benevolent sexism scale (BS). The HS scale is related to negative images of women and consists of 11 statements such as "Women are too easily offended" rated on a five-point scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*). The BS is related to positive images of women and consists of 11 statements such as "Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores" rated on a five-point scale 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*). We averaged responses to create subscale scores. Subscales showed moderate to high internal consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .76_{\text{Benevolent Sexism}}$ and $.90_{\text{Hostile Sexism}}$.

Procedure

We recruited participants from a department subject pool where students in introductory classes take part in studies in exchange for research credit. Students pick from a number of online and face-to-face projects. Participants completed our survey online using Qualtrics software. We used a within-subjects design. We told participants the study measured "perceptions of different people and clothes." Participants completed the consent form, rated all 10 women (presented in random order) on the attributes described above, completed the ASI, and answered demographic questions. We debriefed participants at the end, informing them of the deception by omission.

Results

We first examined the correlations between our dependent variables and sexism. Sexism was not a significant correlate, and we excluded it from further analyses. Descriptive data for all dependent variables are available on request. We tested our main hypothesis with a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) comparing rule-compliant dress with noncompliant dress, with gender as a between-subjects factor and the composite measure as the dependent measure. We received support for our hypothesis. Participants rated women dressed following the rules higher, $M = 33.18$, $SD = 5.49$, than women dressed not following the rules, 29.46, $SD = 5.49$, $F(1, 86) = 68.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$. We did not find a significant main effect for gender.

In order to explore the possible reasons for why participants rated rule-compliant dressed women better and for a manipulation check, we conducted a series of ANOVAs on ratings of the outfit. Participants rated the clothes of women dressed following the rules as less revealing, $F(1, 73) = 54.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .43$; not too tight, $F(1, 73) = 83.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .53$; and more appropriate, $F(1, 73) = 73.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .50$.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that how people perceive a woman directly relates to dressing in code. Whereas dress codes seem to discriminate against women in that most codes have few prescriptions for men (Wintemute, 1997; Zhou, 2015), our results show that people also discriminate *against* women *not dressing in code*. Making quick judgments of strangers varying in dress yielded significant statistical differences. Not only is code dressing easy to operationalize (i.e., we pulled in code dress images from the internet), but viewers seem to attribute a range of positive attributes to those dressed in code.

In general, our study contributes to the existing literature showing how women's choice in dress can affect how others perceive her, specifically in a professional setting (e.g. Glick et al., 2005). We advance existing work showing how even relatively sober outfits (i.e., none of our code violating outfits showed excessive skin or looked out of the ordinary) can hurt women if the outfits are not "in

code." Furthermore, we present one of the first experimental tests of the effects of dress codes. Choosing to follow the dress codes provided by professional establishments does seem to have positive characteristics associated with them.

Limitations of this study pave the way for future research on this topic. We only used female models, a limitation preventing gender-specific predictions. There is a dearth of research on male dress partly because of little variance in what men wear (Casanova, 2015). Although we suggest women are victims here, we acknowledge we cannot really determine whether people would also negatively rate men breaking clothing rules in the same workplace. Of course, as pointed out previously, men have much fewer dress rules to follow, but rule-breaking is still possible. Together with having the same models dress in code and not in code to keep the models constant, future work needs to go beyond perceptions to studying behavior. Does perceiving someone as less competent based on their clothes influence interactions with them or actual performance evaluations of them?

Our study provides important psychological data to buffer a growing body of work assessing the legality of dress codes (Siner, 2017) and demonstrating how individuals use clothing to judge others (Hannover & Kühnen, 2002; Kwon & Farber, 1992). Whereas attire may be only one symbol of professionalism (Naughton et al., 2016), our results show that clothing is enough of a cue for people to make significant character judgments. An important implication of our results is that not following clothing rules can have a negative impact on how people perceive woman.

Notes

1. OPEN MATERIALS and DATA: All information for independent researchers to reproduce the reported methodology and results are available here (data and materials): https://osf.io/fpdbh/–Identifiers: DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/FT8KM | ARK c7605/osf.io/ft8km.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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