

Female Dress Style in a South African Corporate Workplace

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Appearance and dress style are important and significant factors in a person's career progression. This study gives insight into the importance and impact that the daily choices of apparel have had on female Managing Consultants in a South African corporate workplace. In studying the dress style of the participants, we established the role of dress style in the work lives of senior females in a consulting firm. The research was conducted in a corporate managing consulting environment that is known for its standardised, policy-based, masculine dress code. Using interviews, the results uncover deeper insight into women's dress style and how this relates to their personal brand in the workplace.

Field of Research: Management

JEL Code: 405

1. Introduction

Women who occupy positions in a multi-racial and multi-cultural South African corporate environment should ideally be able to express elements of their cultural identities and elements of their personal style in their places of work. In a work context, identity refers to the way an individual distinguishes themselves, their position and their categorisations in the workplace (Elsbach, 2004). An individual's identity in the workplace is defined by physical identity markers, which signal each person's uniqueness and status. These physical markers are found in the form of material artefacts such as office décor, dress style, business cards and artefacts displayed on walls and on desks (Elsbach, 2004).

In this paper, expression of dress style speaks to how women reconcile their dress style individuality with their roles within masculine working environments where dress policies of standardisation and uniformity are the norm. Professional dress can be defined as "dressing in such a manner as to enhance your authority, promote your respect, aid your promotion, and promote your advancement opportunities in the workplace" Cooper, (2003, p.3). Professional dress involves individuals making appropriate clothing selection by taking into consideration profession, company policies, level of customer and client interaction, geographic location, clothing care and maintenance, appropriate styles for one's individual body, types of functions attended, and budget and purchasing techniques.

Dress in an organizational context is significant in that it serves two functions; to assert control, and to convey identity (Pratt & Rafaeli 1997a; Peluchette et al. 2006; Cooper 2003). Studies done on the role of dress in organisations have indicated that dress attire is a concept rooted in cognitive schemata, which in turn determines the way an individual understands and embodies behaviour in the workplace. This allows individuals to increase their emotional and physical preparedness for jobs and improve interpersonal relations (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997). Corporate dress code can be viewed as a form of organisational uniform, which Joseph and Alex (1972) describe as a means by which boundaries are determined and other complex organizational dilemmas are resolved. This ensures that members of the organisation align to its goals and understand the status sets of their counterparts.

2. Literature Review

Dress is one of the most powerful mediums of communication and expression as it serves as a reflection of the individual's inner consciousness. Dress affects the wearers and the observers by sending visual messages, or symbols to every person interacted with. The resulting ideas and expectations formed may influence the nature and extent of the relationship going forward. These clothing symbols are a language of sorts, which, like verbal and written language also send various complex messages (Storm 1987). The context in which the clothing messages are communicated adds further complexity to the framework of daily work life, especially for women because more attention is generally paid to what women wear compared to their male counterparts (Stidder 2011). Context includes not only attributes of the wearer and perceiver, but also the relationship history and the setting of the interaction which also incorporates culture and the historical association of the clothes (Kaiser, 1990; Marshall, Jackson, Stanley, Kefgen, & Touchie-Specht, 2000).

There is a general consensus amongst various authors on image management that clothing affects impressions (Behling & Williams, 1991; Bell, 1991; Nisbett & Johnson, 1992; Pradheepam & Littrell, 1993). During every day brief encounters, message receivers assess a limited number of cues sent out by the message sender. It is on these assessments that decisions, which have an impact on one's career advancement, are made. Marshall et al., (2000) state that in order for clothing symbols to be fully understood, the sender and the receiver need to have the same clothing language. Creating a common understanding of clothing symbols may be the main reason why organisations insist on standardised clothing policies.

Research conducted in business management in the field of dress and dress style indicate that the way a person presents themselves ultimately determines the way in which they are perceived. Authors Peluchette et al., (2006); Rafaeli et al., (1997); Rafaeli & Pratt, (1993); and Schmalz, (2000), agree that the daily choice of apparel has multiple implications for the individual. Business dress forms part of the daily act of an individual's performance in the workplace, and untimely become a means by which individuals convey information about themselves and their competence to others. Individuals need to be aware of the messages they are communicating through their clothing. This is because within the first four to ten seconds of interacting with another person, decisions are made about the message sender's

economic level, education level, trustworthiness, social position, level of sophistication, economic heritage, social heritage, educational heritage, success, and moral character (Damhorst, Miller-Spillman & Michelman, 2005; Johnson & Foster, 1990; Levitt, 1907; Schmalz, 2000; Storm 1987; Thourlby, 1995).

Clothing serves a dual means in the workplace; enabling people to advertise themselves, and as a means of gaining approval. Because individuals are judged on their appearance and behaviour, rather than exclusively on their performance, the significance of a professional image cannot be overlooked. Nothing exceeds success in the business world like the appearance of success, therefore one needs to look the part in order to get an opportunity to fulfil the part (Cooper 2003). The significance and importance of professional image on one's career mobility should not be underestimated. Appearance gives you a competitive edge, and whilst it may not make up for poor performance it can positively affect an individual's career. This can include selection for participation on project teams, inclusion in social settings with customers or clients, selection for presentations, promotions to positions of greater responsibility, improved performance rating and overall competitiveness in numerous situations (Cooper, 2003; Hurlock, 1929; Marshall, Jackson, Stanley, Kefgen, & Touchie-Specht, 2000; Peluchette et al., 2006; Rafaeli et al., 1997; Schmalz, 2000; Thourlby, 1995).

Peluchette, Karl, and Rust (2006) conducted a study on MBA students in the Midwest and Southeastern parts of the United States of America (USA) to determine the significance of attire in their working lives. They found that attire was of importance to people in senior and executive positions, and that those who dress for success believed that this had a positive impact on their careers. The purpose of workplace dress policies is to diminish any personal differences in order to bring attention to the aspects that are most important in the workplace: authority, credibility and responsibility. This lends credence to the reason why tailored clothes tend to be favoured as business dress by women. Tailored clothes do not look dainty or feminine, but instead exude masculine authority and proficiency (Johnson & Foster, 1990). However, hiding one's unique cultural expressions seems to disenfranchise minority groups as illustrated by the following:

Black women who become executives have found that their image is very important. They have learned to say 'I am competent' through their appearance. Emphasizing their ethnic background through their clothing or hairstyle can backfire in a white dominated business world – at least until they have proved their worth (Johnson & Foster, 1990, p. 17).

In another study conducted in the USA, Hymowitz (2005, p. 238), established that "you don't have to look like a man, but you have to look serious if you want to be taken seriously." Moreover, a survey conducted on male CEO's revealed that some of the qualities which are associated with strong female leadership were a firm handshake and the ability to walk in stilettos without wobbling (Hymowitz, 2005). A number of researchers have stated that the closer a woman's professional attire resembles a man's business suit; the better they will be perceived. This is because the perception associated with a man's business suit is that the wearer has the

requisite characteristics to succeed in their chosen profession (Johnson et al., 1995). There have been instances where women have been denied career advancement opportunities because they appear too masculine, therefore it is important to strike a balance (Johnson et al., 1995). In a study on Sari wearing Indian women in USA conducted by Bahl (2005), the conclusion reached was that the women face multiple pressures from both the Indian and the Western community. As a result of the constant need to transpose between the contradictory demands of the workplace, ethnic, regional, and national identities, the author concluded that dress identities are defined by, and more often limited to, the region in which the interaction occurred. The same can be said for the corporate world, depending on which part of the world you are working in, dress style norms differ.

Surveys conducted on how both male and female executives perceive female managerial candidates in interviews based solely on their dress style concluded that there was an increased perception of the competence of candidates based on their apparel during interviews, with the traditional skirt being favoured more than trousers (Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, & Truss, 2008). Another study supporting Hymowitz's conclusions was done on the perception of female candidates during a job interview, based solely on their clothes. This study was initially conducted in 1991 where the appropriateness of skirted suits was evaluated. Damhorst, Jondle, et al. (2005) state that up to 70% of judgments in an employment interview are based on appearance, more so than physical attractiveness. Moreover, the 8 suits that were identified during the study as most appropriate out of over 38 suits worn by the candidates were characterised by their classic tailoring, echoing the style of men's business suits. Likewise, men leaned more positively towards traditionally tailored suits, favouring a more conservative look rather than a feminized one that incorporated more colour, aesthetic design and modern styling. Although the number of women entering the workplace and occupying managerial positions is on the rise, masculine symbols continue to communicate the preferred image for an executive. Additionally, current research indicates that females who wear feminine adaptations of masculine symbols, rather than the masculine symbol itself, are more likely to be given career advancement preference (Johnson et al. 1995). This indicates that although masculine symbols are favoured, there seems to be room to include some femininity within the boundaries of masculine norms.

The main thread running through all these studies is that the manner in which an individual dresses ultimately has an impact on the way in which the individual is perceived. The underlying assumption is that the impression the individual makes in the workplace in some instances has a bearing on the rewards received. From the literature it can be seen that dress style influences career progression, social acceptance and the parameters in which a person can express their identity and sense of self. The question that this study will address is; what is the role of dress style in the work lives of senior females in a consulting firm?

The setting in which the research was conducted is in a corporate environment that is known for its masculine and standardised, policy driven dress code. The research style and techniques that are described below were chosen because they allow the research participants to tell their story, rather than creating artificial research settings.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Methodology

This study utilised multiple case studies in its approach, whereby a study or specific case was analysed to give insight into an issue. This was then extended to several similar cases in order to learn more about the phenomenon being studied, in this case the role of dress style in the professional lives of senior women in a South African consulting firm (Punch 2006; Fitzgerald & Dopson 2009). Ten women were chosen to serve as individual cases and were examined using in depth face-to-face interviews. There was a holistic focus to case study research with the intention to “preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case” (Punch, 2006, p. 144). This was done during the interview process whereby we solicited information from the participants about their upbringing and education in order to assess its impact. Additionally, a section of the research focused on the way in which participants dressed at the beginning of their careers in order to provide comparison to the manner in which they dress now, and to establish links and patterns from their past to their present. Moreover, we asked secondary questions that enabled the participants to draw comparisons between their professional and casual wardrobes in order to draw parallels between the two.

3.1.1 Participants

The sampling strategy had a two-fold approach, starting with selecting the level of seniority of the participants. The ranking system within the Consulting Company is based in the Stratified Systems Theory (SST), first introduced by Elliot Jacques, which identifies seven levels of work in an organisation. The SST, rather than being hierarchy based, proposes that the work assigned to jobs and roles is structured in levels of increasing complexity. Therefore the cognitive and integrative skills required to operate successfully at higher levels of work are greater than at the lower levels (Jaques 2006; Grobler 2005). This study profiled women between levels 4 and 6 (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: The Levels of Work and Their Associated Responsibilities as Well as Spans of Control

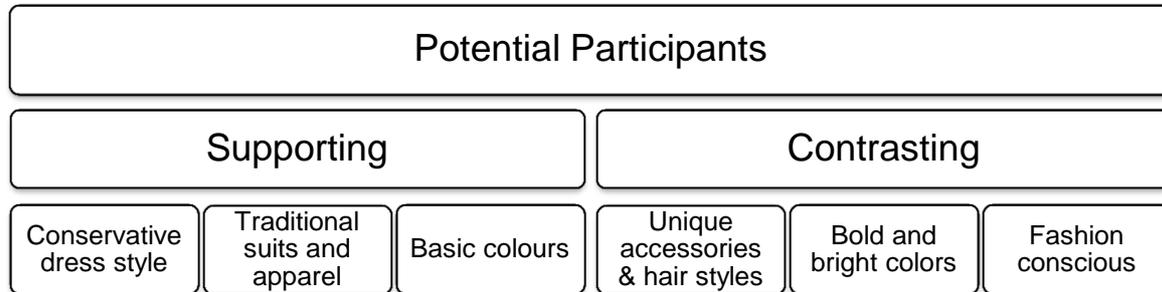
- **Level 4 (Strategic Development)** is responsible for overseeing large-scale implementations, with the additional mandate of managing client relationships. This involves conducting a needs analysis, assessing costs, planning, risks and then directing the resulting restructuring of roles and services.
- **Level 5 (Strategic Intent)** deals with the fulfilment of needs by restructuring services and shaping future solutions to mitigate projected risks.
- **Level 6 (Corporate Citizenship)** deals with the development of strategy in order to give direction to the coordination of large-scale projects.

Source: (Kinston et al. 1989)

The second step in the sampling strategy was executed in order to gather richer data within the population frame and to increase confidence in the results. The sampling technique, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, was chosen because it contained both conforming and non-confirming (extreme, deviant and typical) cases with the intent

of “elaborating the initial analysis, seeking exceptions and looking for variations” in the cases and data collected (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p 28).

Figure 1: Secondary Sampling Strategy



The cumulative result of the sampling strategy was a selection of 10 diverse women in various stages of their career, shown in table 2, below.

Table 2: The participant profiles

Name	Level	Descent	Children
Participant 1	Senior Manager	African	No
Participant 2	Managing Executive	African	Yes
Participant 3	Senior Manager	Indian	No
Participant 4	Senior Manager	European	Yes
Participant 5	Senior Manger	Indian	Yes
Participant 6	Managing Executive	European	Yes
Participant 7	Senior Manager	European	Yes
Participant 8	Senior Manager	African	Yes
Participant 9	Manager	African	Yes
Participant 10	Manger	European	Yes

3.1.2 Data collection

We used a singular data collection approach of interviews as a method to document different aspects of corporate dress style. Interviews were chosen as the main method of sampling because, according to Neuman (2003, p. 290), they have the highest response rate of all types of surveys. Additionally, we had the opportunity to ask in-depth questions and probe deeper on issues of interest during each interview.

3.2 Data Analysis

During the interview process, we selected seven broad themes based on the research questions. From the data collected, transcribing the audio recordings resulted in a detailed description of each case interview. This was achieved by asking open-ended questions in the first interview. We then analysed the data gathered, and collated a number of questions, which were expanded after each subsequent interview. The initial data analysis was conducted within-case, which entailed providing a detailed description of each case, the themes within the case, and which themes connected the cases to one another. The seven emergent themes that were identified provided a platform to ask questions that generated more insight. They also served as a baseline with which we made interpretations and assertions about each case by organising the data in such a way that it revealed aspects of

interest and relevance to the research questions (Trochim 2006). This was followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis, which allowed us to draw an interpretation of the meaning of each of the cases and a comparison of it to the other cases used in the study. We observed and participated in the social settings in real-time, and in doing so, the allowed the experiences of the research participants to tell their story, rather than creating artificial research settings, and thereby possibly altering the results.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the research were interpreted through the seven themes, which were identified during the interview and analysis phases of the study.

4.1 Importance of Dress Style

All of the respondents agreed that dress style is very important in the workplace. The general consensus is that people do judge you based on appearance; however outputs need to match appearance.

P8: (212:212)

I always think 'look professional. Keep neat. Be on time. Also look in terms of like when you bring papers to a meeting, have them stapled together, not like you're coming all dishevelled. Just look professional and look organised.

P9: (037:037)

I think we work in consulting so you have to be appropriate meaning that your client has to, your image has to show someone that it is professional yet fashionable because a lot of consulting is about image. It is about first impressions.

4.1.1 Appearance Effort

The emerging trend was that the women interviewed did not plan their wardrobes prior to getting dressed with any significant amount of effort. This is because much effort had gone into the purchasing of clothes that are consistent with their style and brand, such that most pieces in their wardrobe match. For Participant 7, the effort goes into keeping her wardrobe simple, whereas in comparison, Participant 4 initially exerted an enormous amount of effort with an image consultant into defining the parameters around her wardrobe. Now, she exerts a significant amount of time and energy into maintaining the wardrobe by purchasing items that are consistent with her defined style. Participant 6 expends a fair energy in her wardrobe planning the day before. This is especially true for business trips, which include daytime outfits for meetings and nighttime outfits to entertain clients. According to her, it is important to look smart, and to dress in a manner that suits whatever you are doing, be it in internal meetings, walking the floor or meeting with C-Level executives.

P10: (071:071)

...if I go or I have an important meeting with my boss or something like that then definitely I would put more effort into it than I would do on a normal day.

P6: (154:154)

I put quite a bit of planning into my wardrobe especially if I go away on a business trip. Like I will spend quite a lot of time planning what I'll wear each day. Although this, if we take clients on a five day client trip we're entertaining. We're going to the client meetings every day. We're entertaining every evening and then I also love running so I'm always taking gym stuff wherever I go. So I put quite a bit of effort into that.

P2: (158:158)

Look I pick my clothes quite carefully hey. I do think about them and usually if I do some travelling or go into the office I actually mentally put what I'm going to put on every day of that week. Wear ahead and then Monday I'm going to do this so Tuesday I'm going to wear, so I don't just wake up and open the wardrobe and decide what I'm going to do.

P5: (354:384)

... I'm the change management lead and I walk across the road for an emergency meeting on a Friday in my All Stars. Now, that student look just races to the surface... It's about client value, it's about a trusted work relationship and especially on a trusted work relationship, you know, are you going to trust a 31 year old female, me, with your 60 team member change management team when you're coming across the road for a meeting in your jeans and All Stars. I don't think so.

The constant exception to the amount of appearance effort exerted by the participants was when the women prepared the day before for an important client meeting or workshop. In these instances, the women dressed with purpose and therefore put extra thought into their dress style for the day.

4.1.2 Opinions of Others

The most common trend that emerged in regards to the opinions of others was using appearance-established credibility. Participant 6 sees herself as a role model and dresses accordingly. She also dresses in a manner that allows her to fit in with the people that she works with whereby the other female executives wear suits. None of the women were particularly concerned about the opinions of others, though some stated that they were open to constructive feedback.

P6: (088:088)

... I believe that I'm a role model. So I have to make sure that what I'm wearing, I think is appropriate.

P2: (096:096)

... I get compliments on how smart I look and people say they want to see more of that because we don't see it. So I do that often. When our colleagues from Europe come and they find me dressed that way they say wow, you know. Because they really, really look nice, you know.

4.1.3 Expression of Individuality

All of the individuals interviewed for this paper choose to express themselves in a manner that is meaningful to them, from wearing jewellery that holds sentimental value, to wearing bright colours, bold feminine tops and quirky shoes. Most participants favoured the classic wardrobe – primarily black or grey trousers; however, the elements of individuality were expressed through exciting hairstyles, colourful and feminine tops, shoes and nails.

P9: (063:063)

...for a woman, jewellery is important. If you can accessorise; so you can wear a cute bracelet with cute ear-rings. Sometimes it is the small things that make a whole lot of difference. A little bit of lip-gloss - I think those small things make a difference, you know, getting your nails done; small things.

A variation to the expression of individuality that emerged in two of the interviews was that in one instance, the woman used an exclusive brand of leather goods, i.e. branded wallets and passport cases, and in the other instance, it was the type of car that was driven – a convertible BMW. In both these cases, the women kept a fairly simple professional wardrobe that conformed to company standards, and where necessary, to their clients standards. Further than that, there was no real interest in personalising their professional dress style.

4.1.4 Personal Choice

Personal choice is an unconscious factor for most participants, as most of the participants have never had to subscribe to a company's dress code. Participant 8 dresses for her body type in order to avoid looking inappropriate. She chooses black wide leg trousers rather than form fitted clothes in an effort to detract attention from her physical appearance, and rather to bring attention to the quality of her work. What came through consistently in all of the interviews is that individuals should not attract attention for all the wrong reasons, and no matter their choice of wardrobe, individuals should always look appropriate and fit for purpose at their clients.

P8: (084:084)

I like to wear dark clothes because it's slimming at work

P6: (022:022)

Yeah the policy was is that women were not allowed to wear pants and I had to go out and buy a whole lot of skirts and jackets and proper suits and all men had to wear full suits and ties

The expression of ethnicity was a conscious decision for one participant who is very senior in the company. Due to her upbringing in West Africa, this was attire that she

felt most comfortable with, especially in the warmer months. She also uses the African attire as an attention grabber in order to stand out from her peers.

P2: (080:096)
It's easier to wear suits when it's winter and easier to dress, up African attire which I absolutely love in the summer times....I get compliments on how smart I look and people say they want to see more of that because we don't see it. So I do that often. When our colleagues from Europe come and they find

This is in contrast to another, less senior participant from the same region, whose personal choice is to dress in a manner that she feels is appropriate for her clients and will allow her to blend in with her peers.

P9: (069:069)
Not as much in here or in the U.S. as it would in Mali or in Senegal because, for example, I never wear any traditional clothes to work whereas if I were there I would. For example, on Fridays or anything like that. I think also that goes to consulting so I dress in a way that I think my client might not react in a certain way. So, if I feel like if I wore a traditional outfit I might get so much attention around that that I might not be able to focus on the right things. So, yes, I think my cultural; I dress appropriately for the culture of the client.

4.1.5 Evolution of style

Most participants began their careers dressing in a manner that they perceived as expected in a professional context, which is the traditional suits and shirts.

P1: (72:72)
I became more comfortable and more experimental and more expressive of whom I am. When I was younger there was a view of what a professional look is like so it would be your suit, pants and a jacket. I actually don't like to wear pants. So I've kind of like let that go, in terms of power dressing as that was seen relevant in the day. I am more now expressive around what I like and what I enjoy and less about the position and less about the position and less about how I'm supposed to look and I look how I like to look.

Whilst some of this was driven by dress code policies, some of it was largely perception. The most prominent trend to emerge is that once the participants started to understand what their personal style was, in relation to their personal brand they began to dress in a manner that better suited them.

4.1.6 Price of Clothing, Exclusivity and Conspicuous Consumption

The overarching theme was that the participants would not intentionally spend a lot of money on clothes. In one instance, the participant would spend more money on wardrobe staple items that would not go out of fashion, for instance trousers and suits, however, when it came to shoes and blouses, she would buy them as cheaply as could be found. This individual also did not buy branded clothes because she had

other priorities for her money. This participant was brought up in financially strained circumstances, therefore, despite her improved financial standing; she does not spend a lot of money on clothes as a matter of principle.

P5: (212:280)

So I'll invest money in a good quality pants and the dresses that I have but when it comes to things like shirts and blouses I actually buy them at the China mall...if it's functional, looks neat and professional and if it costs a R100 then I will spend a R100 instead of spending a R1,000.

P9: (123:123)

I think economic standing matters a lot, in two ways. It matters in your purchasing power, so being able to buy quality clothes, being able to have a certain variety but I think economic standing sometimes, not all the time, sometimes reflects your background. So, if your parents were professionals I think it helps because you know automatically. You don't have to learn that behaviour. I think for people that don't have parents who were like white-collared professional. I think it is a much harder exercise to determine what is appropriate and what is not appropriate.

Another participant preferred to purchase branded apparel, but would only purchase them at a discounted rate. The emergent trend amongst most of the participants, all of whom have access to the overseas retail market through business trips, is that they buy their clothes when travelling. Whilst most would like brand name clothing, few were willing to purchase those exclusively.

P6: (110:112)

I have friends who only shop at specific shops. I have rather, shop at shops where the style suits me... So if it happens to be Burberry for a beautiful coat then I buy it but it's not, that's not the reason I'm buying it.

P10: (163:163)

I wouldn't buy cheap stuff. I definitely wouldn't buy cheap shoes. I, yes, I mean I would buy certain things; I would buy into like a bigger hype. For example, bags. I have Gucci bags, Louis Vuitton bags...

P7: (218:218)

The only brand that I buy and I pay full amount for regardless, is Mont Blanc.

The shopping habits of Participant 8 have changed over the years such that she shops less, instead purchasing classic pieces. According to her, this evolution is as a result of having other priorities with her money, such as a mortgage and child related expenses.

4.1.7 Motherhood

One of the most significant factors in the amount of effort, time and money used for dress style is being a mother. Where having children was a factor in the manner the

participants chose to dress, it was in relation to how they have adapted in order to accommodate their children financially, or in terms of appearance labour.

P8: (106:106)

I used to spend a lot of time doing makeup in the mornings, because no-one else had to get ready. So I could invest in putting on makeup, doing my hair... but now because I've got these 2 people that I have to take to school, I'm more or less running late, so I've said it's either get to work on time or get to work pretty, so I've chosen to get to work on time.

P6: (146:146)

I guess that's what I want to communicate and as a working mom and a female it's about looking good so I suppose it's always been important for me to look good as a mom because a lot of the stereotypes are mom predictably more, weightier so heavier.

P9: (067:067)

I now have 2 kids so I don't have a lot of time to get my hair done so now my hair is short; short and easy to manage.

5. Conclusion

The seven themes that were identified give an insight into the role that dress style has played in the work lives of the participants. It came across very clearly that the way in which you present yourself ultimately sets you up for success and also contributes to the personal brand that you wish to express in the workplace. There appeared to be an unwritten standard that wardrobe staples consisted of black trousers and some form of suit or jacket for extreme formality. None of the women dressed below the company benchmark, which is determined by the dress code policy, but instead found ways to 'dress up' in more feminine and personal ways still within the confines of the expected company's dress standard. This was done in order to feel comfortable by dressing in a manner consistent with their professional brand, as well as to distinguish themselves as individuals.

All the participants, some after a period of trial and error, have found a style that is effective and professional whilst being consistent with each of their respective professional brands, which range from being confident, neat, energetic, professional and comfortable. It is clear that all the women in this study have taken the time and exerted effort in thinking about how they look, which relates to how they will be perceived. They all dress the part of senior women, and distinguish themselves from the younger consultants in that way. Unexpectedly for a South African firm, culture did not emerge as a key trend, as wearing African cultural attire is not commonplace within the company. The only other exceptions were several participants who wore lakshmi strings, which are customary Hindu red strings tied around the wrist for protection and success. In one instance, the participant had a red bindi on her forehead to denote that she was married. Also, there was no real emphasis on hairstyles even though participants ranged from European to African. However, having children made a significant impact to the appearance effort that most participants exerted.

What also came across quite clearly is that appearance does matter. The participants put in a little extra thought before interactions with clients, teams and peers in order to not have to waste time at a later stage trying to rectify a misaligned perception. It is clear that even though women are now modernising and feminising their looks in order to align their personality and brand, there is a clear definition of what is not acceptable in the workplace. Anything that is below the standard set by the corporate dress code policy will get negative attention, whilst dressing on par with the average company employee is expected. However, dressing above the average is not a differentiator. We can conclude that senior women in a consulting firm use dress as a baseline on which they further build their professional brand. It is not the most important factor for a professional individual, but as participant 6 stated: it's your ticket to the game.

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