

Clothing as an Impression Management Technique for Pregnant Working Women: Perceptions of Students and HRM Professionals

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The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of different types of clothing on impressions of pregnant working women. Questionnaire responses from 237 undergraduates and from 315 human resources professionals were analyzed to determine interviewer impressions of clothing worn by a pregnant job applicant seeking a managerial position. Respondents rated photographs of four outfits in terms of the degree to which each outfit made a favorable impression. Results for both samples showed that the masculinity of the clothing had a significant effect on raters' impressions of favorability. In addition, rater sex affected favorability ratings.

Approximately 3.45 percent of working women give birth each year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989), which translates to nearly 2.3 million women by the year 2000. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 makes it illegal to discriminate on the basis of pregnancy, but many women are still fired, demoted, or denied benefits solely on the basis of their pregnancies (Gueutal & Taylor, 1990; Slonaker & Wendt, 1991). In addition, pregnant workers face subtle discrimination in terms of job assignments and coworker interaction as attitudes toward them shift due to their pregnancy (Hughes, 1991).

Discrimination against pregnant women is due in part to prevailing stereotypes about women in the workplace. Although attitudes about the role of women in society have changed dramatically (Dambrot, Papp, & Whitmore, 1984; Helmreich, Spence, & Gibson, 1982), women are still perceived as being less suited than men for managerial positions (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Sutton & Moore, 1985). One of the most persistent aspects of the stereotype is the perception that women are

not as committed to their careers (Coser, 1981; Fierman, 1990; Fraker, 1984). Specifically, women are thought to be too easily diverted from their careers by family considerations.

Such stereotypes are more likely to play a role in perception of others when a worker becomes pregnant, because of the degree of uncertainty created due to the fact that the impact of pregnancy on employees' future work performance varies greatly among individuals (Sobkowski, 1990). In situations where uncertainty is high, judgments about individuals tend to be biased by gender (Bodenhausen & Wyser, 1985; Locksley, Hepburn, & Ortiz, 1982). Dobbins, Cardy, and Truxillo (1988) suggested that sex-role stereotypes affect employment decisions because these decisions require inferences about future (and unknown) employee performance.

For this reason, it is critical for a pregnant worker to convey an impression of competency and job commitment in order to offset any possible negative effects of the traditional stereotype of female workers. Pregnant workers may be able to reduce discrimination through impression management, the process by which people control the impressions others form of them. Research suggests that subtle techniques used by individuals to create positive impressions may have considerable impact (Baron, 1989; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Choice of clothing is one such technique (Forsythe, Drake, & Cox, 1985; Littrell & Holm-Peterson, 1980; Stuart & Fuller, 1991). Because of the uncertainty introduced by pregnancy, clothing cues can increase in importance as a basis for inferences about employees' future performance.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of different types of clothing on impressions of pregnant women. Previous studies have contributed to defining the appropriate business dress for managerial women who are not pregnant (Forsythe *et al.*, 1985; Molloy, 1977). In general, prior research indicates that clothing incorporating masculine design elements (e.g., a suit), creates a more favorable impression of a woman's competence than clothing incorporating feminine design elements (e.g., a frilly dress). Pregnant applicants may be able to offset negative stereotypes by wearing clothing that reflects masculine design elements. On the other hand, such clothing worn by a pregnant woman may create too strong a contrast for those holding gender-role stereotypes, resulting in a negative impression. To test this possibility, the first hypothesis states:

H1: Impressions of pregnant women wearing more masculine clothing will be more favorable than impressions of women wearing less masculine clothing.

The interview situation was chosen as the setting for this investigation, because the interview situation is one in which initial impressions play an important role. The second hypothesis is suggested by research on the interview as a selection device (Raza & Carpenter, 1987; Morrow, 1990). In his review of the literature on employment interviews, Harris (1989) suggested that, because the effects of recruiter gender in previous research have been small and inconsistent, "there seems to be little need for more research on sex differences in the interview" (p. 714). Yet, we would argue that recognition and understanding of a relationship between rater gender and impression management is important for pregnant job applicants who are competing for jobs with other applicants whose qualifications are equivalent to their own. As Morrow (1990) pointed out, "even small effects can be substantive when the number of qualified applicant exceeds the number of positions available" (p. 59). Hypothesis 2 is thus stated as follows:

H2: Gender of interviewers will affect the impression made by clothing worn by pregnant job applicants.

METHOD

Sample One

Subjects

The purpose of the study was to test for the existence of a clothing effect on perception of pregnant women, and to test for a gender effect. Subjects in the first sample were 237 undergraduate business students at a Midwestern university, who completed a questionnaire administered in class. The sample size yields power in excess of .95 to detect a medium ($r = .30$) effect at the .01 level of significance for a two-tailed test.

Roughly half of the subjects were female ($n = 118$). Ages ranged from 20 and 49 ($M = 24$ years). The majority of the subjects (87.2 percent) were employed at the time of the data collection, and 33.3 percent of these students were employed full time.

Content of the Questionnaire

Subjects were asked to evaluate photographs of four different clothing outfits worn by pregnant job applicants in terms of the favorability of the impression created by each. Although the use of photographs in research on the interviewing process has been widely criticized as part of the "paper-people paradigm" (Gorman, Clover, & Doherty, 1978; Harris, 1989; Raza & Carpenter, 1987), in this study photographs were deemed appropriate. The focus of the current study was on the existence of an *impression* created by clothing worn by pregnant women in an interview situation, not on the outcome of the interview itself. By using photographs, the impact of extraneous cues was minimized, and the subjects' attention was directed to the effect of interest.

The four outfits of clothing presented in the photographs approximated the masculinity and femininity dimension used by Forsythe *et al.* (1985) in their study on the influence of dress on selection decisions. Masculine outfits emphasized straight silhouettes and strong angular lines, whereas feminine outfits emphasized rounded silhouettes and curved lines. The four clothing outfits chosen for this experiment were selected by clothing professionals who worked in stores specializing in maternity clothing. In photographing the outfits, every effort was made to avoid contaminating effects of extraneous factors. Each outfit was modeled by the same woman, black and white photographs were used to avoid the effects of color, no jewelry was worn, and the photographs were cropped at mid-calf so that shoes were not visible.

As in the Forsythe *et al.* (1985) study, a panel of judges independently viewed the photographs and rated the masculinity and femininity of the clothing outfits on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all masculine* (1) to *very masculine* (4). All panel members agreed on the relative masculinity of the outfits. The four outfits of clothing used in this study were as follows, presented in order from most to least masculine:

Suit. A double-breasted, pin striped suit with a straight skirt.

Conservative Dress. A loosely fitted dress with strong angular lines in the form of a straight skirt and a contrasting collar. The masculine lines of this outfit were tempered by fullness in the mid-section of the dress.

Jumper. A full-cut jumper with a rounded neckline, worn with a collarless, front-button shirt that had a rounded neckline.

Soft Dress. A typical maternity dress with a full skirt, pronounced curved lines and a rounded silhouette.

Procedure

In the first part of the questionnaire, subjects were asked to evaluate the four photographs in terms of the favorableness of the impression portrayed through each outfit. The subjects were instructed to assume the following situation in evaluating the four outfits:

Your company is hiring for an entry-level management position. You have scheduled an interview with one of the highly qualified applicants who is pregnant. Her resume indicates a good fit between the job requirements and her qualifications. Furthermore, her letters of recommendation are excellent. You knew the applicant was pregnant when you scheduled the interview, and her pregnancy will not be a consideration in your hiring decision.

The respondents rated the impression conveyed by each of the four outfits on a 100 millimeter line anchored by *very unfavorable* and *very favorable*. Each outfit received a score ranging from 0 to 100. To avoid order effects, the order in which the outfits were presented was completely counterbalanced over the subjects.

Sample One Results

Ratings of Clothing Outfits. In order to examine the impression created by clothing worn by pregnant job applicants, the mean ratings for each of the outfits were compared. One subject's responses were deleted from the analysis because of missing data. Mean ratings for the four outfits from the remaining 236 subjects are presented in Table 1. The conservative dress received the highest mean rating, followed by the suit, the jumper and the soft dress. However, the ratings were not evenly distributed: the two more masculine outfits (i.e., the suit and the conservative dress) received much more favorable ratings than did the outfits which reflected feminine design components. Repeated measures MANOVA contrasts indicated that the differences between all of these

mean ratings were significant at the .001 level.

Gender and Ratings. Because of missing data, three subjects were dropped from the analysis of variance used to investigate the effect of gender on ratings of clothing outfits (Hypothesis 2). For the remaining 234 subjects, gender had a significant effect on the ratings of three of the four outfits. Table 2 displays the mean ratings for men and women. The ratings given by men tended to be less extreme than those given by women, in that their favorable ratings were lower and their unfavorable ratings were higher than those given by women. Men rated the suit and the conservative dress significantly lower than did women ($F(1,233) = 5.86, 9.91$, respectively, $p < .05$ for both), and rated the jumper significantly higher than did women ($F(1,233) = 9.10, p < .01$). However, impressions made by the outfits were consistent for both genders in terms of overall order of favorability ratings: the conservative dress received the highest rating, followed by the suit, the jumper, and the soft dress.

Sample Two

Subjects

The use of nonrepresentative groups in selection studies produces results that differ from those using actual interviewers (Gordon, Slade, and Schmitt, 1986; Gorman *et al.*, 1978), yet only a few studies have employed recruiters as raters. For this reason, in the second study subjects were 315 human resource professionals in the Midwest, the majority of whom (95.2 percent) had conducted interviews during their careers. Subjects responded to a mail questionnaire. The response rate was 54.8 percent (575 questionnaires were mailed). The sample size yields power in excess of .99 to detect a medium ($r = .30$) effect at the .01 level of significance for a two-tailed test.

Almost 60 percent of those responding were female ($n = 188$), and 94.9 percent had at least two years experience as human resource professionals. Respondents were between the ages of 20 and 70, with the majority in the 30 to 49 age group (69.7 percent). Several different industries and sizes of firms were represented in the sample.

Procedure

The questionnaire used in for the first sample was also used with this sample. The questionnaires were mailed to members of a professional human resource organization. No deception was involved; the cover letter stated the that purpose of the research was to answer the question, How should pregnant job applicants dress for job interviews to create the most favorable first impression of their potential for success as future employees?

As in the first study, respondents rated the impression conveyed by each of the four outfits on a 100 millimeter line anchored by *very unfavorable* and *very favorable*. Each outfit received a score ranging from 0 to 100. Again, the order in which the outfits were presented was completely counterbalanced over the subjects.

Sample Two Results

Ratings of Clothing Outfits. The mean ratings for each of the outfits were compared. One subject's responses were deleted from the analysis because of missing data. Mean ratings for the four outfits from the remaining 314 subjects are presented in Table 1. The suit and the conservative dress, the more masculine outfits, received favorable ratings. The most masculine outfit (the suit) received lower ratings than did the moderately masculine outfit (conservative dress). The less masculine outfits, the jumper and the soft dress, received unfavorable ratings. Paired samples t-test comparisons indicated that the differences among these means were significant.

Gender and Ratings. Because of missing data, six subjects were dropped from the analysis of variance used to investigate the effect of gender on ratings of clothing outfits. For the remaining 309 subjects, gender had a significant effect on the ratings of three of the four outfits. Table 2 displays the mean ratings for men and women. Men rated the suit and the conservative dress significantly lower than did women ($F(1,308) = 26.79, 33.07$, respectively, $p < .001$ for both), and rated the jumper significantly higher than did women ($F(1,308) = 24.17, p < .001$). However, impressions made by the outfits are consistent for both sexes in terms of overall order of favorability ratings: the conservative dress received the highest rating, followed by the suit, the jumper, and the soft dress.

Table 1**Clothing Rating Means and Standard Deviations for Students and HRM Professionals**

Type of Clothing	Sample ^a		
	Students	Professionals	Total ^b
Suit	71.36 (23.31)	71.69 (25.24)	71.52 (24.41)
Conservative Dress	82.89 ^c (19.06)	88.74 ^c (14.29)	86.20 (16.75)
Jumper	38.35 ^d (25.21)	35.76 ^d (26.56)	36.87 (26.00)
Soft Dress	23.44 (21.53)	27.46 (22.74)	25.71 (22.30)
Overall	53.97 (12.36)	55.91 (11.82)	

^aWithin each sample, differences among ratings of clothing outfits were significant at the .001 level.

^bDifferences among ratings of clothing outfits were significant at the .001 level for the total mean ratings.

^cStudent and professional ratings for the conservative dress were significantly different at the .001 level.

^dStudent and professional ratings for the jumper were significantly different at the .05 level.

Table 2**Sex Differences in Clothing Rating Means and Standard Deviations**

Clothing	Sex of Student Subjects		Sex of Professionals	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Suit	74.98 ^a (22.13)	67.92 ^a (24.03)	77.44 ^b (23.66)	62.73 ^b (25.48)
Conservative Dress	86.70 ^c (17.06)	78.84 ^c (20.25)	92.32 ^d (11.72)	83.18 ^d (16.17)
Jumper	33.50 ^e (23.74)	42.97 ^e (25.24)	29.86 ^f (25.90)	44.60 ^f (25.44)
Soft Dress	20.99 (22.05)	25.95 (20.87)	26.30 (22.66)	29.55 (23.02)

^aSex differences in suit ratings for the student subjects were significant ($p < .05$).

^bSex differences in suit ratings for professionals were significant ($p < .001$).

^cSex differences in conservative dress ratings for the student subjects were significant ($p < .05$).

^dSex differences in conservative dress ratings for professionals were significant ($p < .001$).

^eSex differences in jumper ratings for student subjects were significant ($p < .01$).

^fSex differences in jumper ratings for professionals were significant ($p < .001$).

Additional analyses were conducted to investigate possible relationships between favorability ratings and other demographic variables. No association was found between favorability ratings and industry, age, years of experience, or size of organization.

A 4 X 2 two-factor ANOVA was performed to examine the effects of the four types of clothing and the two samples on clothing ratings. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. Consistent with the individual results for each sample, there was a significant main effect of type of clothing ($p < .001$) on clothing ratings. There was no significant difference in ratings for each of the four clothing ratings between student subjects and HRM professionals, but the interaction between type of clothing and sample was significant at the .001 level. Professionals provided significantly higher ratings for the conservative dress ($t_{548} = -4.12$, $p < .001$), and significantly lower ratings for the jumper ($t_{548} = 2.24$, $p < .05$).

Table 3

Two-way Analysis of Variance of Clothing by Sample

Effect	df	f	p
Clothing	3,546	880.78	.000
Sample	1,548	3.51	.062
Sample * Clothing	3,546	5.91	.001

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that pregnant women can use clothing to enhance the impressions they make on others at work. Raters in these studies differentiated across outfits of clothing defined in terms of masculine and feminine design elements. A comparison of the favorability ratings associated with impressions created by different outfits suggested that within an acceptable range, the more masculine the outfit, the more favorable the impression created, especially in the eyes of females. However, clothing that incorporated strongly masculine design elements was not perceived as favorably as clothing that was moderately masculine in design. In addition, gender of raters affected raters' impressions of favorability, although rater sex did not affect the overall order (i.e., most favorable to least favorable) in which outfits were rated.

The effect of pregnancy on impressions of working women based upon type of clothing worn has not been tested empirically prior to this research. Pregnancy was an important aspect of this study because pregnant women are potentially a special sub-group of working women in general. The persistent stereotype that women are likely to be diverted from their careers by family considerations is especially likely to be invoked for pregnant women. It was possible that this stereotype influenced perceptions of clothing worn by pregnant women more than women in general. For this reason, it was not obvious that the findings from earlier studies applied to pregnant women with regard to the impact of clothing as an impression management technique. However, the results of this study suggest that clothing can be used as an impression management technique by pregnant women in a manner consistent with previous research on the influence of clothing worn by working women.

The practical implications of these results are obvious. Pregnant working women can use clothing as a technique to enhance the degree to which they are seen in a favorable light by others at work. If possible, pregnant working women should dress in clothing that incorporates masculine design elements, although these results suggest that a conservative dress may be a better investment than a suit.

The results also raise some questions that merit further research. As was found in the Forsythe *et al.* (1985) study, the most masculine outfit received less favorable ratings than did the second most masculine outfit. Apparently women can reduce the favorableness of the impression made

by creating an image that is outside the acceptable range of masculinity. Forsythe *et al.* noted that what constitutes a "too masculine" image has not been defined, and that this image may vary across industries or groups of subjects. In this study, this effect was not related to industry, age of raters, years of experience, nor size of organization, and neither gender nor raters' attitudes towards women as managers explained the second-place rating of the most masculine outfit. Thus, the question of defining an "optimum level of masculinity" (Forsythe *et al.*, 1985, p. 377) remains open-ended.

Another question raised by the results of this study is the reason for the association between rater gender and the degree to which different clothing made a favorable impression. Only the outfit with the lowest favorability rating (the soft dress, the least masculine outfit) failed to receive significantly different ratings from men and women. Again, because of its strongly feminine design components, this outfit may have been perceived as obviously inappropriate to raters of both sexes. Overall, women tended to rate the more masculine outfits higher than did men, and to rate the less masculine outfits lower than did men. Possible explanations for these findings are that (a) women are more aware of appropriate dress guidelines for women than are men, and discriminate more strongly between favorable and unfavorable impressions created by outfits of clothing than do male interviewers; or (b) women are more interested in appearance than are men (Heilman *et al.*, 1989). An alternative explanation for these differences could be that men and women differ in the degree to which they hold traditional stereotypes about women in management (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Stevens & DeNisi, 1980), which affects their reaction to clothing as an information cue.

An interesting aspect of the findings was comparison between the two samples. The perception of clothing was consistent across both groups, in that HRM professionals and students rated the clothing outfits in the same order, with the conservative dress receiving the highest ratings and the soft dress receiving the lowest ratings. However, the statistically significant interaction among the four types of clothing and the two samples indicated that some differences existed between the groups. If the professionals had rated all outfits somewhat higher than students, we might conclude that through work experience professionals learned to be less reactive to clothing than students. However, for the conservative dress, HRM professionals provided significantly higher ratings than did students, whereas for the jumper, professionals provided significantly lower

ratings. A possible explanation for these differences is that the professionals are less reactive to appropriate clothing, but more reactive to inappropriate clothing. The ratings for the soft dress, which was rated higher by professionals than by students, would appear to contradict this explanation. On the other hand, the ratings for the soft dress were not significantly different. An explanation for these differences can only be provided by future research on this issue.

The population differences in the samples used in this research provide support for the generality of the findings. Still, there are some limitations that affect the generalizability of these findings. The "paper people paradigm" in research on the interviewing process has been widely criticized (e.g., Gorman *et al.*, 1978; Harris, 1989; Raza & Carpenter, 1987), although in this study photographs were deemed appropriate because the focus was on impressions created by clothing worn by pregnant applicants in an interview situation, not on the outcome of the interview itself. Also, the degree to which clothing affects the final selection decision was not addressed in this study. To the extent that favorable impressions based on clothing contribute to perceived attractiveness, the model proposed by Raza and Carpenter (1987) would suggest that this influence is more indirect than direct, but testing for this influence was beyond the scope of the current study. Finally, a non-pregnant control group was not used in this study. The degree to which these findings apply to women in general as well as pregnant women has been suggested in previous research, but was not directly tested in this study.

This research has shown that a pregnant working woman can use clothing to improve the favorability of the impression she makes. Given the potential for discrimination against pregnant working women, the findings of these studies have important implications for impression management by women at work. Clothing may serve to send positive information cues and thus reduce uncertainty in perceptions of future performance of pregnant employees.

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Author Note

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, series P-20, No. 436 and earlier reports. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Handbook of Labor Statistics, August 1989, p. 240. The 3.45 percent annual rate of working women who give birth was computed by averaging rates for the years 1985-88, the most recent data available.

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